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**SUBVERSIVE DEVOTIONS:
TOWARD A WHOLEHEARTED PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH**

by
Patricia Youngdahl

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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In the Graduate College
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As members of the Final Examination Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Patricia Youngdahl

entitled Subversive Devotions: Toward a Wholehearted Practice

of Christian Faith

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To Michal
with all my heart

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ABSTRACT.

Writing this dissertation, I opened a sanctuary in which to practice the devotions of my feminist, lesbian, Christian life. It has turned out to be a healing work. There are some who advise me that "healing" has no place in academic classrooms and compositions, but I learn, teach, and write as if it belongs.

This writing grew out of my fifteen years as a Presbyterian minister seeking to resist the promotion of male supremacy and the condemnation of lesbian, gay, and bisexual existence which interweave in prevailing, patriarchal practices of Christianity. I tell how my subversion of these dynamics of domination was furthered as I came to understand Christian traditions, including the Bible, from the perspective of rhetoric. I demonstrate that one way to support the interpretive authority of marginalized believers is to see Christian faith as an ongoing argument in which the meanings of key terms such as "God," "love," and "Jesus" are continually being negotiated. I urge people to decide among contending practices of Christianity based on how well each would be likely to bless us, with who counts as part of the "us" being key to the deliberations. I propose that defecting from the rituals of domination and submission celebrated in

most churches can empower us in the struggle for racial, sexual, cultural, economic, and ecological justice.

At the center of this project are the devotions through which I have rewritten my relationship with Christian traditions. In composing them, I fell into listening more freely to the fears, angers, griefs, and desires of my heart. Experimenting for three years with strategies of appropriation, faithful repudiation, and revision, I eventually turned my "mis"hearings and "mis"readings of patriarchal faith into an alternative, wholehearted practice of being Christian, a practice which encourages me to love the world, including my life, with increasing pleasure and power.

I offer this work as a participation in the movement of mujerista/womanist/feminist believers who choose to pursue their vocation of love and justice by reinventing "the" faith.

INTRODUCTION

We are always and everywhere at our devotions. In some moments we are especially attentive to them. We light a candle, enter a voting booth, kiss a photograph, scatter a handful of ashes, or break bread at table with friends, and it is easy to catch sight of ourselves enacting our beliefs and desires. But usually we are not so aware. We move through most ordinary hours without recognizing that here, too, or perhaps here even more, since indeed we are not watching so closely, we perform the devotions by which we make ourselves at home in the world.

To devote ourselves is to risk passionate involvement, to pour out our energy toward the fulfillment of our hopes. This is basic to human survival, as essential to us as water. The attachments we make during infancy to those who care for us mark the beginning of this vulnerable, artistic, lifelong work. As we grow into maturity, this work connects us with wider communities, and yet each of us accomplishes it in our own body and soul. Our devotions shape our responses to the mysteries that surround us; they prompt questions, imply values, suggest goals. Our human birthright, our ethical vocation, is to become increasingly discerning and decisive about the devotions we do.

By chance and by choice, it is in relation to Christian traditions that I make a home for myself in the

world--and a home for the world in my heart. Through many seasons of growth, and by a process of continual revision, my practice has led me into a Divine Love who calls creation into being and cares for each of us, who grieves with us over the tragedies of our existence, and who inspires me, especially through the community of friends who keep faith with Jesus of Nazareth, to love the world, including my life, with abundant pleasure and power.

This love did not come to me intact and finished; it is new every morning, changed every evening, an ongoing work. In our world as it is, where vulnerability so often is exploited; where attachment routinely goes awry; where conversation, between us or within ourselves, so easily detains us from our freedom; where devotion is coerced by those who conspire to keep power in short supply--right here in this very world, I am learning to love. This is exactly what I began to desire when, at the invitation of my two best junior high girlfriends, I first showed up at church. This I recognize as the ongoing fulfillment of my baptism into Christian faith. Learning to love. Myself and the world. With my whole heart. A lifelong unfolding.

I began this writing three years ago as an experiment in opening a hospitable space for the devotions of my feminist, lesbian, Christian life. In these pages, I explore how inhabiting this space has not only helped me to

be "all here," but also led me to defect from the drama of domination and submission celebrated in most churches, and to propose an alternative which I have come to call wholehearted Christian practice. My hope is to offer inspirations and provisions for whosoever may desire,¹ as I do, to live in devotion to a future in which nobody "has to" be dominated or destroyed.

The work I do here would be impossible if I did not know myself to be part of a diverse, far-flung communion of women and men struggling for liberation from what cultural theorist bell hooks² has called the "interlocking systems of domination" that injure each one of us and afflict our life together (Talking Back 175). I understand these interlocking dominations to include racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, cultural imperialism, and ecological destruction. When I speak of patriarchal domination, I seek not only to focus on the systems of male supremacy and homophobia, but also to recall the related oppressions with which these interact. The wholehearted practice of Christian faith which I envision explicitly and actively resists them all.

In chapter one, I tell the story of how I embraced and then questioned Christian believing, pursued my questions through divinity school, became a Presbyterian minister, and hid my feminist/Christian/lesbian devotions in order to

participate in church life. I attend to my wrestlings with religious authority, which led me eventually to take up the study of rhetoric.³ I reflect on how this study blessed my efforts to claim interpretive authority by encouraging me to view Christianity as an ongoing argument among believers in which the meanings of key terms such as "God," "Jesus," and "love" are continually being contested.

In this reflection, I show how I benefitted especially in response to the insights of Kenneth Burke, a broadly influential twentieth century rhetorical theorist who developed a dramatistic view of language;⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a feminist biblical scholar who adopts a rhetorical framework for interpreting Christian traditions;⁵ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, a mujerista ethicist who demonstrates the legitimacy of women adapting "the" Christian faith for our own good;⁶ and Sallie McFague, a feminist theologian who emphasizes that every proposal about divinity must "try its chance" and that in believing, we are always "experimenting with a bit of nonsense to see if it can make a claim to truth" (Models of God 69).⁷

Gathered into chapters two through four are the ventures in loving and believing that I refer to as devotions. They witness to the moves--emotional, ethical, theological--by which I have succeeded in creating space to live my life. At the same time, as I discovered toward the

end of writing them, the devotions offer hints toward the possibility of a Christian practice designed to release people from the process of domination by providing a place where we can learn to be wholehearted. In the notes, I offer some comments on how writing these devotions has empowered me.⁸

Chapter five is a sketch of my imaginings toward a wholehearted practice of Christian faith. I am indebted in this effort especially to Rita Nakashima Brock, whose Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power informs my reflections throughout;⁹ and to a mentor of hers, Nelle Morton, whose The Journey Is Home offers me the wisdom of her pioneering mystical, feminist, activist Christian life.¹⁰ With these sisters, I believe that liberation is furthered and love is made possible when, as Nelle might put it, we begin to hear our hearts to speech.

CHAPTER ONE

"DO YOU THINK WE CAN REALLY DO THIS?"

That's what Dorsett asked one night as she was about to light a candle to found a feminist spirituality group for the women of the congregation where she belongs. She stood in her own living room, surrounded by women she had succeeded in gathering: church members and ministers, older and younger, economically disadvantaged and privileged, lesbian and bisexual and straight, women of various races and cultures. Yet even in the circle of all these faces, stories, survivals, wisdoms, Dorsett did what women in most Christian communities are still trained, Sunday after Sunday, to do: she doubted our authority to know God, to theorize about our experiences of God, even to invoke the presence of God in our midst, a midst that did not invite the participation or permission of any male knower of the Divine.

No one was saying these things outloud, probably no one was even thinking them overtly. But Dorsett knew she was about to consecrate a subversive space. She knew that what we were about to do has been designated a transgression. Likely she also suspected that any Divine Love who would answer our summons might surprise her, might startle us all, and that falling in love with such a Love

could well cast a person into who knows what kind of turmoil over where she had been going to church, and not just that, but over how she had been looking at, living in, the world.

Dorsett paused. She looked around the soft darkness at women's bodies, women's faces, the lit match extending from her fingers. "Do you think we can really do this?"

My answer is yes, though I have not always believed so. It has taken me a long time to learn how to claim my full authority in relation to Christian traditions. It seems to me that to "do this," as Dorsett saw it, meant to exercise our authority to critique and remake Christian faith by taking into account, by counting as significant and trustworthy, the lived experience of the women gathered in that room, including our pain in relation to prevailing Christian practice, our own intimations of Divine Presence, and our daily struggle to survive in and transform what historically have been places of male domination: households, schools, legislatures, factories, businesses, streets, courtrooms, churches.

My confidence that we can indeed do this has grown as I have come to understand Christianity, from its earliest emergence, as an ongoing argument--that is, as a human conversation in which contending claims about God and love continue to be proposed, tried out, and negotiated. Since

this conversation has come to be dominated by those who maintain that "being Christian" depends on the subordination of women, however, feminist believers face a double task: it is not enough for us to listen to our hearts, articulate our faith, and formulate our arguments about love and God; we must also argue for our right to be among the arguers.

No one told me all this, of course, when at the age of fourteen, I asked to be baptized. I never dreamed that the further I journeyed into faith, hope, and love, the more I would have to argue for the authenticity of my being Christian.

My persuasion to Christian faith began on a bus rolling southwest from my hometown in suburban Chicago one sunny July morning in 1970. It was a church trip. Our stops would include a few Presbyterian mission sites as well as a sojourn at the denomination's Ghost Ranch retreat center in Abiquiu, New Mexico. I didn't belong to the church. I signed up because my friends asked me and it sounded like fun--mountains, horseback riding, cliff dwellings--these were the prospects that excited me. I had no anticipations of a spiritual adventure.

Attendance at vespers was, however, required. On that first evening I gathered with the group, embarrassed and scared. How would I know what to do? There I sat,

reassuring myself that an attitude of reverence would no doubt be enough to see me through, when I realized with a jolt of alarm that a prayer was on its way around the circle and that when it got to me, I was supposed to do something with it, find a way somehow to get it into my mouth and then out again so that it could proceed to the next person's.

I decided to listen more deeply. People were saying thanks for things. Ordinary things. Things that had happened during the day. Thanks that we got to swim in the pool at this college, someone said. Thanks for when we stopped to eat ice cream. Thanks for the sun on all those cornfields we drove through. Thanks that I get to go on this trip with my friends.

I have no idea what I said when my turn came. What stayed with me was my delight that this meditation on our day, this shared enjoyment, this improvisation arising from our many voices, could be prayer. At the time I didn't think in terms of "theological implications," but my heart took note: God likes to hear our real voices; God cares about the details of our daily lives; God values our pleasure.

That prayer was the start of my spiritual formation. In the years that followed, whatever I heard or read about God, love, and Jesus, I interpreted in its light. "God is

love," our ministers taught, and I believed it. "Jesus calls us not servants, but friends," they proclaimed, and I knew what they meant.¹

Not until after I went to college did I first trip over Christianity's ongoing argument about what it means to have faith. It happened during my one and only visit to the Twin City Bible Church in Champaign-Urbana, early in my first semester at the University of Illinois. I was lonesome. I missed my old friends. When a second-year student, a woman I had known in the youth group back home, called and invited me to join her for worship at "TCBC" on Sunday evening, I was pleased. The words "Bible Church" had no associations for me. As far as I knew, a church was a church was a church, a place to connect with God, learn about love, and make sense of life.

Yet as worship at TCBC unfolded, I felt increasingly troubled, in danger, angry. I couldn't figure out what was wrong. The minister smiled often. But I didn't trust his talk about Jesus. Looking back, I can see that I was visiting a culture very different from the one in which I had come to faith. I had never before heard anyone suggest that "our Lord" had "died for me" in order to "accomplish the will of the Father." This minister made that claim repeatedly, his vehemence underscoring the not-quite-spoken

threat that we had better respond now, with fervor, and in the ways he himself was prescribing--or else.

By the end of that service, the last thing on earth I wanted was for Jesus to be "Lord of my life." My body wanted out of there. I was finding it hard to breathe. And it was no wonder, I now see. I was used to being given a lot more room to interpret Jesus. I had learned to expect that defining my relationship with God was, to a large extent, my work.

My visit to TCBC left me confused. The people had tried to be friendly. I still felt a powerful aversion. My friend kept calling to invite me back. I kept saying no. Soon after, I looked up "Presbyterian" in the yellow pages and took myself to a service at the McKinley Presbyterian Church just off campus. Being full of professors and students, it wasn't just like my church back in Elmhurst, but before worship was over, I felt at home. Here as there, I had room to breathe, space to wonder. Now faith could again be about neighborliness, justice, beauty --and I could once more take up my part in the work of knowing and loving God.

At the time, I didn't understand why I felt so alienated at TCBC and so attracted to McKinley. I didn't know how to recognize questions of authority or make sense of believers arguing over the whats and hows of faith.

What I did know was to choose the congregation that offered me plenty of interpretive space. Whenever I talked with Dick Lundy or Charlie Schweitzer, the ministers at McKinley, they didn't try to resolve my dilemmas or hem me in. They were receptive. I could tell they trusted that my questions, even about how we know God, would take me where I needed to go.

One place my questions took me was to Vanderbilt Divinity School. As a senior at Illinois, I had arrived at my mailbox one morning to find two scholarship awards--one from the English department at the University of Chicago, and one from the North American Ministerial Fellowship program, offering to support my studies at the theological school of my choice. I stood there awhile, a letter in each hand.

I was an English major. In fact, I was happily engaged in writing a senior thesis, "The Motif of the Stranger in the Short Stories of Bernard Malamud," with the guidance of Achsah Guibbory, my favorite woman professor. Still, I wanted most of all to figure out my faith. By that September, I was at Vanderbilt. I plunged into reading. My questions multiplied.

