THE FUTURE OF THE PROPHETIC VOICE

William Sloane Coffin, Jr. ’36 BD
(June 1, 1924–April 12, 2006)

A Tribute
Lord, keep us from being so cloistered that we become educated to close our eyes to the need about us, or come to think that the learned are excused from the human struggle.

Help us to know that human wants are not finally met only by agencies, national programs or impersonal public good will. Rather, may our knowledge in every field make us more aware of the responsibility of those with special privilege to alleviate tragedy and to express compassion whenever necessary.

Help us to be sensitive to those moments, as well, when we may herald celebration and joy. Yet too often, O God, we cast aside thy Word to meet violence with violence or cowardice.

Help us to live a way of love in this age, between war and appeasement, lest our spirits perish. May all our learning serve the holy purpose of the achievement of peace in Thee.

—Reverend Dr. Samuel Slie
THE FUTURE OF THE PROPHETIC VOICE

William Sloane Coffin, Jr. ’56 BD
(June 1, 1924–April 12, 2006)
A Tribute
As this issue of *Reflections* goes to press two exhibits grace the campus of YDS. On the interior walls hang pictures from Iraq, taken by “unembedded” photo-journalists showing scenes of strife and human suffering. On the Quad stand ranks of military boots and civilian shoes, part of the traveling exhibit “Eyes Open,” another graphic representation of the agony of our current involvement in the Middle East. Both exhibits remind me of the kinds of dramatic demonstrations that prophets such as Ezekiel made in order to proclaim the “Word of the Lord.” They remind us as a community of one of the roles for which our graduates prepare.

In the spring of this year we mourned the passing of an exemplary prophetic voice, well known at Yale and in the wider world. William Sloane Coffin, Jr., whose ministry at the University combined the pastoral and the prophetic in extraordinary ways, was until his death a vigorous voice calling out our best efforts to be responsive to a God of justice and mercy. At a celebration of his life and ministry here at Yale held in April 2005, he rose one last time to challenge his friends and admirers to resist violence in its most threatening forms, particularly in the form of nuclear weapons. That same event marked the endowment of a scholarship in Bill’s honor, which is awarded to incoming YDS students who demonstrate his prophetic leadership, his passion for justice, and his critical theological interpretations of the contemporary social and political scene. Our first Coffin scholar, Ms. Rahiel Tesfamariam, who spent her early childhood in war-torn Eritrea, began her studies with us this autumn. Bill’s life and ministry, at Yale and at Riverside Church in New York City, will continue to inspire students of divinity preparing for service in the world of the twenty-first century.

How to shape and cultivate an effective and responsible prophetic voice remains a challenge. Opening our eyes to see the challenges of the contemporary world, as the exhibit on the Quad challenges us to do, is certainly a necessary condition. Being ready to speak truth to power, as Bill so often did, is an essential part of the equation, but there is certainly more. Our faculty, alumni, and friends writing in this issue of *Reflections* explore the dimensions of what constitutes prophetic ministry today, from what we say in the pulpit, to how we work in the community, from how we construe the heritage of biblical prophecy to how prophets can lead the way in reconciling the deepest divisions in our world.

It hardly needs saying that the church and the country need prophets today. We hope that this issue of *Reflections* will help us all to think about what that calling entails.
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Dear Editor:
The current issue of Reflections is superb. It has been stimulating to me and has proved to be enlightening—in a dark time in a field without much light or much wisdom.

Shalom,
Reverend William Anthony ’45BD
Cambridge, MA

Dear Editor:
I wish to thank you for forwarding the Divinity School’s recent pornographic journal. My nine-year-old son, who collects the mail, was particularly keen to discuss the pictures on pages 13 and 35.

I had been wondering, but I guess the sellout is complete.

Faithfully,
Reverend Paul Hartt ’95 M.Div.
Albanyville, NY

Dear Editor:
Arguably, YDS has produced a work of soft-core pornography in its Spring 2006 edition of Reflections! The artwork, from the grab-able buttocks on the front cover to the vulva-esque bouquet on the back cover, hovers between Audrey Beardsley and Georgia O’Keefe, as if Duchamp and Pearlstein had never lived; its nudes pulse with the passion of the air brush, like the old “Petty girls”- see p. 35, all pout and nipple-see p.51.

The text reflects the images. Most of the essays try to resolve structural and procedural issues of ecclesiastical polity and order as if they were ethical issues of fair play: the reticence of the Anglican community, for example, to consecrate bishops that, to them, practice sodomy, is called an “obes-sion.” The arrangements by which a membership organization governs itself are conflated with Constitutional limitations applicable to public bodies.

Personally, I see no reason why homosexual men and women should not be General Presbyters, presiding bishops or, for that matter, Supreme pontiffs. Sexual practices are not, for me, markers for church governance. But my views are not generalizable, and decent people feel differently. Post-structural post-modernism will, I know, subside, as biblical fundamentalism is in the process of subsiding, but for now, it seems as slick as the artwork to say that these are “spiritual” issues, rather than governance, warm, moist feelings, not discipline.

The heart of the problem is the proposition that churches, temples, mosques, congregations and assemblies are divine projects and not simply social arrangements. The argument is made that if God made all forms of human sexuality, “His” church should encourage all sexual practices among its leadership. Alas, that is just what has been going on in the Roman Catholic Church, the hegemony of the peder-ast.

For many of the essayists it comes down to Jesus. Do I hear snickers about “the disciple He loved best?” But that’s all nonsense: as Tillich taught, Jesus is a picture, just as Ivan Karamozov is a picture. In short, if the application of any version of the metaphysical in theology is applied to forms of social control, the result is sophistry, which is a literary version of pornography.

Respectfully submitted,
Theodore S. Meth ’47Div
Princeton, NJ

Dear Editor:
Once again you and your contributors have hit a proverbial “ten strike” with the spring, 2006 edition of Reflections, “Sex and the Church.” The range of topics (refreshingly not limited to gay/lesbian issues as they relate to the or- dained), the diversity of the academic and pastoral perspectives from which the various writers see and enlighten their subjects, and the careful, calm reasoning applied to these usually divisive issues makes every page a truly invaluable and pragmatic fit to the Churches.

Framed by the insightful editorial comments so precisely expressed by Ms. Manson and Dean Attridge and meaningfully punctuated by the image of Tamara de Lempicka, which in my personal opinion exemplify a high benchmark of achievement in the realm of figurative art, I would hazard to say that this latest collection of superb essays from Y.D.S. faculty and alumni will have set a new standard in the current and greatly appreciated incarnation of this journal.

What strikes me most about every aspect of this edition of Reflections is its amazing balance in tone and content as it bridges that usually evasive chasm which so often separates academic seriousness and popular comprehensi-bility. I only hope that such a precious contribution is received and digested by the various forms of Christianity that exist in this country and across the globe—finally, a fire with more light than smoke!

In the final analysis (exemplified by the astute placement of Michael Bernard Kelly’s piece as the “parting impression”) I came away from the experience of reading and receiving this latest gift from YDS with a much needed rebuttal to the charge that the supposedly dying mainline, “liberal” denominations (of which I am certainly a convicted member) are overly obsessed with issues of human sexuality at the expense of some sort of disem bodied, not to mention absurdly prist inized, sense of mission. The simplistic and limiting category of “either/or” clearly does not apply here. Rather, in honestly and boldly facing these crucial human themes we in the Churches can actually do mission rather than avoid it. Thank God you destroyed, at least for this member of the faithful, yet another false and completely unrealistic duality that is so often presented as an oppressive and unquestioned fact.

May God bless you as you continue your marvelous work.

Sincerely,
Reverend Michael J. Rooske ’00 M.Div.
Palm Springs, CA

Dear Editor:
Thank you for … the Spring 2006 issue of Reflections. From Daniel Helminiajk’s opening article to Michael Kelly’s appraisal of Sister Jeanneine Gramick’s ministry, the writing is bold, well-infor med and provocative, and I am not surprised to learn that you’ve received many requests for additional copies. Perhaps most interesting to me was the “church-ly” nature of so much of the writing, as the authors grapple with pastoral practice and ecclesial polity alongside their explorations of identity, spirituality and power. Please convey my congratulations to Jamie Manson, along with my thanks, for her skillful assembly of this successful issue.

Sincerely,
Michael Gilligan
Henry Luce Foundation
Dear Editor:

I am an older, experienced Episcopal priest, serving as Vicar for a reasonably well educated small congregation in a close-in suburb of Buffalo. A number of the members here are eager to probe the sexually oriented debates and tensions within our denomination, and have managed to assimilate a fairly broad reportage on the subject, and still keep their inner dialogue and shared conversation going with energy, eagerness, and hope. The material presented so beautifully in the Spring issues of Reflections seems to offer the opportunity to deepen, rather than broaden, their continuing search.

Faithfully and Thankfully yours,
Reverend John A. Russell ’59BD
Cheektowaga, NY

Dear Editor:

The articles in the Spring 2006 Reflections just arrived, and I found the articles on the church’s hang-ups with regard to sex both interesting and right on. Equally interesting, but curious: nine pictures of female frontal nudity are included, but only one modest cover picture of the backside of a nice looking male. Does the Editor have hangups that prevent her/him giving us pictures of the frontsides of attractive males? Or is there some obscure YDS policy that says of female frontsides that Lo, they are good, but male frontsides are an abomination to the Lord?

Wayne Brice ’62 Div
Fort Worth, TX

Dear Editor:

Thank you for this edition of Reflections.” I carefully read all the articles in it and learned some things from all of them. I liked the first article best – “Sex as a Spiritual Exercise.” About five years ago I read a book entitled Why God Won’t Go Away. It is a study of mystical experiences and two neuroscientists and they discovered that mystical experiences in all religious traditions deactivate the two areas of the brain that relate us to time and location/space. This gives the experience of being united with all things in all of time, a mystical experience. I don’t think that this is mentioned in the Helminiak article, but a mystical sexuality that is mystical does this. In fact, as noted, sex is so powerful because it dislodges us from the on-going connections of daily life – space, time, restraints, responsibilities, etc. Sex will produce mystical experiences about as readily as public worship does – not often.

Twenty some years ago I wrote a paper on sexual relations and I came to the conclusion that sex is not really an end in itself but a means to an end – relationship with another person. I follow Tillich’s thought, and also that of others, that a thing, including sex, is moral if it enhances the lives involved and doesn’t denigrate them or the community.

Richard Stazesky ’52BD
Hockessin, DE

Dear Editor:

I am a 1983 graduate of Yale Divinity School/Berkeley currently serving an Episcopal Church in Fort Smith, Arkansas. The human sexuality debates within our church are, of course, a matter of deep struggle and personal concern, both within our congregation and for me as a priest and a member of the Church.

In that context, I am writing to express my complete and deep disappointment with the recent Reflections. It struck me as little more than a self-serving, often belligerent, assertion of “progressive” ideologies with little in the way of genuine self-examination or self-criticism. I believe it is of almost no value as a contribution to the current debate within the church. I would have expected better from Yale Divinity School.

The mainline churches have all wagered their futures in an effort to respond with dignity and humanity to those people who, in the wake of thirty years of unchecked expressive-experiential utilitarianism (Bellah), have come seeking the life and blessing of the Christian community. The churches have struggled to do that while still honoring the deep questions and concerns of those who stand within the tradition. The depth of my frustration and disappointment with your number is called forth by what that struggle has asked of me and my church, as you do it little honor.

Fort Smith, AR

Dear Editor:

I have just finished the current copy of “Reflections” and it is a remarkable read. I am taking Margaret Farley’s sexual ethics seminar and from the perspectives gained in that class I appreciate especially how timely, balanced, fair and informative this issue is. I hope everyone reads it cover to cover. I am proud to be a member of an institution that speaks up like that.

Grace and peace,
Judy Holding
Darien, CT

Dear Editor:

I received the latest issue of Reflections in the mail yesterday and already have had an opportunity to read a few articles. I must say that I am rapidly coming to the conclusion that this is one of the best issues of the magazine ever! Its articles are timely, informative, stimulating and thoughtful.

Sincerely,
David Viggiani ’91MAR
Canandaigua, NY

Dear Editor:

I’d like to take this opportunity to commend and thank you for the Spring 2006 edition of Reflections. I received my copy in the mail yesterday, at first I skimmed it–joyously–reading small sections from every article before I started reading from the beginning in earnest. I called to see about ordering more copies to send to friends and associates who will want to read it as well. The breadth and scope of the articles is truly impressive and I am grateful beyond words that you and the Divinity School had the courage to address this issue in all of its complexities. I sincerely believe that this journal has taken the debate on these issues to a new and higher level (long overdue), and that those who might argue that there is a lack of balance will have great difficulty demonstrating any evidence of that.

Congratulations and thank you once again.

Sincerely,
Armand M. Belmonte
Waterbury, CT, ’91MAR
There are so many of you out there who should be up here instead of me. You rode with Bill through the Deep South chasing Jim Crow from long impregnable barriers imposed on freedom. You rose with Bill against the Vietnam War, were arrested with him, shared jail with him, and at night in your cells joined in singing the Hallelujah Chorus with him. You rallied with him against the horrors of nuclear weapons.

You sang with him, laughed with him, drank with him, prayed with him, grieved with him, worshipped and wept with him. Even at this moment when your hearts are breaking at the loss of him, you must be comforted by the balm of those memories. I envy your lifelong membership in his beloved community, and I am honored that Randy, his wife, asked me to speak today about the Bill Coffin I knew.

I saw little of him personally until late in his life. We met once in the early ‘60s when he was an adviser to the Peace Corps, which I had helped to organize and run. He spoke to the staff, inspired us to think of what we were doing as the moral equivalent of war, and told us the story of how as a young captain in the infantry, following military orders at the end of World War II, he had been charged with sending back to the Soviet Union thousands of Russian refugees made prisoners by the Germans. Some of them he had deceived into boarding trains that carried them home to sure death at the hands of Stalin. That burden of guilt sat heavily on Bill’s heart for the rest of his life. He wrote about it in his autobiography, and raised it forty years later when we met in the waiting room of the television studio where I was about to interview him. That’s the moment we bonded, two old men by now, sharing our grief that both, in different ways, had once confused duty with loyalty, and confessing to each other our gratitude that we had lived long enough to atone —somewhat. “Well,” said Bill, “we needed a lot of time. We had a lot to atone for.”

I had called him for the interview after learning the doctors had told him his time was now running out. When he came down from Vermont to the studio here in New York, I greeted him with the question, “How you doing?” He threw back his head, his eyes flashed, and with that slurred (from a stroke) but still vibrant voice, he answered: “Well, I am praying the prayer of St. Augustine: Give me chastity and self-restraint….but not yet.”

He taught me more about being a Christian than I learned at seminary.

His witness taught me – he preached what he practiced. But his writings taught me, too: Once to Every Man, Living the Truth in a World of Illusion, The Heart Is a Little to the Left, Credo, Letters to a Young Doubter, and, of course, that unforgettable eulogy to his drowned son, Alex, when he called on us to “improve the quality of our suffering.” During my interview with him on PBS, I asked him how he had summoned the strength for so powerful a message of suffering and love. He said, “Well, we all do what we know how to do. I went right away to the piano. And I played all the hymns. And I wept and I wept, and I read the poems, like A. E. Houseman – ‘To an Athlete Dying Young.’ Then I realized the folks in Riverside Church had to know whether or not they still had a pastor. So I wrote the sermon. I wanted them to know.”

They knew, Bill, they knew.

This will surprise some of you: Not too long ago Bill told Terry Gross that he would rather not be
known as a social activist. The happiest moments of my life, he said, were less in social activism than in the intimate settings of the pastor’s calling — “the moments when you’re doing marriage counseling...or baptizing a baby...or accompanying people who have suffered loss — the moments when people tend to be most human — when they are most vulnerable.”

So he had the pastor’s heart but he heeded the prophet’s calling. There burned in his soul a sacred rage — that volatile mix of grief and anger and love that produced what his friend, the artist and writer Robert Shetterly, described as “a holy flame.” During my interview with him he said, “When you see uncaring people in high places, everybody should be mad as hell.” If you lessen your anger at the structures of power, he said, you lower your love for the victims of power.

I once heard Lyndon Johnson urge Martin Luther King to hold off on his marching in the South to give the President time to neutralize the old guard in Congress and create a consensus for finally ending institutionalized racism in America. Martin Luther King listened, and then he answered (I paraphrase): “Mr. President, the gods of the South will never be appeased. They will never have a change of heart. They will never repent of their sins and come to the altar seeking forgiveness. The time has passed for consensus, the time has come to break the grip of history and change the course of America.” When the discussion was over, Dr. King had carried the day. The President of the United States put a long arm on his shoulder and said, “Martin, you go on out there now and make it possible for me to do the right thing.” Lyndon Johnson had seen the light: For him to do the right thing someone had to subpoena the conscience of America and send it marching from the ground up against the citadels of power and privilege.

Like Martin Luther King, Bill Coffin also knew the heart of power is hard; knew it arranged the rules for its own advantage; knew that before justice could roll down like water and righteousness like a flowing river, the dam of oppression, deception, and corruption had first to be broken, cracked open by the moral power of people aroused to demand that the right thing be done. “In times of oppression,” he said, “if you don’t translate choices of faith into political choices, you run the danger of washing your hands, like Pilate.” So he aimed his indignation at root causes. “Many of us are eager to respond to injustice,” he said, “without having to confront the causes of it...and that’s why so many business and governmental leaders today are promoting charity. It is desperately needed in an economy whose prosperity is based on growing inequality. First these leaders proclaim themselves experts on matters economic, and prove it by taking the most out of the economy. Then they promote charity as if it were the work of the church, finally telling troubled clergy to shut up and bless the economy as once we blessed the battleship.”

When he came down from Vermont two years ago for that final interview, we talked about how democracy had reached a fork in the road — what Tony Kushner calls one of those moments in history when the fabric of everyday life unravels and there is this unstable dynamism that allows for incredible change in a short period of time — when people and the world they are living in can be utterly transformed for good or bad.

Take one fork and the road leads to an America where military power serves empire rather than freedom; where we lose from within what we are trying to defend from without; where fundamentalism and the state scheme to write the rules and regulations; where true believers in the gods of the market turn the law of the jungle into the law of the land; where in the name of patriotism we keep our hand over our heart pledging allegiance to the flag while our leaders pick our pockets and plunder our trust; where elites insulate themselves from the consequences of their own actions; where “the strong take what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.”

Take the other fork and the road leads to the America whose promise is “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” for all. Bill Coffin spent his life pointing us down that road in that direction. There is nothing utopian about it, Bill said; he was an idealist but he was not an ideologue. He said in our interview that we have to keep pressing the socialist questions because they are the questions of justice, but we must be dubious about the socialist answers because, while Amos may call for justice to roll down as waters, figuring out the irrigation system is damned hard!

He believed in democracy. There is no simpler way to put it. He believed democracy was the only way to ensure that the rewards of a free society would be shared with everyone, and not just elites at the top. That last time we talked he told me how much he had liked the story he had heard Joseph Campbell tell me in our series on “The Power of Myth” — the story of the fellow who turns the corner and sees a brawl in the middle of the block. He runs...
right for it, shouting: “Is this a private fight, or can anyone get in it?”

Bill saw democracy as everyone’s fight. He’d be in the middle of the fork in the road right now, his coat off, his sleeves rolled up, and his hand raised—pointing us to the action. And his message would be the same today as then: “Sign up, jump in, fight on.”

Someone sidled up to me the other night at another gathering where Bill’s death was discussed. This person said, “He was no saint, you know.” I wanted to answer: “You’re kidding?” We knew, all right. Saints flourish in a mythic world. Bill Coffin flourished here, in the cracked common clay of an earthly and earthy life. He liked it here. Even as he was trying to cooperate gracefully with the inevitability of death, he was also coaching Paul Newman to play the preacher in the film version of Marilyn Robinson’s novel Gilead. He enjoyed nothing more than wine and song at his home with Randy and friends. And he never lost his conviction that a better world is possible if we fight hard enough. At a dinner in his honor in Washington he had reminded us that “the world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.” But as we left he winked at me and said, “Give ’em hell.”

Faith, he once said, “is being seized by love.” Seized he was, in everlasting arms. “You know,” he told me in that interview, “I lost a son. And people will say, ‘Well, when you die, Bill, Alex will come forth and bring you through the pearly gates.’ Well, that’s a nice thought, and I welcome it. But I don’t need to believe that. All I need to know is, God will be there. And our lives go from God, in God, to God again. Hallelujah, you know? That should be enough.”

Well, he’s there now. But we are still here. I hear his voice in my heart: “Don’t tarry long in mourning. Organize.”

The above remarks were delivered by Bill Moyers at the funeral service for William Sloane Coffin, Jr., on Thursday, April 20, 2006, at Riverside Memorial Church in New York City.

Bill Moyers is a journalist and commentator who has spent the past forty years producing hundreds of hours of television interviews for various series broadcast primarily on PBS. Over the years Moyers earned more than thirty Emmy awards, ten Peabody awards, and nearly every other television journalism prize for his work.

On a Saturday morning last October, Rev. Tim Ahrens encountered a quote by televangelist Rod Parsley, the leader of a conservative Ohio megachurch that jolted Ahrens. The day before, Parsley had launched the Reformation Ohio movement, aiming to register 400,000 voters and bring a quarter of them to Jesus. “I’m reading the paper,” Ahrens recalls, “and come across where Parsley says, ‘We are locking, loading, and firing on Ohio.’ I almost spat out my coffee. This was the crack in my liberty bell.”