The most disturbing book I read was also the shortest one, an extended essay written in 1966 (translated in 1972) by the German biblical scholar Willi Marxsen, The New

Testament as the Church's Book. What bothered me was that Marxsen proposes that the New Testament be seen as a collection of the preaching of the early church. To me, at that time, this was far from good news. If these writings were preaching, expressions of faith intended to evoke faith in readers, then how could they be a reliable witness to the presence and love of God? I didn't want the New Testament to be the church's book, I wanted it to be God's book. Growing up in a culture with a scientific bias, I had unconsciously absorbed the notion that the Bible's claims could only be "true" if they were objective, made by dispassionate, unbiased observers who merely reported what they had heard and seen. How could I trust the word of people who believed?²

I lived with that question through and beyond my first year of divinity school. I had already been persuaded once, it's true, among the people at my home church, but when it came to pursuing how we know what love is, who God is, I found myself in trouble. And just in case I was not quite clear about what my trouble was, one theologian we read stated the issue in a way that I could not avoid. It was Anselm of Bec, appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1093, who had this to say about the basis for his faith:

I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights,
because my understanding is in no way equal to it.

But I do try to understand your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand (qtd. in González 2: 158, emphasis mine).

Again, this was not at all what I wanted to hear. I wished for witnesses who arrived at God's truth by objective, rational inquiry alone, who would consent to believe only if the evidence of their investigations in itself turned out to absolutely convince them. Instead I was confronted with an obviously well-respected medieval theologian who allowed his intellect to follow his heart.

Here was my trouble. I was attracted to Anselm's way. My heart wanted to believe, too; it was leaping in recognition of the truths being offered in the courses I took, most especially on pastoral care with Peggy Way, on parables with John Donahue, on the letters of Paul with Daniel Patte, on the Reformation with Dale Johnson, on forms of religious reflection with Sallie McFague. And yet I worried that to proceed by heart would be--what? Self-indulgent, uninformed, risky, irresponsible, foolish.

I was surprised, then, to find myself one afternoon at course registration standing in line to sign up for New Testament Greek. I was reading a book as I stood waiting. I hadn't really noticed what I was up to--or why. All at

once I looked up, caught on to the strangeness of my being in that line, and got it. The only possible reason I had for taking Greek was that it's required for Presbyterian clergy. "Oh!" I said, startled, almost out loud, "I must have decided to become a minister."

And so I did. I transferred to McCormick, a Presbyterian theological school in Chicago, for my third year of study; celebrated my ordination by the Chicago Presbytery in the sanctuary of the Elmhurst church; and went to be one of four pastors on the staff of Third Presbyterian Church, a large, activist congregation in Rochester, New York. My primary responsibility was to encourage the spiritual growth of adult members. I taught, preached, led retreats, and collaborated with members to design courses, study groups, and conferences with visiting theologians.

It was an amazing transition. As I moved toward ordination and then took up pastoral work, the thing I was surest of about my own faith was that it had happened to me. I didn't know how, exactly, or even when. All I knew, looking back, wondering, was that listening intently in classrooms and sanctuaries, being in the company of professors and students who wondered and yet believed, my heart had slipped into a participation, an assent, a joyous

buoyancy--all of which I took to be the experience of "having faith."

I hadn't yet resolved my questions about how we "know" what is true. Nor had I succeeded in understanding the argument I had stumbled on at Twin City Bible Church. What I had done was begin an experiment in trusting and allow myself to see what happened. Not that I consciously chose this experiment. My coming to faith felt like what my Christian friends called "grace," like a gift, a blessing from beyond me. This grace--this being in love with God and the world and my life--was the spring from which I drew as I embraced the work of ministry. Its waters have proved trustworthy, bringing pleasure and strength to many as well as to me.

During my six years with Third Church, I began to understand that not only had grace "happened to me," I had also made a decision to trust. What I trusted at first was the witness of other believers, both past and present, that telling and hearing the stories of what has happened to people on their way with Jesus is a reliable way to learn about God and love. I trusted because in the company, through the poetry, of this community, both the living and the dead, I knew God's love, and loved the world, including my life, with exceedingly more generosity and hope than I

had previously been able even to desire. The more these loves deepened, the more I trusted myself.

And then I found Michal. I had first fallen in love with a woman ten years before, right about the time I was first persuaded to Christian faith. But until I got to Rochester and saw lesbian households, I hadn't believed it would be possible to make my home with another woman.

The life Michal and I entered into flowed from an exuberant interplay of erotic and spiritual passion. Yet knowing our denomination's penalties, we kept our ecstasy to ourselves. At home, we practiced a mystical, prophetic Christianity. But we steadfastly avoided any mention in public of this flourishing spiritual life.³

Life in the closet, for me at least, required a numbness to the losses and ironies of censoring myself. I couldn't begin to imagine all that I was not telling, holding back, giving up. Even as the pastor in ministry with members of Third Church's lesbian and gay support group, and later, with the task force working toward erotic justice within and beyond the congregation, I remained hidden. Michal did too, as she co-founded the Gift Center, a storefront ministry with residents in a predominantly African-American, economically oppressed neighborhood of Rochester, and also as she was elected moderator of our Genessee Valley Presbytery and appointed by former hostage

Benjamin Weir to be vice-moderator of our whole Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.

Michal and I didn't talk about what it might be like if we chose to reveal the many dimensions of our life together. We were so "churched," coming out was just not thinkable. Still, it didn't occur to us to doubt our recognitions of Divine Presence in our deepening love and delight.

My choice to live as a woman-loving woman, along with my clear sense, grounded in my own experience, that my denomination (and the Bible) were mistaken about the harmfulness of same-sex love, led me to look more critically at the church. Semi-consciously at first, I began to develop what feminist Christians have called a "hermeneutics of suspicion," an interpretive approach to the Bible and other church traditions which "suspects" that these texts, because of the male privilege so often written into them, may well work to re-enforce domination and therefore do readers harm.

My attitude of suspicion was encouraged as another lesbian pastor in the Presbytery and I read and talked together about historian Elaine Pagels' 1979 book, The Gnostic Gospels. As we read Pagels' analysis of the gnostic Christian texts discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt, I learned that early Christian practice was

much more diverse than I had known; that "orthodoxy" had eclipsed alternative ways of being Christian not because it was self-evidently "truer," but as part of a political struggle in which a central intention of those who triumphed was the curtailment of women's religious authority and existential freedom; and that sanctifying the domination of male over female was a guiding motivation among the men who decided which Christian writings to include in what continues to be the scriptural canon of the church.⁴

For a woman who was happy being a pastor, this was trouble. I took in what I could afford to and applied it in my work, most directly in a Bible Study I taught each Wednesday morning. I shared what I knew about how the canon got formed and emphasized the many layers of reinterpetive revision most biblical texts have undergone. Then we continued the work of revision. We brought passages from the Bible into dialogue with our lives. We considered the audience, the immediate concerns, and the cultural situation of the person writing. We listened and spoke based on the possibility that God might have something very different to say to one or another of us, in our circle, given our needs and interests, than what the writer (not to mention God) had intended in the original situation.⁵

Wanting to continue in parish ministry, I was seeking a way to draw on my new insights and still accept the limits of the church's canon, still preserve my denomination's assumption that God would be likely to speak to us especially through this collection of texts.⁶ In the setting of the Bible Study, this strategy worked. No one there seemed to mind my suggestion that sometimes God had to speak to us by "working around," with our cooperation, the oppressions we found woven into the biblical texts. Still, I didn't know how to hear biblical texts and interpretations as part of the ongoing argument we call Christian faith.

This left me at a loss when it came time to respond to conservative pastors in the Presbytery who charged that our congregation's commitment to leadership rights for gay and lesbian members violated "the teachings of the church." I didn't agree with their view. I could say what I believed. But I wasn't prepared to argue for the legitimacy of my position in relation to Christian traditions when they were using those same traditions to argue for the legitimacy of theirs.

I didn't know how to show that our congregation's decision was consistent with "the teachings of the church" as we understood them. I didn't know what to say when my opponents appealed to condemnations of homosexuality in

Leviticus and Romans, verses I was convinced God was "working around." I knew we had different ways of reading the Bible, but I didn't know how to describe the two approaches or how to advocate the faithfulness of mine. Especially since recent denominational rulings favored their position, I was silenced.

My move to accept the pastor/head of staff position at First Presbyterian Church in Green Bay, Wisconsin, was to some extent, I now think, an expression of my desire to explore my confusions about religious authority. During a farewell party at Third Church, Stuart Zellmer, a co-facilitator of the lesbian and gay support group, read a poem he had written which concluded, "the reason why we must endure this loss, is just because she wants to be the boss." Stu was on to me. As I now know, I wanted to be not just the primary preacher for a congregation, but also the person exercising primary authority in my own faith and life.

But, as it turned out, being "the boss" at church made it even more difficult for me to know and be myself. Being the only pastor, I found it was more important than it had been before to be responsible to, available to, every person in the congregation. I had taken for granted, when I took the job, that I would comply with the denomination's demand that its lesbian and gay ministers stay hidden. I

didn't anticipate, though, how much more closeted I would become as a feminist.

I developed a preaching strategy that I now call the "for those who have ears to hear" method. It seeks to promote liberation not by explicit critique, but by poetic suggestion, intentional silences, hinting, and innuendo. Such work is highly creative, very tiring, and given the pervasiveness of Christianity as domination in church texts and in our imaginations, it is a strategy with very slim transformative possibilities. During my third year, one parishioner did begin to count how many times "Father" occurred in the liturgies I designed, but only because he thought we should be hearing "God's name" more often.

I loved and still miss the people with whom I was in ministry in Rochester and Green Bay. And yet, as I continued to hide, I felt severely compromised. I wanted my integrity. So did Michal. One morning, we got out the map.

A few months later, in July, we curved onto the entrance ramp for 43 South. The back of the Trooper was filled with everything Michal needed while she stayed with friends in Tucson and looked for work. Our two Norfolk Island pines had gone in last, and as we bounced onto the highway, I watched their long branches wave goodbye.

December came before my actual move to Tucson. Michal had taken a job administering programs for homeless citizens. I had gotten accepted to the doctoral program in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English at the University of Arizona and concluded my work at First Church. With Banana Mae the cat in a carrier under the seat in front of me and Annie Dillard's The Writing Life in my hand, I sat back to maximize the sensations of acceleration and take off. In the air, exhausted from packing boxes, I soon fell asleep. I woke to see the lights of Albuquerque, though. That's how long it took Banana to get absolutely mad and decide to put up a howl. People in our section started looking around, alarmed, trying to figure out who or what was making that weird sound. I did the same.

Here in Tucson, free at least for awhile of pastoral responsibilities, I began once more to investigate questions of truth, authority, and argument in Christian faith. I started coming out as a lesbian to my colleagues on campus and to a few friends in the church. I dove into writing devotions, not yet knowing what they were. And I researched feminist practices of Christian faith, eventually finding the book that became my turning point: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's 1992 But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation.

I read the book one long weekend when Michal and I were up in the backcountry at Muleshoe Ranch, east from Tucson in the foothills of the Galiuro Mountains. In between hiking the trails, soaking in the hot springs, scampering across boulder-filled stream beds in the truck, and searching through binoculars for the yellow-breasted chat, I would read, mark key passages with my green highlighter, and just about scare myself to death.

Fear. I realized that if I saw it Schüssler Fiorenza's way, I was going to have to relinquish my current relationship not only with the Bible, but also with the church. My being Christian, I could tell, would never be the same.

I had a lot to give up. My vocation as a parish pastor. My sense of at-homeness in the world. The insulation from my anger at being oppressed. The sense of protection from patriarchy's worst violences that I had maintained by being hidden and compliant. With trepidation, but also with anticipations of freedom, I read on.

Staying with But She Said undid my old way of having faith. The key was Schüssler Fiorenza's contention, elaborated throughout her book, that "the Bible is a cacophony of interested historical voices and a field of rhetorical struggles in which questions of truth and

meaning are being negotiated" (152). This is the insight that brought things together for me. It set me on a path toward my current conviction that what we find in the church's scriptures are glimpses of Christianity's ongoing argument over what we who believe may take for truth, may "know," about God and love; that when we read the Bible, we hear the diverse, often overlapping voices of earlier believers, each in the midst of seeking to persuade particular audiences to look at "the" faith and "the" world in the speaker's way.

Here I echo rhetorical theorist Richard Weaver, who in his 1963 essay "Language Is Sermonic" suggested that "we are all of us preachers in private or public capacities. We have no sooner uttered words than we have given impulse to other people to look at the world, or some small part of it, in our way" (1054). This view is at the heart of what I was learning from my doctoral studies in rhetoric: that "knowledge" is available to us only through the very human process of "believing with"; that engaging in persuasion, including self-persuasion, is precisely how we come to "see" the world as we do; that truth, as rhetoric and composition scholar Patricia Bizzell puts it, "is what emerges when rhetoric is successful" (261).⁷

No wonder I felt terror reading But She Said. Its focus on the rhetorical conflicts swirling within and

around Christian traditions knocked me out of the kind of "true believing" we enjoy when we settle in to a particular view of the world. Allowing us to believe, of course, is an important function of worldviews. If we are constantly preoccupied with the as-ifness of our way of seeing, it's hard to get through the day.⁸

And yet my work in rhetoric kept leading me to acknowledge that no human look at the world can give us the world "itself." In a way, I was primed for my reading Schüssler Fiorenza. I had just been reading rhetorical perspectives on how human beings generate truth. What I learned is that Anselm, that esteemed medieval believer, was right. And not only about religion. No matter what we seek to know, we proceed on the basis of persuasions. In any given moment, whether we look at the world as artists, social workers, parents, theologians, writing teachers, physicians, voters, or geologists, we cannot help but believe in order to understand.