Ahrens, who describes himself as “the most excitable person in Columbus,” went into high gear, e-mailing his friends, sharing his outrage. He called a meeting in the parish hall of his Columbus church, the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, and gathered 50 like-minded pastors. “It is amazing how coming together like this has people finding their voice,” says Ahrens, 48. “It’s not my voice. These are the voices of scripture.”

Those voices are now one loosely organized organization called We Believe Ohio that spans the state and includes over 400 pastors, rabbis, imams, and other religious leaders. Ahrens credits the group with energizing and emboldening pastors statewide to object to the use of scripture to promote a conservative political agenda, an agenda that in the near term was aimed at electing Ohio Republican Ken Blackwell as governor (Blackwell was unsuccessful in his bid).

Taking a stand isn’t easy for some pastors who, as a result, have lost members and, in the case of one junior clergyman, have been banned in their own churches from preaching on certain subjects. Still, says Ahrens, “They all feel like they did the right thing.” And, six months into its formal start, the group is gaining traction, not only garnering much local and some national press, but also unnerving those in Parsley’s movement.

“We start appearing with [people from Reformation Ohio] on stage and they don’t know what to do with us,” says Ahrens. “They’d written off mainline churches as so secular as to not matter anymore, as dead. What really unsettles them is that we preach the gospel.”

Despite—or because of—the success of We Believe Ohio, Ahrens is deeply wary that the group will be too closely identified with individual clergy or a political agenda, or find itself co-opted by politicians. He is keenly aware of the temptations of being seduced by power, of slavishly serving media needs or shrill voices. “You talk about Falwell becoming a caricature of himself,” says Ahrens. “I think Jesse [Jackson] has become that, too.” That’s why Ahrens has removed himself from a formal leadership position in We Believe Ohio and relentlessly sounds the message that the movement is about serving the poor, not taking power. “If a movement is to succeed, it has to continue to return to the poor,” says Ahrens. “The Old Testament prophets stopped being prophets when they got too close to the king.”

This wisdom of the wizened activist comes from over twenty years of experience, beginning in the mid-1980s while a student at Yale Divinity School and traveling to Groton, Connecticut, to protest the launch of a new submarine, the Corpus Christi. It also comes from sporadic but intense contact with William Sloane Coffin, Jr., who Ahrens first met while at Yale.

“My roommate used to babysit the Coffin kids. I came into our apartment one day on Mansfield Street and there was Bill Coffin. Wha’l? Ahrens recalls that Coffin’s periodic guidance was key to honing his sense of purpose. “If there is a theme in my life,” he says, “it is that God calls us to justice. In God’s reign, justice is the order of things set right. God’s Justice is the light for my path and guides my walk with Christ.”
Prophecy in this register is an act of witness: speaking truth to power, as William Sloane Coffin has said. The prophet may offer challenges about the misuse of political influence, as did the savvy court prophet Nathan when he entrapped King David through the heartrending story of the little ewe lamb (2 Samuel 12). Or the prophet may decry economic exploitation perpetrated by the rich, as did the brilliant ironist Amos in his invective against the sense of privilege that had become narcotic for the elite of eighth-century Israel.

But prophecy in Scripture offers more than a comfortable model for the uncompromising indictment of others. The biblical prophetic books testify in complex ways to God’s truth for living communities. Further, the appropriation of biblical prophecy by Christian believers must be seasoned by the recognition that all have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23) and that we dare not judge others (Matt 7:1-5, Luke 6:41-42). Honoring our Creator’s redemptive purpose requires that we speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). Jesus’ teaching invites us to inhabit a mature prophetic praxis that is grounded – always, seventy times seven! – in forgiveness.

We would do well to consider the nature of our contemporary cultural moment, which many have named postmodern. Technologies of globalization have created a world with porous boundaries and infinite possibilities for those with economic wealth and political capital to promote their own ideologies, for good or ill. Living communities today are geographically expansive, highly culturally fluid, and as diverse as Internet access and transnational travel will allow. Because communities are dynamic, hybridized webs of relationships in a process of constant redefinition, no single story of origins or identity will suffice any longer, whether for a single individual or for a community. Some lament the postmodern turn. But others of us understand the fluidity of contemporary identity as liberating, a heady freedom from coercive metanarratives that never truly welcomed us to begin with.

The Church dares take little for granted these days. Many in the pews on Sunday are believers relatively new to the faith or formed in another tradition. The average age of M.Div. students is getting younger across the country; incoming students may have had little background in church work and minimal exposure to Scripture. Race, sexuality, and gender do not mean what they once seemed to mean, because old assumptions are finally being resisted at their epistemological core. The Church is living into an identity that is becoming increasingly globally configured, ethnically hybrid, and decentered from European and North American cultural narratives, as Christian communities in the global South gain new members at rates exponentially higher than churches in the northern hemisphere. Many competing truths illumine and complicate our common life together. Christian faith these days bespeaks a paradoxical Church living in the interstices among contradictory narratives, understanding its own provisionality while nevertheless proclaiming the Gospel boldly, bearing in its own embodied life
the dissonances, incoherences, and conflicting visions of a Body of Christ that is continually being transformed.

So how might we take up the prophetic voices of Scripture in this dynamic time of paradox for the Church and for the world? Two aspects of biblical prophecy can help us to envision the prophetic role today, aspects that have not traditionally been emphasized in social-justice movements. In what follows, we will consider the pathos of the prophet in community and the self-reflective writtenness of the prophetic word.

**Prophetic pathos in community**

I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, “Violence and destruction!” For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and a derision all day long. If I say, “I will not mention Him, or speak any more in His name,” then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. (Jer 20:7-9)

Jeremiah’s prophetic vocation cost him dearly in the intense political opposition he faced. The suffering he had to witness was horrendous: there was no “balm in Gilead” for the anguished Jeremiah or his people (8:22). Pathos embodied in community was the very heart of Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry. The Word of God burned in Jeremiah like fire. But he did not voice that Word from a place of security and privilege – he prophesied in fetters. Jeremiah shows us that a bone-deep commitment to living in community is essential to authentic witness.

Contemporary prophecy likewise must spring from rootedness within our communities, and we must be willing to suffer with others. In his recent book, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Prophecy and the Changing Inner City*, Mark Gornik reflects on intentionally relocating to Sandtown, a desperately blighted urban neighborhood in Baltimore, to devote more than ten years of prophetic advocacy among the people there. Gornik knows that a truly God-bearing church “incarnates itself within the community and becomes one with its neighbors in the struggle.”

Prophets make themselves present to real engagement in living communities — offering their “souls and bodies,” in the Eucharistic formulation, for Christ’s redeeming work with the suffering. Prophets must prepare spiritually for imprisonment, threats, deprivation, fear — and for the constraints that those things place on the moral imagination. Prophets must prepare to meet the despair of those who starve in the shadows of economic power, those who stumble traumatized and destitute through landscapes of tribal conflict and international war — and then they must speak a prophetic word out of that pathos, that lived commitment to staying present to brokenness.

Theological education has a crucial role to play here. The currency of “pedagogies of engagement” — teaching that prioritizes collaborative work and field-based learning across disciplines — raises important curriculum and policy questions for theological schools about how we can best prepare students for prophetic ministry. Imagine a divinity school trustee meeting devoted entirely to the issue of fostering engaged prophetic ministry! Change would come. For any theological school that funds and resources this preparation for contemporary prophecy will see the light of the Gospel transforming communities and human hearts as never before.

**Writing the prophetic word**

Go now; write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, so that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever. (Isa 30:8)

The Israelite prophets shouted God’s Word from Temple gate and city square; they pleaded with kings and wrestled with priests. They performed the terror of God’s Word using rotting figs, shattered pottery, barley cakes baked on camel dung, even marriage with (oh, the drama) sexually autonomous women. Amos, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea offered all of themselves in their efforts to become transparent to God’s purposes. They knew that trenchant tones and...
vivid tableaux could fire the spiritual imagination, could draw the believer irresistibly into an encounter with the will of God. But displays of brilliant oratory and dramatic technique were only the beginning. The prophets also wrote. They wrote poetry and stories and exhortations and prayers. They risked writing in order that the power of God’s Word might reach peoples near and far, contemporary and yet unborn. After King Jehoiakim destroyed Jeremiah’s first scroll column by column, the scribe Baruch rewrote the entire thing in a defiant gesture of political and theological power.9 Isaiah implored his disciples to preserve in writing his vision of God’s purposes, so that it might speak a living word of witness to those who were yet to encounter God in another time.

Prophecy in the contemporary Church, too, must witness across geographical distance and through time. Martin Luther King, Jr., could say, “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here.” He was present in Birmingham, yes — but, equally important, he wrote enduring words from there.10 Civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois gave countless speeches and taught classes, and those unquestionably had an impact through his decades of work for racial equity. But he also wrote feverishly, virtually every day, no matter what other obligations clamored for his attention. Du Bois wrote as a man possessed — no, as a prophet obsessed with proclaiming a word of truth in any way he could, through anthropological studies, editorials in the NAACP, monthly The Crisis, newspaper articles, letters to scholars and politicians, autobiographical writing, essays, historical books, novels, and dramaturgy.11 In the “After-Thought” to his monumental The Souls of Black Folk (1903), Du Bois offers this about the prophetic power of writing:

Hear my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world-wilderness. Let there spring, Gentle One, from out its leaves vigor of thought and thoughtful deed to reap the harvest wonderful. . . . Thus in Thy good time may infinite reason turn the tangle straight, and these crooked marks on a fragile leaf be not indeed

THE END12

The contemporary prophetic voice must leave its own “crooked marks on a fragile leaf,” must risk the accountability and visibility of the written word in order to transform lives shaped by texts, text-messaging, and slogans. In our global communities, writing has become an essential means of engagement. See prophecy at work in a blog such as that of Christian Scharen at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture (http://faithasawayoflife.typepad.com/blog/). Listen for prophecy on a Christian political Web site such as that of Tennessee state senator Roy Herron (www.faithfuldemocrats.com), or a listserv dedicated to protecting the integrity of all God’s creatures, such as the Episcopal Network for Animal Welfare (enaw@yahoogroups.com). In my parish, we are engaging many more people in an electronically mediated yearlong study of the book of Isaiah than we could ever have enticed to show up at weekly meetings (visitors welcome: isaiah_list@wu.wss.yale.edu). The fruits of written prophecy promise to be abundant indeed in this technological age.

Prophetic truth voiced in paradox

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me. (Isa 49:16)

The Isaiah tradition speaks a paradoxical word of hope into the experience of trauma and exile. With smoke still rising from the ruins of Jerusalem in the cultural background of this text, the Isaiah tradition dares to proclaim that God will not forget God’s people. The nursing mother’s intense care for her child is as nothing compared with God’s compassion. Pathos is here: this God of love has tears streaming down Her face, because God has witnessed the devastation of Jerusalem and the anguish of a beloved people. Writing is here, too. Jeremiah and Ezekiel had eaten scrolls (Jer 15:16, Ezek 2:9-3:3), bringing honeyed divine writing into their bodies. Now God’s people are inscribed on the very palms of the hands of God, indelibly etched into the being of the Holy One who creates, touches, transforms. The Creator of the Universe can do nothing — the metaphor of hands makes this clear — without remembering and caring for Her people.

So must prophets be in the contemporary Church: willing to suffer in and for our communities, willing to inscribe the prophetic truth of God’s grace everywhere so that we, too, can do nothing without remembering and caring for those whom God has made. Jeremiah encourages us to stay present to our broken and divided communities, to wrestle and lament and hope alongside him. Isaiah encourages us to write — poems, stories, essays, songs, prayers — so that we may bear witness beyond ourselves.
Christians live in paradox. We have been welcomed into God’s people only late, as a wild branch grafted into a vine long tended and loved (Rom 11:17-24). We seek to speak the wild truth of Christ into a world that does not understand incarnation and knows little of mercy, yet we polemically wound each other within a Church that seems to forget mercy almost as often as does the secular world. Naming injustice must continue to be a central part of scripturally grounded prophecy, of course. We still need the fulminations of Amos and Micah, within the Church’s walls no less than outside. But we would do well to move beyond the ungenerous indictment of others that so often characterizes contemporary political and theological discourse. Prophecy is much more than that. Prophecy is courageous presence in communities that suffer. Prophecy is writing words of truth so that the poor and the powerless may be inscribed on the hands of all who take up those texts and read. The Gospel demands nothing less.

Notes

1 Martin Luther King, Jr., in his incomparable “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered on 28 August 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

2 William Sloane Coffin, Credo (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 63. The full quotation is relevant: “Had I but one wish for the churches of America I think it would be that they come to see the difference between charity and justice. Charity is a matter of personal attributes; justice, a matter of public policy. Charity seeks to alleviate the effects of injustice; justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it. Charity in no way affects the status quo, while justice leads inevitably to political confrontation. Especially I would hope that Christians would see that the compassion that moved the Good Samaritan to act charitably – that same compassion prompted biblical prophets to confront injustice, to speak truth to power, as did Jesus, who, though more than a prophet, was certainly nothing less.”

3 See in the Spring 2006 issue of Reflections the essay by Virginia Ramey Mollencott, “Are There Really Only Two Genders?”


6 Gornik, To Live in Peace, 129.

7 The phrase comes from Russ Edgerton’s influential “Education White Paper,” written in the fall of 1997 when he served as director of education for The Pew Charitable Trusts.

8 Noteworthy here is the innovative school that Mark Gornik now heads: the City Seminary of New York (http://www.cityseminaryny.org), which is committed to intercultural education for urban peace ministry.

9 Walter Brueggemann says of the “dangerous, bold process of bookmaking” in Jeremiah 36, “the conflict evoked by the scroll is between royal power and scroll power. . . . [O]n some inscrutable way, liberated prophetic imagination and experience take the form of a scroll. . . . [S]uch texted reality is a great and relentless enemy of silence. . . . This text authorizes the mute to speak and to know what to say in the face of life-canceling power.” See Brueggemann, “Texts That Linger, Words That Explode,” 1-19 in his Texts That Linger, Words That Explode (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 8–9.


... and so we begin

for some of us gathered here
this is a time that is familiar
yet even in the somewhat comfort of the known
there lurks the unknown
we can know certain things about this new academic year that is dawning
but we can never know what kind of class we will have
because new configurations of students
reading
other source materials
keep even the known in the category of "adventure"
for some of us gathered here
this is a time i sometimes refer to as the “oh my god what have i done” time
we have launched ourselves into the unknown
  anticipation
  trepidation
  questioning
or some mixture of these emotions and more
i think, overwhelmed-but-trying-to-hang-in-there, may be a better description of
what is going on in us

for others of us gathered here
this is a time of affirmation
we know this is where we should be and we are doing what we should be doing
yes, this may even be a call

for others, this is a time of seeking and questioning
we have a sense this may be the place—but perhaps not
and so we are digging in and listening intently and trying to feel deeply to see what the future brings

for others, this is a time of feeling incredibly entitled or incredibly inadequate
both are human
both are natural
both need to be gotten over
  quickly

for others, this is a time of resistance
we wish we were somewhere else
doing something else
with someone else
  but we often don't know what that “else” is
  so here we sit
  or when we do know what that “else” is
  time, circumstance, and letters of appointment mean
  here we sit

for others, we have the challenge of moving in and out of all these emotions and ways of being
sometimes at the same time
often with lightning speed
  and we are simply stunned and amazed
  and often humbled

there are other ways in which we sit here today
and i want to suggest that given the worlds we live in these days
however we are, as we sit here to begin this academic year
it’s normal
the challenge, i think, for all of us is this: what will we proceed to do with the fullness and incompleteness of what we have
brought to this time and place
  as we remember that we are in a world
  that we have helped make
    that needs a new, or perhaps ancient, vision
    molded by justice and peace
    rather than winning and losing

so i want to talk with you this afternoon about a few of the things that are behind holding on to justice and peace in the midst of
myriad injustices and a world that is a spinning top of wars
  and give you some sense of why i think that what we do in this academic life has a profound
effect on the worlds we live in
if we choose to make our work and our studies rigorous academically and relevant experientially
it is for me to respond to the call by the black mystic and theologian Howard Thurman,
who joined others
  in encouraging us to blend head and heart
one of my sources of sustenance for this challenge is found in the speeches of the late former congresswoman from Texas, Barbara Jordan

Jordan was a woman of firsts:
- 1st black woman to serve as administrative assistant to the county judge of Harris County, Texas
- 1st black elected to the Texas state senate since 1883
- 1st black woman to deliver the keynote address at the Democratic party convention in 1976
- First black person to be buried in the State Cemetery in Austin, Texas, on January 20, 1996.

and those of us who remember or have heard the recording of the crisp bell tones of her perfect diction and impeccable cadence will never forget her testimony before the house judiciary committee during Watergate at 2am:

Earlier today, we heard the beginning of the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States, “We, the people.” It is a very eloquent beginning. But when the document was completed on the seventeenth of September 1787 I was not included in that “We, the people.” I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just left me out by mistake. But through the process of amendment, interpretation, and court decision I have finally been included in “We, the people.”

Today, I am an inquisitor; I believe hyperbole would not be fictional and would not overstate the solemnness that I feel right now. My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total. And I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution.

I am struck, by the profound trust she had in the notion “we the people”

Jordan was the daughter of a Baptist preacher and a devout practicing Baptist her whole life

one of the bedrock principles she lived her life by was that human equality under God is categorical, absolute, unconditional, and universally applicable

so when she said “we the people” she really did mean all of us

now because she was a public servant, she did not do much god-talk in her public addresses

but I think she can be a window into how we can think about how we understand one link between this divinity school on the hill and the rest of the world

and realize that what we do here is the real world

to be sure, it’s only a small slice of it

but one of the temptations we must avoid

is believing that what we do here—with our well-placed and much-needed emphasis on academic and intellectual rigor

means that we check our hearts at the door

for I learned well from the older black men and women who raised me in the church and outside of it

that intellect with no heart is about as useful as a heart with no intellect

and missing both sides of that equation means you probably don’t have much common sense to boot

in other words, you’re not very useful

so let me offer a counternarrative to the expansion of moral hubris that we are experiencing of late in many of our religious and non-religious homes

that I think springs form the kind of faith that Jordan placed in what it means to take our citizenship seriously as people of faith

these lines are from the notebook kept by Marie-Sophie Laborieux

she is the protagonist in the Martiniquan writer Patrick Chamoiseau novel Texaco

Chamoiseau’s novel chronicles the path to freedom of Martinique from colonial rule

through the eyes of Marie-Sophie and her ancestors—slaves and former slaves

Marie-Sophie records the words of her father

In what I tell you, there’s the almost-true, the sometimes-true, and the half-true. That’s what telling a life is like, braiding—all of that like one plaits the white Indies currant to make a hut. And the true-true comes out of that braid.

Chamoiseau captures in novel form

the shorthand version of my reply to why I hold on to justice and peace as relevant

vital
necessary
and indispensable values
that we can craft into faithful action in our scholarship
in the lives of those in our religious communities
in the worlds we live in

that is
lately, we have existed on the almost-true, sometimes-true, and half-true without looking for the true-true
searching for the true-true is what i think we should be after these days
this takes what ethicist Marcia Y. Riggs calls a mediating ethic
this mediating ethic is not one to seek easy reconciliation
it is an ethic, which is a “process of acknowledging seemingly diametrically opposing positions and creating a re-
response that interposes and communicates between opposing sides. It is living with tension rather than aiming at an
end result of integration, compromise, or reconciliation. These may be outcomes, but mediating as process occurs
whether or not mediation as an end does.”
mediating as process rather than mediation as end
and i suggest that the only way we can faithfully look at who we are
as a nation
and the roles we should and must play
as people of faith or people who hold deep values of respect for others and the rest of creation
who must live our lives not always comforted by the holy
but haunted by God’s call to us to live a prophetic and spirit-filled life
and not just talk about it or wish for it or think about
means that we remain in the tension
in the process of uncovering and working through how we can build faith-filled responses
to meet the needs of those who may be the least of these
or folks just like many of us—blessed with resources and abilities and a divine mandate to use them
with a spirituality that will not let go of that relentless justice that can only come from a rock-steady God

II.
we must be about these things because
we are living in a time in which imperialism is being dwarfed by empire
from the beginning of this country as a republic
the myth of universal uninhibited freedom has always had its evil twins—studied sadistic subordination and anal-
retentive annihilation
our history is one of that cast native americans outside of the constitution
and included blacks in the constitution—but not as 5/5ths of being human
this has, to my mind, always been a great problematic in our self-understanding as a nation
we have not always been the land of unfettered liberty, equal access, and open markets for all peoples and on a truly
equal playing field
we have, domestically and globally, been a nation that has practiced—far too many times—imperialistic domestic
and global outrages that carry kinder and gentler names such as
usa patriot act
economic growth and tax relief reconciliation act
free trade area of the americas

you and i are drawing breath in a country, which is for many of us, our country
one that possesses an incredible concentration of financial, diplomatic, and military power
and is rather disingenuous not to admit the tremendous power and influence we have on a global scale
and also recognize the awesome responsibility that comes with this
because we have the power to do incredible good—and have done so
and must continue to grow this side of who we are as a nation larger and stronger
on the global stage and here at home
this is part of the true-true i think Chamoiseau is trying to tell us about
and the way that we respond to this is by telling the truth as we see it, know it, smell it, breathe it
this is what empire and permanent war does not count on:
people of faith telling the truth that not only does the emperor have no clothes, the emperor is, as my grandmother used to say: naked butt
if we can hold on to digging up the truth when it gets buried in political and theological cat fights and mud-wrestling contests, i think we will be able to bring together issues of justice making and peace
but only if we take seriously the challenges of a mediating ethic that tells us that we are caught in H. Richard Niebuhr’s web of creation
we are responsible for each other and ourselves
we may not always agree, nor should we expect to
we have to give an accounting of our actions and inactions
we may get tired and need a break, but we must always come back because we do not get out of this life alone
and we are responsible for what goes on in our names