In this century especially, the truths generated through scientific research have often been successfully portrayed (over the objections of many scientists) as knowledge un"tainted" by human bias or belief. In a 1977 essay, "The Scientific Community as Audience: Toward a Rhetorical Analysis of Science," though, Michael Overington reveals how the "allegedly self-evident character of

scientific knowledge" masks the processes of belief, negotiation, and consensus-building by which its claims are shaped (161). Similarly, Michael Polanyi, in "The Re-Interpretation of Language" (1958), characterizes the move from one scientific perspective to another as a "conversion to new premises not accessible by any strict argument from those previously held" and demonstrates that scientific "facts" can only be recognized as such within human-devised interpretive frameworks which reflect the persuasions of particular communities of inquiry (105).⁹

Even the most "unemotional scientific nomenclatures," says Kenneth Burke, have a "suasive" effect. Burke maintains that human beings interact with the world through communally developed "terministic screens" which by their nature not only reflect but also select and deflect reality (45). Our terminologies, he contends, direct our attention and influence what we "observe." No one is exempt from the limitations inherent in this process, since human beings emerge as persons precisely by learning whatever particular communal speech provides their first symbolic context (53).¹⁰

Taken together, these insights led me to affirm what I call the rhetoricity of our existence. It's not that we are forever stuck with whatever ways of believing and seeing we first learn. It's just that being human, we have

no access to unfiltered looks at the world because our looking depends on language, and our languages, in turn, are involved with the conflicts, values, aims, and persuasions of communal life.

At the same time, we are not left to go about our lives bereft of truth. Truth is still available, and just as useful as ever for getting through the day. But, from the standpoint of rhetoric, truth is never independent, objective, value-neutral, or closed; instead, like each and all of us, it is involved, persuasion-dependent, interested, and still emerging.

Up in the Galiuro wilderness, reading But She Said with these truths about truth fresh in my mind, I began to own that the Christian faith I practice subverts the drama of domination that prevails in the church. At the same time, and very crucial to this "owning," I dared to see myself as especially belonging to, encouraged by, knowing with a particular community of believers. Following Schüssler Fiorenza, I chose to take a place in the transhistorical, international community of women and men struggling for sexual, racial, and economic justice. It is from this location that I now read Christian texts and traditions, and with these partners in survival and liberation that I claim authority to propose healing truths about Jesus, God, and love.¹¹

On this point, obviously, advocates of patriarchal Christian practice disagree, arguing that "the Bible tells us" every truth we need to know about matters divine and human, including that God wills that women be ruled over--with "love," of course--by men. In doing so, they portray the Bible as an autonomous, univocal source that puts out the same "self-evident" message no matter who reads it, why, or how. This argument, in which these believers represent themselves as getting instructions directly from the Bible "itself," without the intervention of an interpretive strategy, is, of course, their strategy for interpretation. By this sleight of hand, patriarchal interpreters advance their own interests while seeming only to receive and submit to them as "the Word of God."

Not long after my wilderness revelations, I saw this maneuver re-enacted, probably not by accident, in the same issue of the Presbyterian Layman (January/February 1994) where defenders of patriarchal faith denounced the 1993 Women's Re-Imagining Conference. Susan Cyre's front page lead article, headlined "PCUSA funds effort to re-create God," was accompanied by a photograph of women gathered in a circle and a caption that explained, "PCUSA executive Mary Ann Lundy (second from left) joins in a milk and honey ritual with lesbian activist Jane Spahr (second from right)

and others at the Re-Imagining conference. This ceremony included prayers to 'Sophia, Creator God.'

Just below, readers were referred to page seven for an article presenting a conservative Presbyterian coalition's proposal on human sexuality: "Renewal leaders issue 'A Declaration of Faith and Life.'" On page seven, I found a declaration which condemned lesbian, gay, and bisexual existence with a refrain of "Scripture tells us" and threatened me with God's judgment should I continue to "defy Him." Indeed, the declaration opened with the words, "All scripture is inspired by God . . ." (this itself was a quotation from scripture); and went on to claim that "All that is necessary for faith and for life is either explicitly stated in Scripture or may be deduced from it, and we affirm that it provides its own interpretation."

There they go again, brushing over the tracks of their interpretive exertions and disowning their political interests. But if the Bible does the work of interpretation on its own, then why write and distribute a Declaration to advance their proposal for how to read it?

How to read it is, of course, the healing question. As soon as that question is even halfway out of our mouths, we have opened a space where the patriarchal values and visions that prevail in biblical texts can no longer contain our being Christian.

My current practice is to read the Bible as a gathering of arguments. In its pages, I hear a multitude of often contradictory voices, each one engaged in believing, proposing, asking particular audiences to look at "love" and "God" in the speaker's way. I see the very formation of the Bible not as inevitable but as a move in the ongoing argument about God and love that flourished in Judaism, motivated Jesus, and continues to activate believers, both Jewish and Christian, today. I recognize that every voice in this argument, present and past, offers a view that is partial and interested--that is, thoroughly involved in living, breathing communities and thus in negotiations over power.

The way I orient myself among these many voices is to focus on the ethical. To me, the central matter is not "What does the Bible say?", a formulation which in my present view makes no sense, but rather, as Schüssler Fiorenza puts it, "What does a reading of the Bible 'do' to someone who submits to its world of vision?" (47). Again, much depends on who that someone is, where she stands in relation to established processes for granting social power, and how she reads.¹²

I currently seek to read in ways that encourage my spiritual-ethical authority and foster a wholehearted Christian practice. An insightful guide for this endeavor

is ethicist and theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz, who in her 1993 "La Palabra de Dios en Nosotras--The Word of God in Us" shows how and why "mujerista biblical hermeneutics accepts the Bible as part of divine revelation and as authoritative only insofar as it contributes to Hispanic women's struggle for liberation" (87). The goal of mujerista interpreters, she points out, is not to assist Hispanic women to "get ahead" within a social system which depends on some people being dominated and deprived; rather, in their proyecto historico, their preferred future, current social structures will have changed so radically that "nobody will be diminished" (92).

Such is the future that I also desire and toward which I believe, write, and read. This practice still feels a bit odd for someone who had always expected ethical desires to "flow forth" from her faith, but who did not yet acknowledge that every expression of faith already flows from particular ethical desires. I am now convinced that paying attention to this interplay between ethics and faith is, when it comes to proposing religious truth, "how it's done;" that such creative work is precisely what makes it possible for any person or community to "know" God.

Religious truth, just like all the rest of our truth, is human-made. As Sallie McFague puts it in her 1987 Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age,

"our concept of God is precisely that--our concept of God--and not God" (37). McFague reminds us that "no language about God is adequate and all of it is improper;" she argues that all metaphors "are in the same situation and no authority--not scriptural status, liturgical longevity, nor ecclesiastical fiat--can decree that some types of language, or some images, refer literally to God while others do not" (35).

This is not to suggest that it doesn't matter what language we choose, or that we are bereft of guidance for doing so. In her 1993 book, The Body of God: An Ecological Theology, McFague emphasizes the ethical implications of the language we use and invites us to consider how our lives would change if we let our central Christian affirmation be an image of the universe, including ourselves, as God's body.¹³ Further, and this is the key point for our purposes here, McFague maintains that though all proposals about Divine Presence arise from the lived experience of humans-in-community (and that therefore none deserves automatic privilege), she also affirms that we may choose one model rather than another based on where it is likely to lead us: "one adopts a model because it helps to make things better" (88-89).

Here in my practice of Christian life, I keep company with a nondominating God. She shows up, time and again, as

I attend to my experiences of loving and being loved, as I read and write Christian faith, as I listen to the wisdom of many different lives, and as I join with women and men at work to heal our hearts from the hatreds of domination, believing that we help to make things better.

Believing, after all, is my response to Dorsett's question: do you think we can really do this?

Can we really have a wholehearted Christian faith?
Can we really make things better? Can we do the devotions that heal our lives--and still really be with God?

Come and see.

CHAPTER TWO

APPLES THEY SAY ARE SIN

BAPTISM

Growing up, I didn't go to church. I reveled in the pleasure of sun, trees, grass, earth, body. I gave thanks. But when my two best junior high friends invited me to their congregation, I went. The preachers there talked about divine love revealed in ordinary people and events. Bruce, minister for education, worked with us in a literacy project at Chicago's Erie Neighborhood House. Judy, director of the youth choir, sang us into a liberation faith. Our Jesus was a political activist, a friend to outcasts, a heretic. We loved each other madly. We had a blast.

On a bright December morning at the Elmhurst Presbyterian Church, I presented myself for baptism. Later in the service, we in the ninth grade confirmation class took communion for the first time. My friends and I sat shoulder to shoulder in the first pew, giggling a little as we passed the silver plate adorned with uniform cubes of crustless bread. We got serious when the grape juice came around, doing our best to keep from tipping the tiny glass cups and spilling purple all over our white dresses. One night after choir practice not long after, my new friend Evie and I slipped down the stairs behind the sanctuary into the dark and kissed. It was a baptism somewhat different from the reserved presbyterian sprinkling I had

received in the chancel above. This time, I was drenched.

I hadn't had the slightest notion how to hope for such a thing. But there we were. Alone on the landing, the exit light glowing down the hall. Her fingertips on my neck, in my hair. My lips brushing her cheek, finding her mouth.

"What made you two think you could do that?" Janet asks, twenty-three years later. I don't know. But I do know that Evie and I kept choosing that place as a safe house for our loving. The church was across from our high school. Its doors were unlocked. We carried on in every corner of that building--the chilly bathroom, the crowded mop closet, the sacristy laced with the fragrance of candles, the choir loft warm with the orange and red of sunlight falling through stained glass.

Looking back now, I see I was practicing what they preached. God so loves the world. The Word becomes flesh. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. I will not leave you desolate. I will come to you. And then, waking every nerve in my soul and body, there she was. I knew God when I tasted her. My church had taught me well.

TALL GRASS

The grass
is over
my head
over and over
my head
needs to rest
in a nest
of grass
leaning back
into the late afternoon
of childhood
where I can smell the apples
on the wind
apples they say
are sin
but I say
what could be sweeter?

SAVOR IT

We taste, O God, and find that you are wonderful:
wise in creating us
and devoted in freeing us
to be who we are.

Thanks be to you for this gift of life.

More and more,
starting with this moment,
may we savor it.

IN YOUR DREAMS

Sometimes I get mixed up about where I am and what I do.

After ten years as a pastor, with the rhythms of parish life still echoing in my soul, I entered a doctoral program in rhetoric at the University of Arizona and started teaching composition. What a change of worlds. I shifted my focus from a community of faith to a community of inquiry. I poured myself out not for grace, peace, and justice but for writing, reading, and critical thinking. I felt time differently--Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Eastertide, and Pentecost gave way to Registration, Back-to-School, Midterm, Exam Week, and Winter or Summer Break. Despite all this, many of my mystical instincts remained. One morning, as I turned from writing on the board at the start of class, I stopped myself on the verge of opening with prayer.

Then in June I had this dream. The scene was a graduation. Here came a procession of Arizona rhetoric professors decked out in full regalia--gowns, caps, hoods. But instead of marching to "Pomp and Circumstance," they were singing something a cappella. The words were not familiar to me, but I recognized that tune; it stirred me deeply before I realized I knew it from the hymn, "Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling."

The next day I told the dream to my friend Leslie. I boasted: "See, I'm going to put all the parts of my life together yet!"

"At least at night," she said.

HOW YOU CALL TO US

Softly and tenderly IS

how you call to us,

and reverently,

playfully, too.

In daylight and darkness.

Come trouble or pleasure.

I listen, and find myself beloved.

I tell my truth, and find myself believed.

WHOSOEVER MAY

The entrance to my grandparents' house--the door everybody used--brought visitors directly into the kitchen. Not a very big room, it was made even smaller by the glorious clutter of my grandmother Jessie's art supplies. Brushes, oils, chinks, pencils, sketchbooks, canvasses, and paintings-in-progress adorned the counter and chair between the refrigerator and the wooden cabinet where dishes were stowed. Still, there was room for a long maple table and plenty of chairs.

As far back as I can remember, that table was covered with a red and white checkered cloth, and Gramma never failed to set an extra place for supper. When I asked why, she said it was "for Whosoever May." At first I thought that was somebody's name, maybe somebody from the South. But after awhile I came to understand that she set that place for "whosoever may show up." And sure enough, people did.

I remember waking to the aroma of cinnamon toast baking in her oven. Coming downstairs in the early morning dark, I'd find her in the living room, just one lamp on over her corner chair, her fingers tracing slowly down the page of a book or curled around a pen as she kept her journal.

I remember Jessie in her eighties tuning her short-wave radio to news of the world, writing letters on e-mail, taking a course in metaphysics.

I remember how she delighted in Michal as a member of our family, as a sister in spiritual leadership, as a friend.

On the morning after we buried my grandfather, I sat beside Jessie in the back pew of her Christian Science church. It was chilly--October in Cadillac, Michigan. The leaves were falling. She got up and turned the heater on. While the woman lector read, we dozed, sinking in to a strange, delicious rest that still reaches across these years to console me. A hymn woke us, and we stood. Her voice came out soft and clear. She was unspeakably sad, I could see, and deeply peaceful.

She died the way she wanted to, safe from medical intervention at a Christian Science care center. She had eaten a good breakfast in bed that morning, they said, and drifted away not long after, with the sun falling in through the window while an attendant read to her from Mary Baker Eddy.

The last time I saw her was just over a month before that, on the Monday after my grandfather's service. My dad and I were getting ready to drive back to Chicago in time for me to catch a flight home. We brought suitcases down the stairs and hurried to pack the car.

My grandmother sat at the table in that kitchen of hers, watching us bustle. I think she knew. I suspected nothing. She smiled. I kissed her and ran out into the rain.

COMING OUT

There is no savor
more sweet, more salt
than to be glad to be
what, woman,
and who, myself,
I am . . .

--Denise Levertov

Sweet like cherry juice on your lips. Salt like tears on your tongue.

That's what it tastes like to come out, especially at first. There is grieving. The life of refusing to be glad in who we are is relinquished. There are countless giving-ups and letting-gos. There is deep sadness in noticing, for the first time, then repeatedly, the routine, day by day, systematic and rigorous betrayals of one's own soul. You begin to catch yourself at it. You taste salt.

But nothing is more sweet than becoming who, yourself, you are. Fashioned in love by Divine Spirit. Radiant in the image of God. Yearned for by the whole company of prophets. No one can take your place on our journey, in this movement, in God's heart.

We come out, as Dorothy Day would say, "by little and by little." As we are ready. Over and over. To ourselves

and to each other. Our tongues awake to both sweet and salt.