III.
we human folk are challenge and hope
living with ourselves is often a demanding or difficult task
many of us are called to prove or justify our very lives in a court of law that may be structured so that some of us need not apply for justice or mercy or equality or harmony or peace
we see (when we do not sense) that there are false accusations lining the fabric of our lives that we are involved in an ill-designed and misbegotten contest
that is deadly, oh so deadly
but we have expectations of and for others and ourselves
we have dreams that can be more powerful than the nightmares
possibilities more radical than the realities
and a hope that does more than cling to a wish
or wish on a star
or sit by the side of the road, picking and sucking its teeth after dining on a meal of disaster and violence
for a challenge such as we face today, is also a call to respond
and this, i believe, is where our challenge meets up with hope
this is not the hope of pandora’s box
for pandora, hope is an evil that comes to confuse the human spirit
it is not the hope of goethe
for goethe believed “why roam in the distance? see, the good lies so near. learn only to achieve happiness, then happiness is always there”
it is not the hope of camus
for camus’ myth of sisyphus was to teach us that we should “think clearly and [do not] hope”
no, the challenge and hope we have before us comes from miss nora
ms. montez
mr. press
miss rosie
and mr. waddell
this hope is unequivocal and unambiguous
it does not detach the human spirit from the present through mad delusions and flights of fancy
no this hope is one that pulls the promise of the future into the present
and places the present into the dawn of a future that is on the rimbones of glory
To combine challenge with hope is powerful. For together they enable us to press onward when we feel like giving up; to draw strength from the future to live in a discouraging present. Challenge and hope make it possible for us to see the world, not only
as it is, but also as it can be; to move us to new places and turn us into a new people.

For there is something about challenge yoked with hope, when it is grounded in living for tomorrow as we live for today, that is solid enough to sustain our lives and overcome skepticism and doubt. But it is frightening because we know that loving and caring for others and ourselves interrupts the mundane and comfortable in us, and calls to us to move beyond ourselves and accept a new agenda for living. Hope cannot simply be given a nod of recognition, for it demands not only a contract from us; but covenant and commitment. When we truly live in this deep-walking hope, then we must order and shape our lives in ways that are not always predictable, not always safe, rarely conventional, and protests with prophetic fury the sins of a world (and sometimes theological worldviews) that encourage us to separate our bodies from our spirits, our minds from our hearts, our beliefs from our action.

Yoke challenge and hope in our lives so that justice and peace mean something, and are more than rhetorical ruffles and flourishes. None of us can hide from any of the “isms,” war, the economy, confirmation processes, rising oil prices, calls by a conservative christian leader to assassinate a duly elected president of an oil-rich nation because it is cheaper than another $200 billion dollar war, HIV/AIDS, terrorism, and a proposed freedom walk next month from the Pentagon to the National Mall inaccurately linking the Iraq war to September 11th. A walk that will end with a country music concert headlining Clint Black (whose music i generally like) singing lyrics from his song “I Raq and Roll” like “our troops take out the garbage, for the good old U.S.A.” It is wicked, ya’ll, to mix jingoism with the death of innocents in our national mourning.

No, we cannot hide from responsibility or accountability. We can choose to say that someone else is more qualified and more knowledgeable about economic forecasts and political decisions. We can be content to allow experts to debate the quality of our lives. We can wring our hands, or declare we are too busy, or worse, turn our backs in indifference and callous disregard to the erosion of human rights.

But this never relieves any of us of the responsibility that we have to our generation and future generations to keep justice, peace, and hope alive and vibrant. And if all we want to be are poster children for the status quo, then we can find much less expensive places to train for this—and places better equipped to teach us this—than a divinity school.

IV.

ultimately, i believe that somewhere deep inside each of us

we know that perhaps the simplest, yet the most difficult, answer to the challenge of “what will we proceed to do with the fullness and incompleteness of what we have brought to this time and place” is: live your faith deeply

now i am not talking about perfection—I’m an american baptist

i’m talking about what we call in christian ethics, the everydayness of moral acts
it’s what we do every day that shapes us and says more about us than those grand moments of righteous indigna-
tion and action
the everydayness of listening closely when folks talk or don’t talk to hear what they are saying
the everydayness of taking some time, however short or long, to refresh ourselves through prayer or meditation
the everydayness of speaking to folks and actually meaning whatever it is that is coming out of our mouths
the everydayness of being a presence in people’s lives
the everydayness of designing a class session or lecture or reading or writing or thinking
the everydayness of sharing a meal
the everydayness of facing heartache and disappointment
the everydayness of joy and laughter
the everydayness of facing people who expect us to lead them somewhere or at least point them in the right direc-
tion and walk with them
the everydayness of blending head and heart
it’s the everydayness of getting up and trying one more time to get our living right

it is in this everydayness that “we the people” are formed

and we, the people of faith, live and must witness to a justice wrapped in a love that will not let us go

and a peace that is simply too ornery to give up on us

have a good year

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More than forty-five years had passed since I had last peered out an airplane window at the turquoise terminal building. It was exactly as I remembered it. So were the huge white block letters on the façade: “Aeropuerto Internacional Jose Martí—Habana.” Back then, I was a six-year-old awaiting a flight to who-knows-where for who-knows-how-long.

Through that impenetrable airplane window, I waved anxiously at my father and grandfather, not knowing if or when I would see them again. The scene would remain forever seared in my memory.

By the grace of God, our family was eventually re-united in Miami. And now, more than four decades later, I myself was returning to be reunited with a land and a people that had given me birth. I had no idea how I, who had fled with my family and found success in the United States, would be received by the Cubans on the island. Like an orphan returning to meet his parents after forty-five years, I was deeply anxious. After all, during those four decades the people of Cuba and the Cuban exile community in the United States had seemingly become estranged. Even as many Cuban-Americans had achieved economic and political success in the United States, a large number also harbored tremendous animosity toward Cubans on the island, identifying them with the dictatorial regime under which they lived. How would the impoverished, beaten-down Cuban people who struggled to survive in such desperate circumstances receive me, who had fled with his family? Would they resent me? Would they feel that I, along with the other hundreds of thousands of Cuban exiles, had abandoned them to their plight?

It did not take long for my fears to be assuaged. Wherever I went on the island, the Cuban people’s response to my visit was the same: “Thank you for not forgetting us; thank you for remembering us.” Whatever “survivor’s guilt” I may have experienced in steering myself for the trip dissipated in the face of the stunning hospitality of the people. I, who in some very real sense had abandoned them, was now being welcomed back with open arms, no questions asked—not with a “how dare you” but with a “thank you.” Everywhere I went, the message I received was the same: “You are one of us; welcome back.”

My experience of being welcomed by those who themselves were victims was, of course, hardly unique. Only two months earlier, the *Boston Globe* published the story of young Kai Leigh Harriott, a five-year-old African American girl who had been paralyzed when a stray bullet severed her spine as she sat playing on the porch of her house in inner-city Boston. The *Globe* described the scene at the trial of Anthony Warren, the man who had shot Kai Leigh:

The little girl said the word porch and then began sobbing loudly. After her mother comforted her, 5-year-old Kai Leigh Harriott looked up from her blue wheelchair in the hushed courtroom yesterday and faced the man who fired the stray gunshot that paralyzed her nearly three years ago. “What you done to me was wrong,” the dimpled girl with purple and yellow plastic ties in her braids said softly. “But I still forgive him.” . . . Yesterday, in emotionally wrenching victim-impact statements that left many spectators in tears, Kai and four members of her family told a Suffolk Superior Court judge that the shooting had changed their lives forever, but had also shown them the value of forgiveness. “We’re not victims
here; we’re victors,” said Kai’s mother, Tonya David, addressing the court. Moments later, Warren, 29, a convicted felon who pleaded guilty yesterday to avoid a trial, approached Kai and her family and, in barely audible tones, apologized. David recalled his words later. “I’m sorry for what I’ve done to you and your family,” she said Warren told her. “I was known in the street for all the wrong reasons, and now I want to be known for the right reasons.” David shook his handcuffed right hand and embraced him.1

The following day’s newspaper article then reported the following exchange: “Asked by a reporter why she [Kai] forgave the man who shot her, she shyly but clearly said: ‘I wanted him to tell the world the truth.’ Warren had for three years denied the shooting, but changed his plea Thursday.”2

Among the victims of our society and world, that is, among the very persons in whom one would expect to find a profound anger and resentment, what one often discovers is an astonishing hospitality, gratitude, and forgiveness. Like all prophets, they thus confront us with a Love that challenges and frightens precisely because it refuses to be limited by our meager expectations. Ironically, it is more often the powerful who harbor anger and resentment against the powerless, rather than the reverse. It is the successful Cuban-American who resents the Cuban who “stayed behind.” It is the successful suburbanite who is enraged at the “demands” of the urban poor. It is the successful third-generation immigrant who attacks the recent immigrant. It is the “upstanding citizen” who refuses to forgive the African American man who shot Kai Leigh.

The Prophetic Character of Reconciliation

As Christians, we believe, of course, that we are reconciled to God and to each other through the person of Jesus Christ, particularly through Christ’s death and resurrection. In the various narratives of Christ’s passion, death, and post-resurrection appearances, therefore, the Gospel itself already sets forth a paradigm for reconciliation. Of all those persons who shared responsibility for Jesus’ crucifixion, surely none contributed more to Jesus’ agony than the apostles themselves, those fair-weather friends who abandoned Jesus to his fate at precisely the moment when he most needed them. And surely what was most devastating about Jesus’ passion and death was not only the physical agony itself but, especially, the emotional and spiritual agony of experiencing himself abandoned by his closest friends and even by God.

Consequently, there is high drama in the risen Jesus’ appearances to his old friends, the apostles. How would he confront them? Would he excoriate them? Would he demand justice? How, in turn, would they react to the utterly unexpected appearance of the man whom they had betrayed? After all, they likely remained convinced that it was he who had in fact betrayed them by asking them to trade a throne for a cross. In Luke’s Gospel, the risen Jesus appears to the disciples in Jerusalem, in the room where they had gathered in fear of the Roman authorities. Here we read that:

[jesus] stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

But they were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

Then he said to them, “Why are you troubled? And why do questions arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.” And as he said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While they were still incredulous for joy and were amazed, he asked them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of baked fish; he took it and ate it in front of them. (Lk 24:36-43)

If we read this account not simply as an appearance of Jesus to the disciples, but as an encounter between Jesus and the disciples, we gain some insight into the significance of Jesus’ wounds in this narrative. The wounds are not merely the evidence of Jesus’ bodily resurrection. That they are indeed, but the wounds are also the evidence of the apostles’ betrayal and abandonment of Jesus on the way to Calvary. Confronted by the still-visible wounds on Jesus’ glorified body, the apostles are forced to make the connection, not only between this risen Jesus now standing before them and the man who had been crucified, but they are also forced to draw the connection between their own behavior, their abandonment of Jesus, and Jesus’ crucifixion. By fleeing, the apostles had abandoned Jesus to the Roman soldiers and to his eventual death. No wonder, then, that, when the Jesus whom they had betrayed approaches them openly displaying the wounds in his hands and side, the apostles are “terrified.” Had Jesus returned to exact justice or condemn them? Jesus’ response to their understandable fear is as utterly unexpected as was his resurrection: his first
words are “Peace be with you,” and then he asks, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of baked fish; he took it and ate it in front of them.” In other words, Jesus offers them peace before they’ve even acknowledged him (much less repented), then he invites himself over for dinner. That is his revenge for their betrayal; he asks them to share a meal with him.