A PRAYER OF BLESSING

We thank you, Loving God, for your delight in our lesbian, gay, and bisexual lives. You have fashioned us in your own image. You have made us beautiful, ingenious, resilient. Our loving is full of your transformative power.

We know how to reach deep and we know how to bless. We know how to rage and we know how to rest. In the midst of terror, we find a way to trust. In the face of devastation, we move through the postures and gestures of hope. Together we remember, together we learn, together we act, together we heal.

Gather us now in your warm embrace, hold us so close that we can feel your heartbeat, and give to each one of us all that we need for this day. As we move through hurts, confusions, pleasures, celebrations, may we return, time and again, to the truth about us: we are dearly loved, we are holy, we are yours.

THE "S" WORDS

The words "sin" and "salvation" have been systematically, mythically, ritually used against us. To deceive and to dehumanize. To wound and to subdue.

Sandy Robinson, president of Samaritan College, says it clearly: within many cultures and religious communities, we whose lives do not match the heterosexual norm are "walking talking sin." To people in most churches, she says, "I am sin. My flesh is sin." An African-American woman who resists black male supremacy while also struggling for racial, economic, and erotic justice, Sandy finds herself "shattered." Any salvation which fails to meet her in this shatteredness is not worthy of our yearning or praise.

Early sunlight washes the green-brown hills above the Pacific while Sandy tells her truth to the national gathering of CLOUT (Christian Lesbians Out Together). She speaks of anguish and survival. She acknowledges that some of us get destroyed. Yet she believes that "fear can be turned into energy" as we who are shattered become a community of powerful hope. Showing us her unrelenting rage and sorrow, Sandy declares that "Christ resides here." She's not talking about some easy, seamless mending. No. What happens, she says, is that the Spirit "pulls the shattered pieces into a tension." In the midst of that

tension, "there is a joy."

Some other womanist theologians refuse to speak about sexualities because, they explain to Sandy, "it's death-dealing." She comes on to us--wise, jubilant, irrepressible: "DO I LOOK DEAD TO YOU?"

WALKING TALKING SALVATION

Wild and Wonderful Spirit of Life, praise be to you for prophets who tell their truth boldly and open up plenty of room for us to tell our own. Bless our ruminations. Be heard in the many resonances of our talk. Be recognized upon our faces as we eat and listen and hurt and laugh and touch and remember and dream. Let us become for each other what we already are by your desire and design: walking talking salvation. More and more, especially in our trials and tumults, show us that we are never abandoned. And in our finding you right here with us, let there be a joy.

LOVING OURSELVES

By far the most neglected teaching in Christian tradition is the commandment to love yourself. Church sermons and hymns and rituals are frantically trying to distract us from it. That all by itself is enough to get my attention. What's the big deal? Why such avid prohibition, especially when Jesus poured loving yourself right into the same pot with loving God and loving neighbors in his personal recipe for keeping faith?

Loving oneself takes practice. And passion. And power. Loving ourselves, we honor all creation. Loving ourselves, we bless the world.

YOU DWELL HERE

Spirit of Truth,
let us not be confounded
by those who would keep us
preoccupied,
driven,
compliant.
Appear to us
as we dare to experiment with loving ourselves,
for you dwell here,
in us as in all.

NOT AFRAID

A whirling pulsing blur of bodies and voices; a radiance of faces, many moods, many colors; a roaring, soaring acclamation of pianos, organ, and harp. We're at the evening praise service at the San Francisco Metropolitan Community Church, and it's packed. A few too many CLOUT women squeeze into the front pew. We sing and pray and preach and sing. We hear about an attack in the street, a job lost, a family estranged, the daily invasions of well-organized injustice, the grief upon grief of living and dying with AIDS. Then Sharna goes over to a simple table set with fall flowers, a cup, and bread: "Here at the table with the women and the children and the men who had stayed with him while he ate with people nobody else would eat with and talked with unworthy women in the streets Jesus held in his hands grain of the earth fruit of the vine gave thanks and said this is the work of my soul this is the passion of my life eat and drink all of you and be assured there is no law no government no disease no doctrine no ruling no church no loss no harm that can ever separate us from the love of God."

Well. There is nothing left to do but go on up and get some. After all who want it have been fed and held and blessed, we sing some more. We Shall Overcome . . . and

then, We'll Walk Hand in Hand . . . and last of all, We Are Not Afraid.

We sing it out, knowing it for the honest lie that it is, knowing that there are times when we have to sing our way there, sing our way to the rock bottom truth of it, sing it so wild that we fly, sing it so bold that every sister and brother in the house can believe it for some part of another week, another day, another minute. We are not afraid.

Listen.

VISIT US

Divine Wisdom,
we give thanks
that your presence not only embraces
but also sustains,
that your Spirit is here
not only to soothe
but also to free us.
Visit us as we weep, rant, sing.
Though we are beset by hatred and harm,
may our hearts bloom with healing.
Even as we pass through the mysteries of death,
even as we come more fully to life,
may we find ourselves not afraid,
for you are with us.

CHAPTER THREE

WE WILL NOT WAIT

BE IT RESOLVED

Yesterday we got the news. The governing board of the church we attend could not bring itself to allow our friends Josefina and Helen into the sanctuary for their ceremony of commitment as a couple.

This is the same board at which Fina sits as a congregationally-elected and ordained elder. This is the very board that a few months earlier had adopted a Statement of Inclusive Faith. "BE IT RESOLVED," the Statement concludes, following a blaze of prophetic theologizing and a spirited account of the congregation's years of solidarity with oppressed peoples . . . "BE IT RESOLVED that this congregation declares its welcome to all persons seeking to follow Christ into the full life, ministry, and leadership of its community of faith, regardless of race, ethnicity, worldly condition, gender, disability, or sexual orientation."

What happened?

Fear took hold.

When the board circulated its Statement in meetings among church members, most responded with strong support, but several resisted the mention of sexual orientation. In response to this conflict, some called for yet more study. One proposed adopting only the theology and history parts of the Statement, thus avoiding any BE IT RESOLVED.

Eventually board members decided not to take their usual next step of putting the Statement to a congregational vote. But they assured us that they stood behind their Statement of Inclusive Faith one hundred percent.

Hello?

Oh, fear again. I forgot where I was for a moment. I lost sight just then of the threat and menace that Helen and Fina are. They love each other tenderly, joyously, radiantly. They thirst for justice as women, as lesbians, as an interracial/intercultural couple. They want to come to church and make their vows.

Lock the sanctuary. Fence the table. Don't let the blessing of their communion be accomplished on your holy ground.

Yesterday we got the rebuke. It landed like a kick in the gut. Right away I went rotten, saw myself as walking garbage, turned into the abomination they were saying I was, became someone whose body would poison sacred spaces, felt the horror of believing that my being would bring harm.

Then my breath came back. My vision cleared. Pretending rots the slender, necessary strands of human trust. Acquiescing in the notion that we are evil abets the violence against us in society and church. Refusing to grant us sanctuary is an abomination.

I have loved these people, their faces around the table, their voices in prayer. But they keep pointing to some always-just-down-the-road moment when it will "be time" for justice. All the while, they say they love me. I will no longer accept this "love."

WHEREAS my church has revealed itself to be a place where fear controls, BE IT RESOLVED that the time has arrived for me to shake the dust off these two terrifying feet and take this tender, joyous, radiant dance of mine on down the road.

DOING DISHES

Morning. Here I am doing dishes--again. The soul, too, needs to do things over and over. Like feel its anger, break it open with the shattering of a cup, trace the textures, consider the counsel, ride the unruly surf.

Many spiritual traditions portray love in ways that induce us to recoil from our anger. Given pervasive cultural confusion about anger, this might seem like wisdom. But it's hard to imagine a more effective way to distort and suppress love than to get people to disown their rage. Beverly Harrison is convinced that Christians "have come very close to killing love precisely because we have understood anger to be a deadly sin."

Anger, Harrison proposes, "is not the opposite of love. It is better understood as a feeling-signal that all is not well in our relation to other persons or groups or to the world around us." Learning to honor that bodily signal, we are free to let anger ignite our ethical reflection and fire our action for personal and social change.

Transformation begins whenever we interrupt the schemes by which the power-hoarders succeed in talking us out of our fury. Tenacity expands as we abandon the notion that anger is unspiritual. Love deepens when we recognize in our rage the seeds of holiness and healing. As Harrison

affirms: "A chief evidence of the grace of God--which always comes to us in, with, and through each other--is our power to struggle and to experience indignation."

The cup slips out of my sudsy fingers. It cracks and splinters. I shout and soar.

Over and over, anger.

Deeper and wiser, love.

RISE IN US

Sacred Spirit,
you brood in us through every struggle,
and you rise in us with our rage,
turning us loose for a love that shakes the earth.
Surprise us, we pray, in ordinary hours.
Teach us to pay attention
when we sense that all is not well.
Then renew our trust that we need not
go someplace else,
or do something else,
or be someone else
in order to claim our liberation.
Thanks be to you for the occasion of here and now.

I REPENT

They call me an unrepentant homosexual. But they don't know me well. Yes, yes, yes, I intend to keep faith with my woman-loving heart. And as I do, I find it good to engage in a daily turning away from hatred.

I repent.

I repent of swallowing Hatred's lies.

I repent of assenting to Hatred's judgments.

I repent of adjusting to the everyday habits of Hatred.

I repent.

I repent of excusing Hatred's ways.

I repent of being silenced by Hatred's threats.

I repent of seeking a home in the world according to Hatred.

I repent.

I repent of the deep-drummed belief that there is nothing we can do, no way to get free from these elaborations of Hatred.

I repent. I repent. I repent. I repent.

Yes, yes, and yes!

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S PRAYER

On this last evening of July I want to sit on the back step of my childhood house and eat a peach with my mother, the juice dripping down our chins. Not that I don't have a peach here. But I wish to feel at home.

I call to Maggie. Out on the patio, I brush her hair, the shiny black, the wispy white, the streaks and speckles of brown. I toss her ball and she takes off after it, a twelve-year-old collie breaking into a puppy's delirious run.

Yesterday a boy got shot outside the grocery store down the street from our house. Last week a woman got dragged into the wash and beaten as she took her morning walk. On the news, violation and murder are reported as if nothing else can be imagined or desired.

Even after all these years, my heart is not adjusted to this regimen of horror. When one gets hit, I feel us all go down, our blood running over the pavement or into the water or onto the grass.

In bed, I read aloud to Michal from Adrienne Rich, who summons us to seek release from "the competition--taught in the schools, abetted at home--that pushes the 'star' at the expense of the culture as a whole, that makes people want stardom rather than participation, association, exchange, and improvisation with others."

We belong to each other--improvising, reveling. Each.
Every. All. My soul breathes a sigh. May it be so.

May I learn to see every body, none left out, as bone,
like my bone, of sacred bone; and flesh, like my flesh, of
love, God's own.

May we learn this together.

When the way is difficult, may our desire carry us.

When the way is impossible, may our desire carry us.

May whoever is ready, or almost ready, go first.

TAKING DOWN THE CROSS

A couple of days ago I took down the stained glass cross from our kitchen window. I held it in my hand, turned it over, smiled when the layers of blue and green reminded me of Lake Michigan. Still, the time had come. I was finished.

Misgivings took me by surprise. What is this? Couldn't be. Me? Come on. But there it was. I felt a loss of safety. Amused, I started to shake off my "superstition" that the cross can ward off danger. Then I got curious.

Like many, I have worn the cross, prayed under the cross, taken shelter in singing hymns of the cross. "All the light of sacred story" gathers around it, says one of those hymns, and yes, the cross has been a gathering place for me. I have stood there with other souls who long for healing. Out of the rich communal interplay of myth, conviction, and implication surrounding the cross, I have found/fashioned some truth. There is nothing unusual about this. It is part of the work (and play) of believing. In my case, the cross got charged with the truth that Divine Love abandons no one, that "Thou art with me" can be counted on through every hurt and sorrow. Not bad, as truth goes.

But now I see it's not the cross I want to focus on, gather around, charge with my trust. The tree, they sometimes call it. But it was not a tree. It was an instrument of imperial violence, designed to terrorize, calculated to control. When some saw compassion acted out in the life of Jesus, they set about to destroy it. Our healing springs not from their act of hatred, but from the generous friendship of God.

I turned the cross over one more time, traced its currents of color, then carried it to the hall closet and put it in the brown paper bag of things to give away. It's in there between a comforter, worn but intact, and a pair of outgrown jeans. Maybe somebody else can get some use out of it.

EASY AS BREATHING

Lover of All,
we are ever and always protected,
for Thou art with us.

Over and over, you prepare before us a table
where we can taste and see that there really is
more than enough to go around.

More than enough food, yes.
And more than enough power.

Our part is to notice, take pleasure, believe.
Here on this cool grass beside the stream I rest in you
and the impossible turns out to be effortless.

I watch a green-blue lizard jump;
I listen to the locusts keen.
With such gentleness, I steal away.
Easy as breathing, I go free.

MIRIAM'S BONES

Between the riven sea and the chilly river
you three died
and your bones were laid to rest
one sacred frame after another
big sister first
who one day raised not a tamborine
but an objection
brother priest next
who stood unscathed while
the lord consumed your flesh
brother prophet last
whose infant body you had saved
from the bruise and ruin
of imperial slaughter.

When your company got over the Jordan
they lifted the bones of Joseph with a shout
Moses slumbered on in the Moab valley
Aaron didn't stir in his cave on Mount Hor
but back in the desert of Kadesh
below a lonely mound of stones
your bones began to rattle.

Miriam

you move

in our jaws

when we let our objections loose

and shake in our shoulders when we grieve each woman ever

silenced you sing in our ribs when we roll with a laugh and

in our hips when we rock with desire and in our feet as we

heed your call to a place where every threat to our flesh

is ended.

We are here

to protest

your punishment.

And to any god

who would punish you still

we say

"Go!

Be gone!

Flee into the wilderness

wander between river and sea

turn your soul around and around

Who knows?

It may be

your heart will break

it may be
your fears will melt
it may be
you will long to be with us
at this table

Look
how many chairs
so much food
all this wine

We need not go with you
and we will not wait

But if you come back
yearning

Trust us
there will be enough."

MONASTIC TENDENCIES

I wake up with light just beginning to visit our bedroom. Power is running through my limbs, from my head and heart out into my fingers and toes. I am vibrating. Who knows what will happen today? I am here.

Michal is leaving for work. She has a message to call somebody named Sister Priscilla, who will be in her office at 7:05, after prayer. There's something attractive to me about that: prayer in the morning, prayer before taking phone calls. Prayer.

If I have been here before, lived any past lives, I think at least one of them must have been monastic. Maybe I walked with Hildegard in the green and luminous Rhineland, listened to her tell of working as a visionary preacher in the twelfth century church. And maybe I meditated and gardened, cooked and wrote, in a Buddhist community of China.

These days I make very few assumptions about what counts as prayer. Need I add anything to this humming in my bones? Need I speak to Someone about this happiness?

I wonder who Sister Priscilla prays to, how her prayers work in relation to her power. My prejudices say her God endorses patriarchal domination. My prejudices think they know it all and often end up surprised.

I hope I meet Sister Priscilla one day. Maybe we could walk out into the desert some morning before taking phone calls and pray.

Right now, though, I want this solitude. I listen to bird songs, watch mesquite branches dance on the wind, and welcome this trust that opens a space for the work and play of my being with God.

Who knows what will happen today?

I am vibrating.

I am here.

CHAPTER FOUR

I DECIDE TO CALL YOU SOPHIA

REFIGURINGS OF MYTH

Here at the corner of 10th and Mountain the folks with the purple swing on their porch have been out watering. The daisies proclaim burnt red from gangly stems; the gazanias are still asleep. The sun falls hot already on my cheek, a hint of the searing stretch of afternoons to come. I inhale the wet desert. Music splurges out the screen door, electric piano and drums, jubilant, and I decide to call you Sophia.

See what happens when a Presbyterian minister goes on retreat from the church? It's quite a discipline. Labor and contemplation. Calvin would be proud. I get up early. I write, eat toast and raspberries, go walking with Maggie, write, take a bubble bath, read. I run errands, take a nap, try a new recipe. Michal and I eat out back under the pomegranates. We hear the birds, feel the first stirrings of coolness, talk until our voices float in the dark. I wash the dishes slowly . . . turning, balancing, getting ready to sleep.

Discipline, my friend Deborah Mullen announces via a note on her refrigerator, is the art of remembering what you want. We're thrilled by the storm in our denomination over the global women's Reimagining Conference. Presbyterian women, supported by mission dollars, prayed

and sang to Sophia. The patriarchal police are ready to schedule heresy trials.

Deborah, a womanist theologian, is glad that after lo these twenty years, our work is being recognized for the ecclesiastical earthquake that it is. I agree. This sure beats being dismissed by liberals who look up from their budget projections to insist, "Of course we want diversity in our church."

Who can keep this sidewalk from becoming holy ground? I look, and here you are. Sophia. What can prevent this chaos of recognition, these refigurings of myth? Sophia God. Sophia Spirit. Sophia Jesus.

The more I say your name, the more I see you.

INCARNATIONS

This is the first morning of Advent and I am at home. Almost two years ago now, right after Christmas, I stopped going to church. It was my way of withdrawing to the wilderness as Jesus was known to do. My tradition calls it going out to a "lonely place." It's true, I have felt lonely. It's also true I have gained a previously unimaginable freedom to listen to my heart.

I miss moving through the holiness of seasons with a faith community. I miss the Third Church sanctuary with its doors wide open to the Rochester summer, breezes swirling around us, sweeping with playful, gentle allurements over our skin, through our hair. I miss Lent's permission to be a contemplative . . . solitary, studious, even slow. I miss lighting Advent candles in a crowded church, the faces of grownups and children soft with wonder.

But I don't miss how Advent at church is so very much about Jesus and so very little about us.

Yes, I remember how creative preachers can be in offering us parts in the ancient drama. At first we can desire and wait and listen; later on we can hasten with the shepherds and journey with the magi to greet . . . whom? Each image has its own implications, each poetic proposal its relation to existing structures of privilege and

oppression. What will we call this baby in the manger? Newborn king? Mary's child? Prince of Peace? Lord of lords? Word made flesh? God the Father's only begotten Son our Savior? Stranger for whom there is no room? God with Us? Desire of Nations? Bright Morning Star?

Here I am with mixed responses again. Living in this driven, consumptive culture, I have always valued gathering with others around a story that actually expects us to yearn for neighborliness, that dares to ask us to be receptive to mystery, that would cultivate our trust in blessings which we need not compete for or control. As a parish preacher, I practiced a poetics that gestured toward these spiritual and moral alternatives. I sought to tell an Advent-Christmas story which would invite each listener to live in faith that "Thou art with me;" that peace with each other can happen and offers us the deepest, surest pleasure; that joy can begin now--and all because God is present in the flesh.

Out here in the wilderness, I ask outright and keep on asking: whose flesh?

The prevailing symphony of church traditions drowns out this question, settles it by an exclusive focus on Bethlehem and the embodiment of God that took place back then, back there. Whatever contemporary preachers may suggest about unwelcome Strangers or radiant Morning Stars

who appear to us in the present is quickly subsumed by the steady assertion of intermingled King-Subject, Father-Son, Lord-Slave imagery and its insistence on a restricted, once-and-for-all, you-must-submit-to-benefit incarnation.

"Aren't we the Words of God?" Tilly asks, our cups of coffee steaming on the table between us.

And I ask, all of us? All the time?

What if incarnation turned out to be not perfect and not scarce?

What if we saw the Divine/Human love unfolding in the life of Jesus not as a one-time-only event but as a marvelous hint, a wondrous clue to what is possible, what already sometimes takes place, in our being with each other, with the world, with our selves?

What if Advent were a time when we learned together how to recognize--how to become--God with us?

WHO CAN BELIEVE

Joy and praise, O God,
for the gospel truth that you
inhabit bodies:
my body,
her body,
star body,
earth body,
outcast body,
battered body,
starving body . . .

Who can believe
that justice
begins with this?

SITTING IN THE RAIN

What if I told you that while we sit here, our hair wet, our bodies glad for the sudden heat from these rocks beneath us, I am being forgiven?

I let it in whenever I can, with a wafting of yeast when you baked yesterday, a shimmer of lightning in the belly of a cloud--with this rain cool on our faces as we watch the layered mountains to the west turn the color of watermelon, then violets.

No one says anything. Except about the delicious earth. The bats tilting by. The greening of ocotillo since the monsoons finally arrived. We trust this. We met in our attraction to the holy. We've done baptisms. We've said benedictions. We've preached grace.

Three women. No mention of betrayal or love. Just sitting. Just opening to the Sacred--her undaunted generosity, her irrepressible skill.

Back in the truck, we lumber through the pass. "Oh!"--a huge moon, gold, coasting low above the city, takes us by surprise. We sing. You tell a story. We laugh so hard it takes all three of us to drive.

WE THEOLOGIANS

All theological work proceeds by people going in circles. This may not sound auspicious, but it's true. And going in circles is a very good way, provided we own up to what we do.

What we do is go round and round between the particulars of a life and the traditions of a faith. As we circle, we constantly interpret, ponder, notice. We make sense of our tradition's stories, truth claims, and rituals in the context of our lived experience AND we make sense of our experiences in the context of our tradition's rituals, stories, and claims to truth. This is exceedingly complicated and creative work. And it is not reserved for a privileged few. There is no way to believe outside this circling. Everyone becomes a theologian in order to practice her faith.

It can be disconcerting to acknowledge how creative we must be in coming to believe. But such excellent blessings flow when we notice that we are the authors of our faith, when we talk about it, watch ourselves choose. In doing so, we get freer to shift our focus from "Is it true?", since many very different Christian truths are both defensible and believed, to "Is it good?"--or to be more pointed, "FOR WHOM is it good?" Who would be liberated by

the truth I'm creating? What is the character of the relationships it praises? Where does it claim to see love?

THE SOPHIE TREE

It wasn't a weeping willow. It was huge around, tall, solitary, its canopy spread in full green tiers above the prairie turned park, fifteen miles west of Lake Michigan, a walk from the house where I grew up. I was the one who mourned. The tree rested me.

I would go around to the side facing away from the pool where on other afternoons I braved the high dive, ran in slow motion through the water chasing my friends and then basked, dripping, all body, on concrete warm with the sun. Back of the tree, I would nestle where its roots sank into the earth, lean into the curve of its rutted trunk, and gaze off across the uninhabited grass toward the tracks where once in awhile a freight train moaned, appeared, and shook the ground, lugging box cars to or from Chicago. I could cry there.

Sophia, too, can stand my sorrow. Now as in my early years, she draws me to her shelter, rests me in her beauty, calms me with her reverence until I can know my sufferings and speak the truths that set me free. To one whose truth is so often scorned and denied, her presence is gospel, is salvation, is peace.

With Sophia, I am not threatened and I need not pretend. She tells me her wisdom. She calls forth my

strength. In the play of light upon the mountains, she teaches. In the faithfulness of friends, she heals.

Sophia has no rod or staff to keep me cautious and controlled. Her softening eyes, her listening voice, her breathtaking smile, they comfort me.

"MIS" TAKING GOD'S LOVE

One night I came home excited from a meeting of our Feminist Theological Roundtable.

"How'd it go?" Michal asked.

"I loved it," I said. "Sue and Marilyn got us thinking about questions of authority and how we relate to the Bible. A couple of older women in my small group told how they sit in church, listening to a scripture or sermon, and whenever something rings true, they go out to embrace it, but when something doesn't fit with what they believe, they adapt it or toss it away. One woman said, 'I am my own authority.' It was great to hear that. Just think, all these years when we've been sitting in church feeling alienated and making translations, thinking we were the only ones, other women have been doing it too."

"But that's the trouble," Michal responded.

"What?"

"They didn't help us. They never said. It would have been very different being in worship knowing there were others who didn't go along with it all."

"True . . ."

"If no one says otherwise, just being at church lets people assume you're endorsing everything that goes on there. Unless, of course, you pop up every once in awhile and announce, 'By the way, I deleted the passage from

Ephesians, rewrote point two of your sermon, and changed some words in verse four of that last hymn.'"

Now you're talking.

At the Roundtable, it's becoming clear that many of us sit in patriarchal worship privately "mis"taking God to be somebody who respects our lives, who knows our afflictions, who is angry when people steal our freedom. Here we are, after all these years in the church, finding out that we have "mis"heard, "mis"read, "mis"written ourselves into a whole new Christian faith.

Now what?

AT MY STOVE OR DESK

You visit so unobtrusively. Usually at my stove or desk! I sense you looking over my shoulder with interest in whatever I am making: a letter to Deborah, a retreat for women pastors, a garlic soup, a wholehearted Christian faith. When you come, I am surprised at first, but then it's "Of course! What did I expect?"

There are many things I don't know about how life was for you. Much was hidden, as much was given, in your ways of finding strength.

Grandmother, I am inspired by you: your intellectual pursuits, your spiritual practice, your curiosity, your artistry, your hospitality, your stubbornness, your joy. You were willing to learn and willful in being yourself--a courageous blend which continues to offer wisdom for liberation.

Grandmother, I call on your assistance. I open to your power. Be with me, help me to trust my life in these days as I sink into my heart and proceed to invent pleasures and blessings of my own.

ALL I HAD WAS A BREEZE

What is this exquisite holiness of the stirring breeze? My pleasure in it has been with me forever. It persuades me, over and over, to trust my life for another day.

The breeze--and its flowers, its foods, its friends--has been with me even through the times when I have been without God. And I have been without her, since I did not know, in those days, her names, her ways, her provisions. Today I understand that she visited me when that breeze came up, soft as breathing, over my skin

You must have been so glad
when you could get to me that way
soothe me
assure me
even in my confusion

Still, I did not know it was You

I was deserted

Finding out
how very different You are
from what I was trained to imagine

can't erase these scar lines
Nor do these cancel
your very present Help
in friends
and food
and flowers

It's just that
Your love, this love I now try
like a small child taking my first few steps I fall
yet even with the earth in my face I know
I will fly, and soon

It's just that
Your love, this love I now see
wants me, this woman, to be thoroughly
free

It's just that
Your love, this love, was
ruled a danger: "Don't even think about it!"

Now
I fall
yet even with the earth in my face I know
I will fly, and soon.

YOU ALL ALONG

Only true beach lovers braved the chill--just a few souls, drawn to their solitude, walked the hard-packed sand next to the water. Fog floated in to enclose the dunes, receded over the vast stretch of Lake Michigan, then floated back in, hiding me again. I sat down on a long, smooth limb of driftwood and went with my tears.

Camp Saugatuck is a sacred site, a place where divinity drew near as my church took me into its arms and sang to me of love. But years later, that afternoon on the beach, I began to let myself feel the assault of their betrayal: "We didn't mean you."

What I will do about the church, I don't know. But day by day now, hour by hour, my love for the world, my love for my life, runs deeper. I call out to the One who teaches me, who accompanies me. Sophia!

Sophia of the fragrant pines, Sophia of the splendid grass, Sophia of the shifting dunes, Sophia of the ancient waters, I look back and recognize you. You this whole way. You all along--your invitation, your embrace, your song, your promise.

And here you are again . . . loving me.

OH, HOW I LOVE JESUS

I'm learning to make minestrone. Last night I found out that an onion is not an onion is not an onion. I put one in the soup I was making, just like I did the time before, but the soup didn't end up tasting as good. Its balance was off. The only onion I had was bigger than usual, but I didn't think it would matter much. Surprise.

These days I'm also learning again that a Jesus is not a Jesus is not a Jesus. Being at church, it's easy to forget how many, varied layers of human belief and witness, interpretation and portrayal, make it possible for us to know Jesus. We often forget to pay attention to how different Luke's version of Jesus is from Mark's, say, or Paul's. We hardly ever talk about how different Hildegard's Jesus is from Martin's, or Bob's is from Chah's. And yet because of the richness of these countless different versions, and since none of us, including the writers of biblical texts, was there with Jesus while he lived his life, we take an artistic, mystical, in some ways ridiculous leap of faith whenever we say "I love Jesus."