The Gospel of John also recounts that the risen Jesus appears to the disciples and “showed then his hands and his side” (Jn 20:20). John’s account then depicts the famous “Doubting Thomas” scene:

Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples said to him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe.” Thomas answered and said to him, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:24-28)

Once again, it is helpful to read this account not only as a post-resurrection appearance but also as a post-resurrection encounter—here, between Jesus and Thomas. Again, the wounds can then be seen not only as evidence of the bodily resurrection but as the instruments of reconciliation; Jesus’ invitation to “put your finger here . . .” is what makes possible Thomas’ response, “My Lord and my God!” Indeed, there is no indication that Thomas ever did touch the wound. Jesus’ invitation itself provokes conversion. Jesus’ invitation to touch and see his wounds is put forth not as a sign of condemnation for Thomas’ betrayal and unbelief but as an overture of forgiveness and reconciliation: “Peace be with you.”

When the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are thus interpreted not only as events in the life of the individual Jesus Christ, but as events in the life of Jesus Christ as the head of the community he founded, we see that what the resurrection embodies is not simply the victory of individual life over death but the victory of communal life over estrangement, the possibility of reconciliation in the face of abandonment and betrayal. And that reconciliation is made possible by: (1) the fact that the physical wounds of betrayal remain visible on the body of the risen Christ, (2) the risen victim’s invitation to touch and see his wounds, (3) the character of that invitation as an offer of pardon and reconciliation rather than a demand for the justice due the victim, (4) the apostles’ acceptance of Jesus’ offer (“They gave him a piece of baked fish” . . . “My Lord and my God”), and finally (5) the radical transformation of the apostles from a group of cowering cowards to a courageous band of disciples willing to literally lay down their lives for their crucified and risen friend and for each other.

We can now begin to see the intrinsic relationship between the demands of social solidarity and justice, on the one hand, and the imperative of reconciliation on the other. Indeed, Gustavo Gutiérrez argues that the two principal themes of the Scriptures are: the gratuity of God’s love, and God’s preferential love for the poor. Jesus Christ reveals the privileged position of the innocent victim as the mediator of God’s extravagant, unexpected mercy. The ability to receive that mercy is thus dependent on our solidarity with the victims. If God’s mercy is truly unanticipated it will be encountered, above all, in those places and among those persons whom our society has deemed ungodly, unlovable. In wholly unexpected ways, they become the bearers of God’s mercy; this is the radical, prophetic, indeed scandalous message at the heart of the Gospel. In the words of the Salvadoran martyr Ellacuria, these are the “crucified people” through whom we encounter the crucified and risen Christ today—not because of who they are, since they are not inherently any more saintly or any less sinners than anyone else, but because of where they are located, on the cross alongside Jesus.

**Whither Justice?**

Despite my argument thus far, I am well aware that justice is also at the core of the Christian call to discipleship and reflects the character of God as this is revealed in Scripture, from the Prophets to the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. I am also aware that the logic of forgiveness is susceptible to all sorts of dangerous distortions which, in the past as today, have promoted passivity in the face of oppression and, indeed, undermined the process of reconciliation. One need not go very far to find examples of victims being exhorted to “forgive and forget,” whether Jews who are encouraged to “get
over” the Holocaust, African Americans urged to let the bygones of slavery be bygones, or victims of abuse encouraged to “get on with their lives.” The call to reconciliation in no way obviates the struggle for social justice in defense of the intrinsic dignity of the person and the rights that would safeguard that dignity. Rather, as Gustavo Gutiérrez avers, we must “situate justice within the framework of God’s gratuitous love.” A praxis of solidarity with the poor in their struggle for justice is the means by which we receive God’s mercy and the gift of forgiveness. In their shared gratitude for the gift of reconciliation, both oppressor and victim are liberated. “The forgiveness of acceptance bestowed by Jesus in the gospel accounts,” observes Jon Sobrino, “is something not merely beneficial, but liberating.” Both are liberated from themselves, argues Sobrino. “It is the gratitude of knowing oneself to be accepted,” he suggests, “that moves a person to a de-centering from self.” (Conversely, where a person remains unmoved by the victim’s offer of mercy, neither reconciliation nor mutual liberation is possible.)

The gratuitous mercy of God is what generates repentance, conversion, and solidarity in the struggle for justice; Thomas’ “My Lord and my God” is preceded by Jesus’ “Peace be with you.” Sobrino explains that, in the person of Jesus Christ, forgiveness is always the starting point for any consideration of sin:

It is the acceptance that is forgiveness that adequately and wholly discloses the fact that I am a sinner and gives me the strength to acknowledge myself as such and change radically. The conversion demanded so radically by Jesus is preceded by the offer of God’s love. It is not conversion that requires God to accept the sinner; rather, just contrariwise, it is God’s acceptance that makes conversion possible.7

The apostles remained paralyzed by fear until the crucified and risen Christ confronted them with his wounds, demanding that they acknowledge the wounds, yet offering pardon and reconciliation. Only then could Thomas confess, “My Lord and my God.” The convicted criminal Anthony Warren remained paralyzed by his fear of the law until his victim, the five-year-old Kai Leigh Harriott, confronted him with her wounds: “What you done to me was wrong, but I still forgive you.” Only then could Warren admit, “I’m sorry for what I’ve done to you and your family,” and declare that “I was known in the street for all the wrong reasons, and now I want to be known for the right reasons.” Forgiveness compels confession and repentance, and repentance implies a commitment to justice: “now I want to be known for the right reasons.” The offer and reception of God’s gratuitous mercy thus implies judgment and confession, not as extrinsic but as integral to the act of forgiveness itself.8

Ultimately, full reparation for past suffering is impossible; we can never undo past injustices, and those injustices will always remain part of our present and future. What we can do is to reconstitute our relationships on a completely different foundation based on mercy, confession, penance, and solidarity. This will indeed involve restitution, “giving back” or redistributing resources, but the goal of such redistribution will not be the establishment of a status quo ante—which is impossible, in any case—but the reconciliation of oppressor and oppressed, the constitution of a reconciled community; the focus is not on the “what” of restitution but on the “who.” Justice is ultimately not a question of protecting rights but of nurturing communion.9

The Crucified People and the Ecclesia Crucis

The preferential option for the poor is nothing other than the assertion that the crucified people of history are the privileged mediators of God’s mercy in the Church and the world.10 It is a mercy that judges and convicts even as it makes reconciliation possible. Yet, in so embodying that mercy, the crucified people embody the good news that “there is another way to live.”11

As mediators of the crucified and risen Christ not only in the world, but also in the Church, the crucified people also remind us that suffering is one of the marks of the Church. Indeed, it may be time to emphasize again the biblical notion of the ecclesia crucis (so central for St. Paul and Luther):

No other single ecclesiological theme receives the attention that the suffering of the church receives in our textual sources. For centuries theology has maintained that the true marks of the church are the four that are named in the Nicene Creed: “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”...Each of these notae ecclesia can find some biblical basis, but none of them can claim a fraction of the attention paid to the theme of the church’s suffering in these sacred writings. The earliest and most prominent manner of discerning the true church and distinguishing it from false claims to Christian identity was to observe the nature and extent of the suffering experienced by a
community of faith. Why? Because, of course, as Paul makes clear...if you claim to be a disciple of the crucified one you must expect to participate in his sufferings;...you will have to become a community of the cross.12

To the extent, therefore, that the crucified people reveal the Church as a crucified Church, they mediate Christ’s own mercy in the world and in the Church. “Now this has consequences!” observes British Catholic theologian James Alison. “It means that holiness is our dependence on the forgiveness of the victim. That is to say, our being holy is dependent on the resurrection of the forgiving victim.”13 The preferential option for the poor, for the victims, is thus always a preferential option for all, since we are all dependent on the victims’ forgiveness if we are to live freely in a reconciled community where there is no need for victims; this is what Christ himself offered his disciples as he appeared to them after his resurrection. This indeed is what the risen Jesus offers his estranged apostles when he greets them: “Peace be with you.” The ecclesia is thus at its heart an ecclesia crucis precisely insofar as it is the community constituted by the forgiving victim.

Both outside and within the Church, the crucified people are the privileged locus for encountering today the extravagant, unexpected mercy of the wounded and resurrected Lord. Theirs is a prophetic voice that challenges our theological and ethical presuppositions as surely as Jesus’ own theological assumptions had been challenged on Calvary: “My God, my God, why...?”—and as surely as the apostles’ assumptions had been challenged by the risen, wounded Jesus: “Peace be with you.” In so mediating God’s mercy, the victims remind us that, precisely as the wounded and resurrected Body of Christ in the world, the Church herself is called to a cruciform existence in history. This is true not because the cross is the goal of Christian discipleship but precisely because it isn’t. Precisely because Christian discipleship is ultimately not about death but about life, not about justice but about mercy, not about respecting rights but about restoring communion, not about denying the reality of human suffering but about engaging it head on—precisely because all this is true—we also know that all resurrections are wounded resurrections. All resurrections participate in and are made possible by Christ’s own wounded resurrection:

“For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord...But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God, and not to us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:5-11).

The crucified people make their preemptive offer of forgiveness “so that the life of Jesus,” the crucified and risen Jesus, may be manifested in our oh-so-broken world. By taking the victims down from the cross we become capable of receiving their offer of forgiveness and Christ’s own offer of life.

Adapted from a lecture delivered at the Catholic Common Ground Initiative on June 24, 2006 at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.

Notes
1 Boston Globe, April 14, 2006.
2 Ibid., April 15, 2006.
3 For a more extended treatment of this analysis of the Resurrection, see my “The Crucified and Risen Christ: From Calvary to Galilee,” Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Vol. 60, pp. 57-71, an abridged version of which was also published in the April 17, 2006, issue of America magazine.
6 Ibid. 96.
7 Ibid. 89-90.
8 Daniel M. Bell, Jr., Liberation Theology After the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering (London: Routledge, 2001), 174.
9 Ibid. 182-183, 188.
10 Ibid. 168.
11 José Ellacuría quoted in ibid. p 171.
13 James Alison, Knowing Jesus (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1994), 81.