And yet I do.

I love Jesus who walked out among the Galilean desert hills alone to seek divine presence.

I love Jesus who liked to eat and talk and laugh and hope with friends.

I love Sophia-Jesus who wept over Jerusalem when its people would not dance, could not love.

I love Jesus who lived as if there is plenty--of power, of money, of honor, of mercy, of bread.

I love Jesus who met divine presence in the everyday chores, errands, and conversations of life.

I love Jesus who believed the word of a Syro-Phoenician woman that he had some spiritual growing to do.

I love Jesus who had courage to keep on loving even when threatened by those content with hatred.

I love Jesus who found deep pleasure in rereading the traditions of his religion to create an alternative practice of Jewish faith.

I love Sophia-Jesus who persuades me by the playfulness of her teaching and the gentleness of her touch.

I love Jesus who first alerted me that what my culture says about love, about God, about me, about what is possible, may not be worthy of my trust.

I love Jesus who first showed me how to live in creative resistance to the fear, violence, and despair that prevail around us.

I love Jesus who inspires me to slip outside the momentum of oppression--to steal away, in a breath, to a place where I am not entirely possessed, a place where I am

able to remember my dissents and hopes and powers.

I love Sophia-Jesus who comes to me in times of trial, who lifts the burden of the world's contempt by witnessing to my infinite worth, who is here now, in the midst of my fears, to guard my dignity, to help me keep on writing.

I WANT COMMUNION

I don't believe divine love
is any more available to us
after the killing of Jesus
than before it
when he was alive
trusting in it, pointing to it,
participating in its power.

I don't believe we "have to"
let the evil
of that torture and murder
take over again
as if it were God's idea of help
each time we share a holy meal.

I want communion to be about abundance
a feast of multiplying . . .

gifts,

kinships,

possibilities,

hopes,

loaves,

justices,

joys . . . a time to practice living as if

Sophia God showers humanity with more than enough.

PREPOSITIONS AND JESUS

Leave it to a rhetorician to think that prepositions are just as important to our faith as Jesus is. I do.

As we drove north out of Lincoln City, Oregon, this morning I noticed an announcement on the sign for Faith Baptist Church: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and Thou Shalt Be Saved." This announcement is not rare on the highways of North America, nor is it made exclusively by Baptists. But I've never identified with it as an expression of faith, probably because the notions "Lord" and "saved" have not been central in my understanding of Jesus. This morning, though, it was a different word that put me off: the word was "on."

Believe on Jesus. True, it sounds strange to my ears because I don't speak King James Bible. Recent translations say "in," which sounds more familiar but creates the same problem. On or in, you've still got Jesus stuck there between yourself and God.

I decide to see what happens if I try out believing with Jesus. Immediately I feel a shift in my body. I am no longer gazing at Jesus but standing beside him, gazing, as he is, at this Mystery in which we live, and move, and have our being . . . knowing, in my own bones, this Mystery that we are.

Softly, slowly, as among shadows, faces begin to

appear--their many forms and features becoming visible, brave and lovely. Many I have never seen before; and yet I recognize, with joy, some of those who have provided powerful guidance and spirit when I have been in need: Naomi and Ruth, Mary of Magdala, Sojourner Truth, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Carter Heyward, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Delores Williams, Rita Nakashima Brock, Sallie McFague, Kwok Pui-Lan.

Such good company, these believers with Jesus. I like it here.

Here we practice trusting our own relationships with God. Here we consider it an act of faith to reinvent a religious tradition. Here we welcome new images and desires toward the healing of our lives, our world.

By evening, I am believing wholeheartedly not on or in, but with. It's bedtime. Millions of stars are out. I don't stop being amazed at the divinity of Jesus. But I do begin to be amazed at the divinity of Sojourner and Naomi and Rita and Ruth; of Ada María and Elisabeth and Delores and Sallie; of Carter and Mary and Pui-Lan . . . and Pat.

ROLL DOWN THAT WINDOW

What if we stopped assuming that none of us could possibly know God as well as Jesus did? that none of us could ever be God as much as Jesus was?

I can't remember when I swallowed those two assumptions. No one said I had to. No one spoke them aloud. Some assumptions become so key in the practice of a tradition that they operate without needing to be mentioned. Going unsaid even adds to their power. It removes them from the realm of contention. It prevents us from recognizing them for what they are--propositions to be considered, talked over, and revised or replaced when it helps.

A few mornings ago as I drove south through the green Idaho woods toward Utah, sifting through the uninvestigated givens of my old practice, I came across those two about Jesus. Finally, after all these years, I made them out. I spoke them. They sounded rude. Yes, rude: blunt and bereft of grace. They drew the line. They slammed the door. They disrespected me. Along with everybody else. Including Jesus. Not to mention God. I was offended.

Rolling down the car window, sucking in the spices of hot sun on miles of pines, I repeated those two propositions to myself. None of us can possibly know God as well as Jesus did. None of us can ever be God as much as Jesus was. My mouth watered. I began to laugh.

CHAPTER FIVE

TOWARD A WHOLEHEARTED CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

The possibility of a "wholehearted practice" of Christian faith emerged for me one April afternoon as I sat wondering in the shade of the pomegranate trees behind our house. My heart was troubled. I was grieving the devastations of human violence in the world, in this city, in my life. I yearned to make a healing response.

I sat there a long time, trying to imagine how people might find release from the unacknowledged anguish, rage, and terror that so often drive us to do harm. After awhile, I arrived at a couple of questions: what sort of religious practices, and what understandings of God, would cultivate such release? And then: what if church sanctuaries became places where we learned to respond with love to the fullness of hurt, desire, and joy within our hearts?

Posing these questions, by then in the second year of this work, I began to recognize that writing the devotions has carried me into a way of being Christian not encouraged in most sanctuaries. Having made the spiritual, intellectual, ethical journey I recounted in chapter one, I was ready to value this alternative Christian way and to see that it would offer a more salutary blessing not only

for myself, a lesbian woman, and for others dispossessed by the churches, but indeed for anyone in need of healing from patriarchal hatreds. I believe this need for healing involves us all.

Once again, when I speak of patriarchy, I mean to refer, in the tradition of social theorist and Christian witness bell hooks, to classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, cultural imperialism, and ecological destruction operating as "interlocking systems of domination" (175). In other words, I see patriarchy as a process through which these similar yet distinctive modes of harm interact to impair the well-being of the body politic as a whole and the life of each member. Domination, after all, doesn't stay contained at the safe remove of generalized, impersonal-sounding "isms;" it works on us through the intricate web of our relations, including our relations with divinity as imagined in most church sanctuaries; it breaks our hearts.

The idea that my devotions begin to propose a "wholehearted" practice of Christian faith showed up on the heels of my questions that April afternoon, informed and inspired, no doubt, by my recent reading of Rita Nakashima Brock's Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power. Beginning with reflections on the "brokenhearted society" we live in, Brock proceeds to investigate the relationships

of family and culture to the developing human self, concluding that the pervasive human violence being done in our communities, global and local, has its roots in the often unrecognized assaults and deprivations our hearts suffer under patriarchal domination (xi, 1-24).

With Brock, I understand "heart" to represent "the human self and our capacity for intimacy" and healing to involve "the union of body, spirit, reason, and passion through heart knowledge, the deepest and fullest knowing" (xiv). Like Brock, I am finding that although historically prevailing church practices have endorsed the "necessity" and "rightness" of domination, it is possible to be Christian in ways that help us "to turn patriarchy inside out, to reveal its ravaged, faint, fearful, broken heart" and so make possible the deepest levels of personal and social healing (xv).

What I find at the heart of patriarchal Christian practice is a powerful entwinement of "love" and domination. Though members of established churches are constantly hearing, praying, and singing that "God is love" and professing that we are here to love one another, they are at the same time inundated with metaphors and rituals which suggest that the Divine wants to dominate us rather than befriend us, and that domination, particularly male domination of women, is "made in the image of God."

Men and boys are provided countless opportunities to identify, on the basis of their maleness alone, with the power generated by the interaction of such key terms as Lord, Father, Son, Head, Kingdom, Rule, and Will, but in order to claim that power, even they must continually submit to the King of kings, Lord of lords, Dominator of all dominators. Still, it is hard to overestimate the sense of rightness afforded to male believers when they sing a hymn like "Be Thou My Vision," which names God as Wisdom, Word, Lord of my heart, High King, Ruler of All, and Heart of my own heart--and includes the affirmation, "Thou my great Father, I thy true Son, Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one."¹

The prospect of intimacy with God so attracts me that as a young believer, I loved singing this hymn. Obviously I learned early to write myself into patriarchal texts! Yet notice how, as is usual, the imagery intermingles being "loved" by God with being lorded over. And despite my creativity, it was never lost on me that I was no "true Son."

Even in congregations where worship leaders strive to employ sex-inclusive language and despite the feminist persuasions of some preachers, these key images, evoked by scriptures, hymns, and rituals, function to maintain male supremacy. In all but the most radically alternative

Christian communities, worship still encourages participants to identify divinity with maleness, males with divine power, and power with the act of ruling over others, violently if the rulers so choose.

This banishment of girls and women from participation in Divine Power, along with this equation of power with domination, wounds our hearts and undermines the vocation of love to which Christians are called. The more we are able to acknowledge this hurt, the more alienating patriarchal faith becomes. And yet healing becomes possible as we articulate how our involvement with prevailing church traditions both empowers and impedes us. Not surprisingly, it is women who are more often willing to attend to their alienation and to see where it might lead.

As Christian mystic and activist Nelle Morton declared in "Toward a Whole Theology," her 1974 address to the World Council of Churches first world conference on discrimination against women, "perhaps the greatest pain women bear from the church is the verbal offer of liberation while being pushed to the periphery of the church's life and ministry" (71). Or again, a few years later, she put it this way: "I have never loved work more than I did in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.--for it pulled up out of me, in the formative years of my theology, some of the deepest passions I have ever experienced for

justice, and peace, and freedom for all people. And yet . . . it aborted through its unexamined structures, images, and language, the very meaning of freedom and liberation" (177-78).

Morton knew the political power of listening to her whole heart. The essays and addresses gathered into her book, The Journey Is Home, repeatedly remind us to help one another do this work by "hearing each other to speech" (54, 99, 127-8, 202-10). Whole theology, she writes, becomes "possible only when all the oppressed peoples of the world can speak freely of their own experiences, be heard, and touch one another to heal and be healed" (68-69).

Wholeness summons us, she suggests, not to leave our speech unspoken, not to leave the church or the world poorer without us (67). Hearing to speech, she insists, is political.

I, too, know the liberating power of hearing my heart to speech. I kept on looking into mine, kept on listening, and found I not only love God, not only love the world, not only love me--I also love women. Yes, it hurts when patriarchal Christians call me an abomination. But allowing myself to feel the pain of this overt condemnation has awakened me . . . first, to the church's more subtle, everyday, "hidden-in-plain-sight" oppression of women;² then, to its reinforcement of all acts of injustice by a

stubborn confusion of "love" and domination; and finally, to the possibility of an alternative, wholehearted practice of Christian faith.

According to Christianity as domination, I can be wholehearted OR Christian, but not both. It works to undo my feminism by a process of fragmentation. It would cancel out my lesbian existence altogether. Feminist Christian? Lesbian Christian? In patriarchal practice, I am a double oxymoron. I can have only qualified, compromised, distracted faith; cumbersome, unwieldy, maybe faith--embarrassed faith, this paltry thing, this remnant I have left after I apply my hermeneutics of suspicion, this crumb I brush into my hand as I crawl hungry under patriarchy's table.

I will no longer subsist on this.

I refuse to love a Lord/King/Father who finds us imperfect, declares us unacceptable, threatens punishment, and promises to forgo it if we submit to His will, but only because the violence He "had to" mete out in order to be able to embrace us has already been discharged upon Jesus, who was tortured "in our place" on the cross. Who could possibly learn to love while inhabiting such a story?³

It doesn't matter that preachers seldom say all this directly. Because the patriarchal drama of punishment and threat has become the church's prevailing way of

understanding Jesus, it is powerfully invoked, whether ministers intend it or not, by a mere mention of the cross, by a lifting of the communion chalice, or by a playing of certain hymn tunes without the words even needing to be sung.⁴

Turning away from our hearts is essential to our training into this drama. We learn to disown all feelings or thoughts we sense may be unacceptable to the Punishing Father. We get good at not noticing when we feel insulted or silenced or threatened or angry or confused. Whether subtly or not-so-subtly, patriarchal practice entwines "being Christian" with this conditioning in alienation from one's own heart. Such practice robs us of our power to know our sufferings and to heal.

Rather than helping us to explore our brokenheartedness, patriarchal Christian practice mystifies and legitimates the harm done to us by church and culture, making that harm seem familiar, justified, necessary, inescapable, attractive. Patriarchal faith's strong appeal is that it does provide some relief--relief from the horror of seeing our pain as meaningless, relief from the shame and guilt instilled by the routine of exploitation in which we live. No doubt about it: we need relief. But the relief provided by patriarchal pageants is temporary, and the prices are high: closing one's heart to its own hurt,

remaining trapped in submission and domination, perpetuating the infliction of harm, missing the chance to truly love and be loved.

To risk wholehearted faith is to attend, without condemnation, to all that takes place in our hearts. It is to let ourselves in on, to allow ourselves to learn from, those parts of our experience that patriarchal faith induces us to ignore: our anger, grief, fear, and confusion about the pain of domination; our yearning to be not subjugated and compliant, or when our turn comes, superior and controlling--but treasured, protected, cared for, heard, accepted, healed, empowered, free.

Listening so freely to our hearts is very different from trying to be pure in heart, as in "blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God," at least as that claim would be understood in a context of domination. When I hear "pure," I cannot help but think of Purex bleach, whiteness, ethnic hatred, obsessions with cleanliness and sameness at the expense of richness and multiplicity.

But the healing heart is not a tidy, restricted, or unitary region. The loving heart is messy, moving, fluid, infinitely expansive; it embraces colors, contradictions, plays of light and darkness, mysteries, revelations, wildness, impossibilities. To be wholehearted, then, is

not to have arrived at a place; it is to be engaged in a practice.

Now at the "finish" of this project, I remember how it started with my desire to create space for the "impossible" devotions of my feminist, lesbian, Christian life. Through the writing, I have often fallen into being "all here," sometimes before I was ready. I have chosen to trust the rhetoricity of human existence. I have ventured more consciously into the ongoing argument about God, love, and Jesus that has come to be known as Christian faith. I have deepened my intimacies with a Divine Presence who is not afraid of what happens in my heart, or of where my loving and believing will lead.

It's April again. I turn to my heart, and listen. Who knows what devotions I will do tomorrow morning? Who can tell what I will learn about love this afternoon?

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. See the devotion "Whosoever May," in chapter two.
2. The writings of bell hooks have been significant for several dimensions of my work. In addition to helping me recognize the interaction of various processes of domination in North American culture, hooks has been a model for how to risk speaking of love and spiritual vocation in the contexts of academic inquiry, classroom teaching, and public debate. Particularly important for me in this regard are her essays, "Love as the Practice of Freedom" and "Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process," along with her book, Teaching to Transgress. Also, her Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery has deepened my trust that one essential and effective way for oppressed peoples to interrupt the momentum of domination is to attend to our personal sufferings and begin to treat ourselves well.

The present writing has been guided as well by an exchange between bell hooks and Cornel West, recorded in their book, Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life. As part of their dialogue at Yale University's African American Cultural Center about partnership between Black women and men in the 1990's, bell said, "Both Cornel and I come to you as individuals who believe in God. That

belief informs our message." Cornel replied, "One of the reasons we believe in God is due to the long tradition of religious faith in the Black community." He spoke of this faith as a survival resource for "people who have to deal with the absurdity of being Black in America" and acknowledged that it is often frightening to "speak out with boldness" about oppression "because America is such a violent culture." Given such conditions, West concluded, "you have to ask yourself what links to a tradition will sustain you, given the absurdity and insanity we are bombarded with daily. And so the belief in God is . . . understood in relation to a particular context, to specific circumstances" (8-9).

Reflecting on these insights, I understood more profoundly my decision to revise rather than abandon my relationship with Christian traditions. As a woman, as a lesbian, and as a pursuer of liberation for all, I am daily besieged by contempt and threat in this culture. In my efforts to survive, to speak out, and to maintain hope, I am empowered by practicing my faith tradition, alone and with others, in ways that respect and bless my life.

3. The field of rhetoric, sometimes referred to as the oldest of the humanities because of its roots in ancient Greece, has recently emerged from a somewhat marginalized position in American colleges and universities as some scholars, often in English Departments, have focused

inquiry on the interplay of language, knowledge, writing, reading, culture, and politics. For an introduction to the field, see Vincent Casaregola and Julie Farrar's "Twentieth-Century Rhetoric" and Louise Wetherbee Phelps' "Composition Studies" in The Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age, edited by Theresa Enos. See also The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present, edited by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg.

4. With Burke, I believe that we human beings come to know ourselves and the world through communally developed interpretive frameworks and that, at the same time, each one of us experiences life idiosyncratically enough that "there will be as many different world views in human history as there are people" ("Terministic Screens" 52). For an introduction to Burke's theories and works, see Tilly Warnock's "Kenneth Burke" in the previously mentioned Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition.

5. Schüssler Fiorenza, as the first woman president of the Society of Biblical Literature (1987), advocated that biblical interpretation be reoriented from an objectivist, scientific framework to a rhetorical one; see "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship." This perspective is further developed in her book, But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation.

6. The term "mujerista" indicates the intent among Hispanic women activists to emphasize that their oppression has a particular history and that their emancipation requires release not only from sexism but also from oppressions of race and class. African American women often use the word "womanist" (rather than feminist) in a similar way to acknowledge the specific history and several dimensions involved in their liberations; see, for instance, Delores Williams' Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk.

Isasi-Díaz, like hooks, demonstrates how to engage in academic research and writing as activism which seek the well-being of all while not forgetting one's solidarity with those who share one's particular vulnerabilities to domination. See especially her book, En La Lucha: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology, and her essay, "La Palabra de Dios en Nosotras--The Word of God in Us."

7. McFague has written a series of books elaborating this perspective and developing alternatives to androcentric, hierarchichal understandings of divinity; see Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language; Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age and The Body of God: An Ecological Theology.

8. Each of the Notes sections for chapters two, three, and four consists of a brief reflection on the chapter, followed by comments, including citations for quoted

material, on some devotions in particular. These comments are arranged by title according to the order in which the devotions appear.

9. In addition to being guided by Brock's book, I was inspired by her 1995 lectures in Tucson as the speaker for the first annual Feminist Theological Conference. What impressed me most was her insistence, when asked by conservative believers why she still wanted to call herself Christian, that one's religious tradition "is not like a coat one can simply exchange for another, but is a lifeway," and that she and others blessed and oppressed by Christian traditions have the right to interpret our faith in a way that heals and empowers us.

10. I take special pleasure in building on the work of Nelle Morton because she is one who has gone before me as a pursuer of justice in the Presbyterian tradition.

CHAPTER ONE

1. For more details about what becoming Christian meant for me, see "Baptism" in chapter one.

2. The controversy Marxsen participates in, over whether professors in theological schools were destroying Christian faith by teaching students to read the Bible with historical and literary questions in mind, and the one I join, about whether women and sexual outcasts can "really" practice Christian faith in ways that do us good, are very

different debates, yet at the center of both is the problem of interpretive authority. Christianity as an ongoing argument confronts believers time and again with the questions, how do we define "being Christian," and who gets to be among the "we" who decide? Later in the present chapter, I develop my position on these questions. For now I want to reflect for a moment on Marxsen's solution because re-reading his book from my current perspective has helped me to develop my own response.

I see now that for all his scholarly worries about questions of literary influence and historical accuracy in relation to the New Testament, Marxsen ends up being a mystic. Marxsen wants not the New Testament but the life of Jesus to be "the norm" for defining Christian faith, yet recognizes that he cannot have access to the life of Jesus except through the earliest testimony of believers, which he, through historical and literary siftings, finds most reliably represented in certain portions of the gospels according to Mark, Matthew, and Luke. He labels these written mediations of early testimony "kerygma," a term derived from the Greek noun usually translated "gospel" or "preaching."

Remembering that the church existed for decades without the benefit of these written texts on which he wishes to base his faith, Marxsen admits that what he is actually doing is "believing with those eyewitnesses who

experienced the presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth" (152). As he points out, the texts of the New Testament were written not by the eyewitnesses themselves, but by people who were already, like himself, believing along with those eyewitnesses. To me, all this believing through the belief of previous believers starts to sound thoroughly mystical. If anything, Marxsen sounds yet more mystical when, in seeking to reaffirm the trustworthiness of the secondhand (or thirdhand) written testimony, he suggests that "to be involved with the kerygma is to be involved with [Jesus] in a real sense" (106-7).

Though as I hope to show, my response to the problem of interpretive authority emphasizes contemporary faith communities as much as past ones and focuses on ethical more than on textual authenticity, I find Marxsen's scholarly and spiritual insights valuable because they illuminate what complicated assumptions and numerous leaps of faith are involved even when we make such seemingly simple affirmations as "I love Jesus" (not to mention "Jesus loves me"!) or "The Bible says"

In addition, as I seek to develop a wholehearted Christian practice, I find it useful to consider the implications of Marxsen's conclusion that "Jesus himself did not understand his death as a salvation event," or more precisely, that "the direct witnesses of Jesus . . . did not understand him as orienting his deeds and life toward

the cross;" and of Marxsen's belief, along with the earliest believers, that what we now call Christian faith got going when people who participated in life with Jesus, long before any special titles (such as "Christ" or "Son of God") were applied to him, began to experience the "nearness," the "immediate presence," of the Divine (124, 92-96). See "Taking Down the Cross" and "Prepositions and Jesus" in this volume.

3. In 1978, the General Assembly of the then United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., rejecting the majority report and recommendations of its study task force on homosexuality, announced its "definitive guidance" that "homosexuality is not God's wish for humanity" and that being a "self-affirming and practicing" or "unrepentant" homosexual person does not accord with the requirements for ordination as an elder, deacon, or minister ("Church and Homosexuality" 58, 61). In 1983, when our former denomination merged with the former Presbyterian Church, U.S. to become the present Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., this stance was maintained; in 1985, a General Assembly ruling declared the advice against ordination to be legally binding. One action which flowed out of the ministry I shared with members of Third Church was the congregation's decision to dissent from these injustices by becoming a More Light church--that is, a Presbyterian congregation which grants full membership to lesbian, gay, and bisexual

persons. For more information about this history of oppression and resistance in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., contact James D. Anderson, editor of the More Light Update, the monthly newsletter of Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns, at P.O. Box 38, New Brunswick, N.J., 08903-0038 or on the internet: jda@mariner.rutgers.edu.

The faith Michal and I practiced drew on many sources. We were guided by the essays of Dorothy Day, especially her conviction that "the mystery of the poor is this: that they are Jesus . . ." (330); by the feminist (and lesbian-affirming) liberation theology of Carter Heyward, articulated in Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation; by our readings of Matthew Fox's Original Blessing and Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri J.M. Nouwen's Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life; by our conversations with Jimmy Lee Stratton, African American Presbyterian minister and visionary, activist co-director (with Michal) at the Gift Center storefront; and by the suffering, joy, theological insight, and love of the people with whom we were in ministry.

4. According to Pagels, "the fifty-two writings discovered at Nag Hammadi offer only a glimpse of the complexity of the early Christian movement;" she points out that "what we call Christianity--and what we identify as Christian tradition--actually represents only a small selection of

specific sources, chosen from among dozens of others;" her book is a response to the questions, "Who made that selection, and for what reasons? Why were these other writings excluded and banned as 'heresy'?" (xxxviii). Specifically, Pagels shows how gnosticism, an early Jesus-centered practice of faith which offered alternatives to what became patriarchal orthodoxy, was eventually "ruled out" as a way of being Christian (179). As she emphasizes, "it is the winners who write history--their way;" thus, proponents of orthodoxy have proved enormously successful at portraying "their triumph as historically inevitable, or, in religious terms, 'guided by the Holy Spirit'" (170). These insights lead Pagels to raise questions about the legitimacy of present claims to divinely-granted authority for defining what is and isn't Christian practice (180-81).

5. I now see how decisively our interpretive work departed from prevailing claims about the limits of "divine inspiration." Though we did not articulate our assumption explicitly, our practice reflected an understanding very close to Schüssler Fiorenza's conviction that "inspiration--the life-giving breath and power of Sophia-Spirit [see note on "Refigurings of Myth," chapter four]--does not reside in texts: It dwells among people. She did not cease once the process of canonization ended. She is still at work today" (But She Said 156).

Brock expresses a related persuasion when she suggests that Christians may best approach the Bible "as a resource for understanding our identities" because even individual biblical authors may be best understood as, like us, "having several voices" and "speaking from several perspectives that they struggle to hold together" ("Dusting the Bible" 71, 72).

The belief that the Spirit continues to reveal divine presence and truth raises questions about the wisdom of maintaining a closed canon of writings considered sacred, revelatory, and authoritative for Christian practice. As Kwok Pui-Lan has pointed out, seeing the scriptural canon as closed devalues the processes by which people in various socio-historical contexts make Christian faith meaningful in their lives. Insisting that "Chinese Christians cannot simply accept a canon which relegates their great cultural teachings and traditions to the secondary," she proposes that Christians adopt "a dialogical model" for witnessing to our faith, a model that does not urge "the coercion of others into sameness, oneness, and homogeneity," but assumes a plurality of truths (36, 38). Similarly, Isasi-Díaz has noted that Hispanic women have long embraced and adapted Christian faith for the exigencies of their survival by relying mostly on oral rather than written traditions, thus remaining open to "the ongoing revelation

of God in our lives and the revelation of God in non-Christian religions" ("La Palabra" 90).

Suggesting another way to participate in ongoing revelation, Delores Williams laments that "after slavery African Americans did not write their story into black scripture that would tell future generations about the people's historic life struggle and about God's wondrous way of dealing with them in bondage and during liberation;" she encourages black Christians to write "our current faith-stories demonstrating God's involvement in black people's lives today" and asserts that in the liturgies of the African-American denominational churches, "these stories should be scripture just as vital as the Bible" (218).

6. One of the nine ordination questions for ministers in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., reads: "Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?" In seeking to interpret this vow, Presbyterian ministers are also to consider other commitments we make in responding to the ordination questions, such as: to be guided by the denomination's confessions in interpreting Scripture, to "try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ," and to "seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence,

imagination, and love" (Book of Order, Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.).

7. In her 1992 book, Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness, Bizzell argues that all knowledge, even knowledge that seeks to pass itself off as self-evident or absolute, "is really the product of cultural activity, shaped by ideology and constituted, not merely conveyed, by rhetoric;" accordingly, she emphasizes that "whatever we believe, we believe only because we have been persuaded;" in this view, "persuasive language is no longer the servant of truth, making it possible for people to understand so that they can believe. Rather, persuasive language creates truth by inducing belief; 'truth' results when rhetoric is successful" (261). Similarly, in his 1966 article, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," Robert L. Scott maintains that since human beings do not have access to absolute truth, we are called to undertake the ethical responsibility of participating, despite uncertainty, in the development of contingent truth.

8. Gorgias, an early Sicilian philosopher/rhetorician who taught in Greece, proposed that we must deceive ourselves a bit, "forget" about the provisionality of our truth, avert our eyes to some extent from other possible ways to view things, whenever we allow ourselves to believe/know/be persuaded of something (see pp. 22-24 in Bizzell and Herzberg's The Rhetorical Tradition). It seems my third

grade teacher, Mrs. Kellman, was offering our class more than a spelling tip when she told us, "there's a 'lie' in believe."