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Do you feel that a conference focusing on the history and future of the prophetic tradition is especially necessary now?

It’s probably more consciously necessary now than at any other immediate past period in U.S. history, except, maybe, during the Vietnam era. At the same time, this ought to be a constant in every society because speaking truth to power is the charism of the Christian. It is also the charism of the prophet. We each have a responsibility, in other words, to search for the truth and to say it. Otherwise, never mind the church, there cannot even be a democracy.

So this conference is meant to be relevant to people not only in relationship to their faith communities but also as citizens of their respective nations.

Definitely. This isn’t just a religious concept.

Because that was the aim of the biblical prophet. We’re speaking to the historical situation and not just to in-house religious issues. The prophets of the Bible made the link between the two. Their focus was on the whole of society and the whole of life. That was their brilliance—that they saw the big picture, so many of their conversations were with kings and governmental figures. They knew that both “church” and state had to reflect the divine compassion and the divine justice.

That’s key to the whole question of the prophetic voice in any society. It comes out of the experience and history of the time. When you look at the situation you’re in, prophets are not people who sit around theologizing out of some kind of airy-fairy transcendent overview of somebody else’s idea of what the world is. These are people who, out of immersion in the mind of God, speak about what the society is now and what the society should be. The prophetic movement in any society looks, first of all, at what is the Word of God for humanity. And then uses that as a measure for the way humanity itself is acting at this moment.

There was a time in this country’s history, not very long ago, when the voices of prophets such as Martin Luther King, Jr., William Sloane Coffin, Jr., and Rosa Parks rose up and were heard. The inner workings of many Christian churches were also in a concurrent movement toward transformation, openness, and unprecedented dialogue. Now, both our civil society and our church seem to be in a state of complacency. Do you have any sense as to what has led us to this current state? Have we lost our communal concern and desire for solidarity and become too individualistic?

Well, I think that the way to control a people is not through poverty, but through affluence. When people are concentrating on their own economic development, they can lose sight of the
people who have none at all. There is a flip side to that. There is another way to control a society and that is to see that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer at the same time. Why? Because the masses, the people out of whom the revolutionary voice of any ilk, political or theological, is usually spoken, are the people at the bottom. But if the people at the bottom are struggling for survival and can just about make it, if they have enough bread, but just enough bread, they keep working to get more. Now, what is every economist in the country telling us? The poor have gotten so poor, they know how to be poor, even if it means following the garbage cans of the world to the next meal. We’re losing the middle class. And the middle class is really, interestingly enough, the voice in most societies—the intellectuals, actually. Intellectuals don’t make big money, you know. They are the filter through which we see the social order. But they themselves are beginning to hang on—the professors who are living under the threat of declining populations in the colleges—they’re hanging on, too. So part of this is a survival problem, part of it is an intimidation problem, part of it is the problem of affluence and greed. Why is it so different now than then? Because at this time, we are losing this central part of the population—the largest part of the population—to a new kind of survival.

ROHR I’d like to build on that and point out a parallel within the church. The more the hierarchy reasserts its centralized dominance in everything, the more I am finding that many people in the Catholic Church today are passive dependent, and very often passive aggressive. I think that could be proven statistically. Let me give you an example: While doing a hermitage this Lent, I thought I would go to the local parish Mass. We were reminded about seven times during the homily what sinners we were, how unworthy we were. All these educated people in this upper-class parish, largely professionals or retired, just sat there, numbly taking this, largely poker faced. Right at the end, he reminded them, of course, that he would be hearing confessions and take care of their sinfulness. Consciously or unconsciously he built a dependency system on himself and taught them helplessness. He did not empower us as Christians. I wanted to walk out, but I didn’t. This is why it is good for priests to be out in the pews with some regularity. Now there’s a certain number of Catholics, as you know, who always walk out after communion. But in that particular church, I would say almost half the church walked directly from the communion rail out the back door of the church. So you see what you have. These people are just cooperating as little as they can, in case the whole thing is true, and then they disconnect. That’s the kind of passive aggressiveness I think we’re going to see more and more in our Catholic Church if people are not respected as temples of the Holy Spirit.

CHITTISTER But, Richard, I think you have pointed to a part of the population you didn’t define. There are a lot of people in our churches now who are very sacramental people. They want the sacraments. They want the tradition at the center of their lives. They are really embedded in the Jesus story and they want their children to have some idea of communal and institutional worship, and they edit every single thing it does. They sit, they stare. They’re not even listening, and they didn’t stay for confession. There is a dimension of people in the churches today who are also thinking Catholics as well as non-thinking Catholics. The thinking Catholics, when they hear something like that, are often inclined to walk out, certainly right after communion. Or let’s put it this way: if not right after communion, definitely past the confessional box. Because they’ve got it. They can’t articulate it but they feel it.

ROHR That’s a more positive interpretation and I think it’s often true. I hope it is.

CHITTISTER Well, I’ll bet if we went over here and did a survey of these 1,300 people who are attending this conference, I’ll bet you’ll find out that two-thirds to three-fourths of them are in those very parishes, and they are sacramental people. But they are no longer easily intimidated or easily bounded. And that’s where the frustration is lying—between the institution and the people in the pews. They’re going to church but they, themselves, are in some sort of intellectual transition about what this church is teaching and how it affects them. It’s a fascinating question because I see just as many people as Richard does who do not question at all.

ROHR I think they shut down large parts of themselves to do that. They pay a big price for it. And they’re willing to do that—to shut down large parts of themselves.

CHITTISTER There is something psychological here as well as religious because we’re getting exactly the same attitude where the state is concerned. It’s exactly the same thing. It is, somehow or other, the kind of dependency that is looking for direction. Not leadership, but direction. “Tell me where to go because I don’t know.” Our constitution is being shredded a line at a time. Half of this country does not care, doesn’t even notice, will go so far as to say, “We have to do this in a time of war.” Now, I don’t
know who you think declared this war. But I can tell you, as somebody who circles this globe regularly, there is a world out there that does not see us as its freedom fighters.

REFLECTIONS Do you think part of the reason people shut down, even in the most liberal circles, is because through whatever privileges they’ve received they have lost touch with the oppression and injustice that continue to victimize women, non-white people, non-heterosexual people.

CHITTISTER That’s right. If the women in this country would use their privilege on behalf of the four-fifths of the women on this globe who are beaten, oppressed, invisible, destroyed, then I would be happy to hear those women say, “I’m not oppressed.” But as it is, I’m not at all impressed with them. Because as long as they’re all right, it doesn’t make any difference who isn’t. They do not use their privilege for prophetic truth. This also applies to us as citizens of this very wealthy, privileged country. We live on the largest ice cube on the globe and it’s melting and we don’t know it. We think this is the world. We’re living in a plastic bubble and we think we’re fully alive, fully human, fully adult, fully intelligent. It’s shattering. I have talked to high school kids in Ireland who know more about the world situation than I can discuss with too many Americans that I’ve met.

ROHR Another reason that I think there’s been a tightening up is the whole phenomenon of postmodernism. I have dated, based on other people’s scholarship, that 1968 is an artificial date for when we moved from modernism to postmodernism. I do find that people formed after that period are looking desperately for stability, order, certitude, clarity, authority, and absolutes. I was ordained in 1970 and I had the arrogant assumption that all priests ordained after me would certainly think like I did. And now I can hardly relate to a lot of young priests. I realize that they were formed in this postmodern flux. A lot of them grew up in single-parent families and want an authoritarian daddy to tell them what to do. The whole relationship of men to their father figures, their need for father figures, is something we are studying in our men’s work. If young men don’t have them, they demand them. I believe this has impacted so many young priests, many who have come from unstable family lives. They even call themselves “John Paul II priests,” and often Jesus is hardly mentioned. The Pope became their securing and validating daddy figure. What we have today is much more “Churchianity” than any strong concern for Gospel or Scriptural Christianity. So I think that’s one reason why we’re seeing the contemporary need for these kinds of conferences. We are in a postmodern demand, a “blessed rage for order,” as David Tracy rightly says. There is a demand for order, even if it’s not a truthful order. And that’s where it gets frightening. We would sooner have “satisfying untruth” than great truth, which is always somehow unsatisfying. That’s what happens when the small ego takes over.

CHITTISTER And that demand for order is happening because there are massive social changes going on. I would argue that this is probably the greatest period of social change in the history of the globe, and certainly in the history of the Western world since the thirteenth or the sixteenth century. Why? Because every single institution is in flux: marriage, churches, economic systems, cities, the whole notion of government. Every single item in the human context is changing and, at the bottom of it all, a new science and a new globalization, and a new notion of what it is to be a human being, a nation, a body. When you have that kind of ferment and foment and simmering everywhere, whether people want to admit it or not, there are some people that simply are looking for the cave. It’s too much to take psychologically. So you have what I call the retreat to commitment. So we’re in a phenomenal period of stress and counter-stress, change and unchanged, commitment and new commitment. This is a stew and we’re all working our way through it. The fear is that these things don’t just happen unless voices call for them and make them happen. So you see now, what you’re in is you’re looking for the synthesis of two voices—in church and in society. The past, the present, and the future are in all those voices. The fear of losing the tradition is a genuine fear and ought to be honored. The fear of losing it by failing to develop it is a fear that must be honored. Out of that must come the synthesis. But it won’t come if people abandon the questions. You’ve got to raise the questions.

REFLECTIONS How do we begin to empower people on a practical level? How do we let people know what the questions are?

CHITTISTER You’ve put your finger on what, for me, is the answer. The attempt right now is to silence the questions. “You may not discuss, you may not think, you may not do.” Also, if we can suppress the questions, we’ll have the time, we hope, to build up a young generation in the old answers. The way you empower is to refuse to be silent. If you’re silent now, if you fail to articulate the real questions now, it will take another fifty years just to legitimate the questions again.
**Reflections** And by that time, it’s going to be way too late for both civil society and the church.

**Rohr** It almost feels like the great Catholic tradition that formed us is becoming parochial, that it’s not “catholic” at all. It’s so tiny and defensive and afraid, and not even very tied to honest historical scholarship. This great tradition of wisdom and love, started by Jesus, is simply invalidating people who do not say it our way. And yet, ironically, Jesus consistently exemplified and taught two things: forgiveness and inclusivity. There is hardly a gospel narrative that does not teach one or the other, or both. I mean, what kind of a universe is this, if we can just silence the opposition? Even scientists do not do that, they just do more research. The irony is, as we both know, we’re simply going to create more opposition, a much deeper, more angry, more alienated, and more irrational opposition. In fact, much of the irrational dismissal of the church that I find among the alienated is a dismissal and a pattern that they first learned from us! It comes back to haunt us.

**Reflections** Richard has written that prophets live in a “liminal space.” That is, they live inside an institution, but on the very edge of it. By being in that space, the prophet doesn’t critique or throw stones from the outside, but neither does he or she remain complacent or safe on the inside. I wonder if nowadays, in our therapeutic culture, that’s simply too stressful? Have we become too concerned with ourselves and our own personal health and well-being to take risks for the sake of the community?