9. Two additional theorists who have encouraged me to view rational and scientific claims as rhetorical are Karl Popper and Ernesto Grassi. In his book, The Logic of Scientific Discovery, Popper contends that "scientific discovery is impossible without faith in ideas which are of a purely speculative kind . . . a faith which is completely unwarranted from the point of view of science, and which, to that extent, is 'metaphysical'" (38). Similarly Grassi, in his Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition, finds that all human speech is grounded in communal experiences of persuasion and belief and therefore that all rational speech takes place in the matrix of rhetorical speech. Further, Grassi asserts the primacy of metaphor in all our speaking and knowing. Even as we "make 'sensory' observations," he maintains, "we are forced to 'reach back' for a transposition, for a metaphor" (33). These perspectives have served to foster my reflection about the shaping of truth and action through the metaphors we reach for, the questions we ask, the politics we enact, and the stories we tell and hear and inhabit.

10. The writings of Burke that most inform my view are A Rhetoric of Motives (1950) and the essays "Definition of Man," "Poetics in Particular, Language in General," and

"Terministic Screens" in Language as Symbolic Action
(1966).

11. I understand myself to be participating in the sort of "imagined community" theorized by Benedict Anderson and discussed in Mary Louise Pratt's "Linguistic Utopias." Anderson proposes that virtually all human communities function as imaginative solidarities in which participants "will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (quoted in Pratt, p. 49). Such imaginative participation comes easily to me given my experience with Christian metaphors such as the body of Christ, the communion of saints which joins the living with the dead, and the cloud of witnesses who help one to keep faith.

In the broadest sense, I understand my work to place me in solidarity with all who have been or are presently engaged in seeking release from the violences of domination. This communion includes people who have died, people now living, and people still to come; people I work with, people whose words I read, and people whose lives I scarcely know how to picture; people who do not participate in Christian traditions as well as people who do.

At the same time, in this writing, I feel myself to be in particular solidarity with other believers whom patriarchal Christianity has made into "resident aliens:"

women, gay men, bisexuals, lesbians. Pursuing Schüssler Fiorenza's strategy in But She Said, I am undertaking to collaborate with sisters and brothers who wish to turn our resident alien status into a "positive vantage point" (88) from which to critique and transform patriarchal Christian practice, a task which I believe promotes healing and freedom for all who are oppressed.

12. In addition to the already discussed works by feminist interpreters of Christianity, I've found the following texts on the ethics of reading helpful in my efforts to develop a liberatory relationship with Christian traditions: Louise M. Rosenblatt's The Reader, the Text, the Poem; Stanley Fish's Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities; Terry Eagleton's Literary Theory; and Patrocínio Schweickart's "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading."

13. Kenneth Burke, too, asserts that "there is a kind of 'terministic compulsion' to carry out the implications of one's terminology" ("Definition" 19).

CHAPTER TWO

The devotions in this chapter were written early in the unfolding of this project, before I had any idea of the extent to which I would eventually be rewriting my relationship with Christian traditions. I have grouped them together because they seem to me to be making a

similar move, a move that at the time was new for me to make with such deliberateness and directness--that is, drawing on affirmations of divine presence and power from established Christianity for the purpose of consecrating lesbian, gay, and bisexual lives.

"Baptism"

Although the devotions are not arranged in a strict chronology, this is the first one I wrote. I had written this one and just a few more by the time I said to Janet Jakobsen one summer afternoon as we walked on campus, "I'm writing something and I don't know what it is." Her advice was to stay with the writing and see what it became. The first readers for the early devotions were Janet and the graduate students in a Women's Studies course she taught that fall, *Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Theories, Lives, and Activisms*. I am grateful to these colleagues for their enthusiasms, suggestions, and encouragements to continue with this writing.

"Coming Out"

The lines from Denise Levertov belong to her poem, "Stepping Westward," which can be found in Denise Levertov Poems, 1960-1967, 165-166.

Dorothy Day's phrase "by little and by little" is one she adapted from the devotional writings of Therese of

Lisieux, a Carmelite nun, who practiced "the little way." It became a favorite guide in Day's activism for peace and justice. In 1957, she wrote, after lamenting the sense of futility among her fellow citizens, "we can only lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time; we can be responsible only for the one action of the present moment. But we can beg for an increase of love in our hearts that will vitalize and transform these actions, and know that God will take them and multiply them, as Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes" (By Little and by Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day 286).

"The 'S' Words"

Though some feminist believers prefer to avoid the language of sin and salvation altogether because they find it dehumanizing, I still find power in sometimes using the word "salvation" to describe the process by which divine love, whether present in human friends, in the trees and breezes around me, or in my own heart, has welcomed, inspired, healed, and liberated me. See, for instance, "The Sophie Tree" in chapter four. On the other hand, because the word "sin" is for so many a highly charged source of confusion and harm, I tend not to use that term to refer to our human predicament; like Rita Nakashima Brock in Journeys By Heart, I am persuaded that it is more helpful to speak instead of the depths of human hurt, and

of the need for us to join in resisting the evils of hatred and domination in our communities and in our hearts.

Brochures, newsletters, and information about CLOUT, an ecumenical, international movement committed to sexual, racial, and economic justice, are available by writing to PO Box 10062, Columbus, OH 43201, or on e-mail, to vezmar-bailey.1@osu.edu.

CHAPTER THREE

Writing these devotions carried me a long way. It involved me in what I have come to call "faithful repudiation" of those aspects of prevailing Christian practice that I believe injure our hearts and impair our capacity to love.

Looking back, I now see these devotions as exorcisms by which I worked to free myself from my attachment to the ideology of patriarchal domination which pervades established Christianity. "The study of ideology," says Terry Eagleton, "is among other things an inquiry into the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness" (xiii). As Eagleton points out, effective oppressors convince their "underlings to love, desire, and identify with [their] power; and any practice of political emancipation thus involves that most difficult of all forms of liberation, freeing ourselves from ourselves" (xiii-xiv).

Doing this work scared me. I kept on because of love: love for my life, love for the Divine, love for this world. I returned many times to Audre Lorde's testimony that we must "learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way that we have learned to work and speak when we are tired;" with Lorde, I no longer believe that waiting "in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness" is a way to begin being free (44).

"Doing Dishes"

Beverly Harrison's wisdom is quoted from "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers," in her book Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics (14, 20). Part of what I did in writing this devotion was to draw on her scholarly authority for the assurance I needed, given my cultural conditioning, that it can be good to be angry--in particular, angry and Christian, angry and a woman, angry on behalf of my own well-being.

"A Midsummer Night's Prayer"

Adrienne Rich's insight is quoted from her book, What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics (39).

This devotion gives a glimpse of the experience I often have, when hearing of yet another act of violation, whether on a street, in a chamber of government, or in a

corporate boardroom, that it is devastating to love the world the way I do. In fact, in writing the devotions, I lost the emotional buffer provided by established Christianity's triumphalistic and optimistic insistence that because of "God's victory" in the resurrection of Jesus, all is well, or at least ultimately can be made well.

Like Sharon Welch, I cannot forget the bodies of sisters and brothers starved, brutalized, mutilated; I feel that "even if injustice is eradicated, something irretrievable has been lost" and that "Christian hope is a shallow and callous lie if it fails to be silenced or at least chastised by the voices of all those who suffer and die without relief" (89). My theology now includes "the memory of the many times and places where Christian faith and hopes are not actualized" and where my Christian view "of the nature of human being is defaced or obliterated" (91). Thus, the sense of pleasure, play, personal power, and communal possibility that orients the devotions is not naive, but strategic. Choosing this sensibility allows me, though my heart is repeatedly assaulted, to move as freely as I can in practicing love and doing justice.

"Taking Down the Cross"

For an indication that some early Christian believers did not see the crucifixion as something intended by Jesus or God, see the conclusion of note two in chapter one.

"Miriam's Bones"

This is a response to a story of Miriam told in the Book of Numbers, in which God is said to have punished Miriam with a skin disease because she pointed out that Moses was hoarding leadership authority in the Exodus movement, and insisted that God had spoken through her, too. Aaron made similar protests, but was not punished. I wrote this for a Lesbian Pesach Seder celebrated at the home of Renee Kuperman in Tucson.

CHAPTER FOUR

In writing these devotions, I began much more intentionally to depart from patriarchal dominations and to seek an alternative way of having faith, a way that I now refer to as wholehearted Christian practice.

This move was encouraged by the global, ecumenical Women's Re-Imagining Conference held in Minneapolis in November 1993. At this gathering, funded by several Christian denominations and attended by over two thousand women and a few men from twenty-eight countries, feminist, mujerista, and womanist Christians questioned patriarchal

theological formulations, lesbians held a coming-out observance, and church members prayed, "Our Sweet Sophia, we are women in your image: with nectar between our thighs we invite a lover . . . with the honey of wisdom in our mouths, we prophesy a full humanity to all the peoples" (From a liturgy handed out at the Minneapolis Re-Imagining).

The intense patriarchal backlash against this event got the attention of people in the churches. Ecclesiastical constraints on women's authority to interpret and practice our faith were suddenly much easier to see. Now there is a grassroots re-imagining movement as women organize local study groups and strategize for change in their churches. In my own denomination, for instance, 1995 saw the founding of Voices of Sophia, a womanist/mujerista/feminist movement committed to erotic justice, which is now gathering enthusiasts into local chapters, including one here in Southern Arizona. (For information, write to Voices of Sophia, 223 Choctaw Road, Louisville, KY 40207.) Additionally, here in Tucson, also in 1995, women from various Christian denominations have formed the Feminist Theological Roundtable, a monthly meeting where church members and clergy collaborate in practicing a nonpatriarchal faith.

These events have provided a wonderful matrix of inspiration for my writing. I am thankful especially for

the work of Mary Ann Lundy, a mentor to me way back at the McKinley Presbyterian Church in Champaign-Urbana, who was a key envisioner and implementer of the 1993 Re-Imagining Conference, and who was fired from her ministry on the Presbyterian General Assembly staff as part of the patriarchal backlash.

"Refigurings of Myth"

Some feminists are convinced that it is impossible to refigure Christian myth and ritual in such a way as to heal and liberate women. For an excellent exposition of this view, see Mary Daly's Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation and her autobiographical reflection, Outercourse: The Bedazzling Voyage. At times I have found Daly's critique of patriarchal Christianity so persuasive that I felt there was no other choice but to give up my faith. My work over these past few years has led me to decide otherwise, however; these days, I appreciate Daly's critique, but reject her proposal that forsaking Christian traditions is the only empowering response to their entwinement with patriarchal domination.

In my view, the groundbreaking investigation of how nonpatriarchal our practices of Christianity could become was Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's 1983 In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins,

which includes generative scholarly proposals about Sophia-God, Sophia-Spirit, and Jesus-Sophia.

Myths get refigured in ordinary life, now and then, here and there. Ellen and Phil Willis-Conger, Methodist ministers in Tucson, pray to Sophia in the evening around the supper table with their two daughters, Rebecca and Sophia. One day not long ago, the younger one said to her mother, "Mom, I know there's two Sophies: Sophie-God and Sophie-me."

"The Sophie Tree"

In my studies of the biblical portrayals of Sophia (Divine Wisdom), I am most impressed with how well biblical writers succeeded in appropriating this female image of divinity for patriarchal purposes. Thus, the Sophia I pray to is a Divine Presence available primarily through the reconstructions and rewritings of feminist believers. This devotion is an experiment in re-appropriating the image of Sophia as a tree of life from Proverbs 3:13-18.

"I Want Communion"

For examples of communion liturgies that offer alternatives to seeing the crucifixion of Jesus as something God and humanity needed in order to restore our relationship, see "Not Afraid" in chapter one of this volume and Rita Nakashima Brock's essay, "The Greening of

the Soul: A Feminist Theological Paradigm of the Web of Life," which builds on the life-affirming theology of twelfth-century mystic and reformer Hildegard of Bingen.

"Prepositions and Jesus"

A rhetorician, in my view, is someone who studies and intervenes in the interplay among language, power, and lived experience; someone who is curious about how people come to believe and act; someone who seeks to participate with critical awareness in the matrix and movement by which we make "the" truth and mend "the" world.

CHAPTER FIVE

1. These hymn lyrics are quoted from The Worshipbook, prepared by the Joint Committee on Worship for the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.
2. This expression is one Parker J. Palmer used in discussing the challenges of community life during a retreat I attended at the Pendle Hill Quaker Community.
3. I am persuaded that stories which portray God as a male ruler-over and violence-doer conscript believers into the hatreds of domination. Evidence that many Christians view domination as legitimate and desirable is not difficult to find. When Tucson recently hosted the international

exhibit, "A Message of Hope: Anne Frank in the World, 1929-1945," one display, a chronicle of hate speech across many centuries and cultures, presented a vivid example of Christianity as domination in the contemporary preaching of Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue: "I want you to let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a biblical duty, we are called by God, to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism."

Clearly this is an extreme example, yet I believe that even the more subtle entwinements of "being Christian" with lording it over others are harmful to our hearts and to our communities. Not long ago, when I was looking in the yellow pages for the phone number of a congregation, I saw a church ad which announced, "Jesus is Lord Over Tucson." And a few days ago, as I jotted down a note for this project, I glanced at the pencil I was using: it featured the name of a Presbyterian congregation in California, followed by the slogan, "More than conquerors through Him who loved us."

Such stances are, of course, promoted by many New Testament texts. As Burton L. Mack observes in Rhetoric and the New Testament, most of the texts which were eventually selected for the canon are pervaded by a threatening, absolutist, us-them rhetoric which reflects

the strategies chosen by some early Christians for gaining authority and defining their practice in relation to others. Mack's discussion of the perils involved when believers adopt such models for reflection and conversation within and beyond the church (93-102) is especially instructive here.

4. Since in spite of efforts toward "inclusive language" liturgies, the prevailing patriarchal drama still so easily invades the imagination of believers, I am convinced that in these days, wholehearted Christian practice requires the explicit rejection--including during worship--of images, rituals, biblical texts, and interpretations which work to confuse domination and violence with divine love.

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