**Chittister** It’s not all the fault of the individual. Why are people as self-centered as they are about those things? It’s because there are no safety nets being built into the system and the society anymore that they can count on. I mean, they’re telling the older generation, “Get over it. This is the last time you’ll see Social Security.” They’re telling young people, “You’re going to have to take care of yourself.” Once you take away peoples’ support system, they’re into that survival mode that I was talking about a few minutes ago. It doesn’t look like survival because these are all good-looking people, driving big cars and living on tree-lined streets in nice houses. But they’re scared, absolutely.

**Rohr** So you’re pointing out that people are fleeing to individualism because there are not that many institutions that can be trusted.

**Chittister** They’re being forced into individualism. It’s everybody on her own now because this government is not going to help. It won’t help you when your children are sick. It won’t help you when you’re close to death. It’s not going to help you when you can’t earn any more.

**Reflections** So in order to do the kind of prophetic work that you both are writing about, one really has to have a sense of hope.

**Rohr** If you don’t come from a core of hope, I don’t think you can be a prophet. If you’re just oppositional and negative, you’re no prophet. The core of hope, the absolute centrality of the inner-God experience, is crucial to true prophesy. And you can tell in a person whether her inner core is positive, hopeful, and believing, or cynical, sarcastic, and dead. Some in the hierarchy write us off. They think we’re cynics. In fact, we’re radical believers, deep believers. That’s what gives any of us the true authority to speak.

**Reflections** And that is completely grounded in our biblical tradition. I hear many Christians say, “I don’t read the Hebrew Bible. That God is so angry. I can’t deal with that God.” And I always respond, “No, that’s the God who’s profoundly wounded. That’s not an angry God. That’s a God we can relate to in ways that we cannot relate to the God of the Christian Scriptures.”

**Chittister** The God of despair, the God of frustration, the God of great vision. That God is the God that leads to Jesus. It’s also the story of a people who are in exactly the same situation we’re in right now, and learning new things about God and life, little by little.

**Reflections** So there over 1,300 people waiting to hear you speak about the prophetic voice, and they are not looking simply for a spiritual high. How can these people living in individual communities inspire prophetic ways of being in the church and in society?

**Rohr** What I always encourage people to do, because they don’t feel they have power over the big system, is find one area where they’re gifted, one concrete, particular—the “scandal of the particular,” as Walter Brueggemann says, and begin there.

**Chittister** We must train people to ask one question: About what are you most concerned? About which of these great global questions are you most concerned? And then join a group who shares your concern and move the globe with them. Is it global warming? Is it the ozone layer? Is it the women’s issue? Is it war? Where does your heart bleed? Over what does your soul weep? Identify that. Find the group, because they’re out there. Find the group that has committed their lives to burrowing through that issue and join them.
ROHR That’s where your gift is.
CHITTISTER Find what your gift is and link it with other people, because that is the answer to the despair of individualism.
ROHR The largest percentage of the prophets served as prophets for one event or one era or one king. It wasn’t like they wore the shingle “Prophet” from birth until death. They were called to operate as a truth speaker in a particular situation. Most of them were short-term prophets—for an event, for a period—which, I think, gives people a lot of hope that we can be prophets, too. As Moses says in the Book of Numbers, “Would that all the people of God were prophets!” (11:28). There is always one area where we are gifted to see and speak clearly.
REFLECTIONS Would you say that the particular situation that Jesus addressed was the frequently oppressive and corrupt nature of religious authority operating during his time?
ROHR Absolutely. That is so obviously the case. I offered a talk at a conference a few years back where I took Matthew’s gospel and pointed out how, just in that one gospel, there are so many scenes of hostility between Jesus and the religious authorities. It takes up nearly the entire gospel. I wonder how we made out of these Jesus narratives a religion that is so not self-critical? It’s phenomenal to me.
REFLECTIONS It seems to me that Jesus was arguing with the rigidly conservative and judgmental Catholics and Protestants of the time. And yet, today, conservative believers use Jesus to defend themselves.
ROHR When we imitate Jesus that way, we’re called rebellious, disloyal, disobedient, unorthodox. I think Joan and I have paid our dues to orthodoxy. I can defend the orthodox tradition because it is the only thing that gives me the courage to talk this way. I was educated in the tradition and I know the tradition. The prophets were radical traditionalists. When many people speak about tradition today, they talk about something out of the 1950s.
CHITTISTER That’s maintaining the past, not the tradition. The tradition is alive and dynamic. Someone wrote once, “The only difference between an optimist and a conservative is that there are those who believe that foolishness frozen in time is better than foolishness fresh off the vine.” I do think that it’s probably part of the reason that people who are not asking the questions, finding their gifts, and bonding with others feel so overwhelmed that they prefer to disappear behind it. I have a friend who told me that, among her circle of women, one of them—a very privileged and wealthy woman—said that she could not talk about the women’s issue any longer because, if she did, something in her life would have to change. So the only way out of it is to close the door in your mind.
REFLECTIONS So in order to have prophetic vision, one must first go through some form of metanoia, a radical change of heart and vision?
CHITTISTER Absolutely. Once you see, you cannot not see.
ROHR The notion of transformation was part of the breakthrough that led me into working with men’s spirituality. It is in the male psyche to be heroic, to operate on some level of what he thinks is greatness. It’s usually associated with power, money, control, and dominance. And yet what you find across religious boundaries—not just Christianity alone, but explicitly in Jesus’ teaching—is that in every initiation rite there is a “language of descent.” The Christian phrase was “the way of the cross.” Males have to be carefully taught a wisdom path, and much of that centers on their learning how to critique their own power. Males believe that they are physically more powerful than women. Yet Jesus taught us that those positioned at the top are, in fact, the most trapped. Grief work was a part of every initiation rite because by becoming capable of empathy for suffering a young boy was able to shatter his narcissism. In Kenya, a group of male African lawyers took me on a tour of what they called “The Caves of Grief.” These were stalwart guys. They were dressed in their traditional robes. And they said, “Here, we had to learn to cry.” There is a brilliant recognition that males are often trapped at the top. Tears do not come easily to the typical male because such a large part of him has been closed down by always “ascending” into illusion.
CHITTISTER I really take that as one of the signs of hope in our society. In my lifetime, I have watched men be able to cry. You have no idea how that touches me. That says to me that a man has two choices. He can choose to tell the truth and be a human being or he can choose to lie about his invulnerability and become an animal.
REFLECTIONS So vulnerability, that openness to be wounded, is also essential to being a prophet?
CHITTISTER You can’t understand oppression until you have identified your own. How do you know what it feels like to be abandoned, to be poor and not be able to take care of your children, until you have stopped bullying your way through every in-
stition on earth? Who stands in line if they have money and power? So many women religious give up the habit because we knew it was absolutely essential to our ability to identify with the very society we said we wanted to serve. Too much privilege came with the habit: every door opened and every restaurant had a table.

ROHR In male initiation rites the wounding of the initiate was universal. A boy was always symbolically wounded because it taught him, at least symbolically, the necessity of vulnerability, patience, and healing. The great traditions say that it is in suffering that you understand, and you don’t understand any other way. In fact, the Africans told me that it was precisely during the healing of their circumcision that wisdom was taught to them. Finally, they were in a teachable space. It is the same for history and for institutions.

CHITTISTER I have the sneaking suspicion that it has something to do with the male attraction to war. In war they can be wounded and be heroic in their wounds. There, they can cry for another human being and be considered masculine. They keep the power, hide the wound, make it heroic, and, somehow or other, have the community that goes along with all that.

REFLECTIONS It’s fascinating because Jesus was quite the opposite. He was the wounded one. The crucifixion, it seems to me, is the ultimate act of vulnerability. Prophets take similar risk. They speak out of a passionate love of their communities, and paradoxically is it exactly that love that puts them at risk of being hurt by their very own communities. Which is why I suppose, Jesus says, that the prophet has nowhere to lay her or his head.

ROHR The vulnerable position, identification with the crucified Christ, and crucified people will never be a popular position on either Left or Right. The Left is into its heady and rational idealism and the Right into its moral separateness and superiority. These are just different ways we create an identity for ourselves. Neither is the naked position of the Gospel, where “I live no longer with my own life” (Galatians 2:20). In that place, as Jesus warned, “the whole world will hate you” (John 15:19). One wonders why anyone would choose or want to be a prophet.
In the beginning, as life became form,
The oceans heaved, the mountains were cleaved,
The firmament stormed.
At the center of being, immensely small
Was the master of now, don’t ask me how
The Love of it all

And the seasons were many.
Creation was new.
And there on a tree (deceptively free)
A forbidden fruit
Upon leaving the garden, after the fall,
One thing was clear; we chose not to hear
The Love of it all

But for the Love of it all
I would go anywhere.
To the ends of the earth,
What is it worth if Love would be there?
Walking the thin line between fear and the call
One learns to bend and finally depend
On the Love of it all.

“Irresistible targets”
I heard someone say.
They were speaking of angels
Who are so courageous day after day
Gunned down on a highway (as we often recall)
I hear a scream; I have a dream
The Love of it all

Still the world is in labor,
She groans in travail.
She cries with the eagle, the dolphin,
She sighs in the song of the whale.
While the heart of her people
Prays at the wall.
A spirit inside is preparing a bride
For the Love of it all

For the Love of it all,
Like the stars and the sun,
We are hearts on the rise,
Separate eyes with the vision of one.
No valley too deep, no mountain too tall,
We can turn back the night with merely the light
From the Love of it all.

And so we are marching to ‘give peace a chance’
Brother and sister as one in this mystery dance.
Long ago on a hilltop where now the curious crawl
A man on a cross paid the ultimate cost
For the Love of it all

For the Love of it all
We are gathered by grace
We have followed our hearts
To take up our parts
In this time and place.
Hands for the harvest,
Hear the centuries call:
It is still not too late to come celebrate
The Love of it all
“Eli, eli, lemana shabakthani”
The Love of it all.

Noel Paul Stookey
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From the Editor

It is with both joy and sorrow that I complete this most current issue of Reflections. It is a joy to present a topic urgently needed and long ignored or overlooked by progressive Christian communities. The sorrow comes in its dedication to the memory of Bill Coffin’56BD, whose passing leaves a dark space in a world more than ever in need of illumination.

Since we at Yale Divinity School hosted a major event in honor of Bill in April of 2005, it was our intention to publish an issue of Reflections on the future of the prophetic voice and dedicate it to him. The creation of this issue began months before Bill’s passing during Holy Week in 2006. In the wake of his death, the urgency of the topic only mounted as war and violence continued to intensify throughout our world, estrangement and isolation grew between nations and individuals, and voices of religious extremists continued to drown out voices of compassion, dialogue, and peace.

To be true to Bill’s spirit, we believed it was important not to produce a collection of tributes to him, but to create a magazine that deals with the critical issues surrounding the biblical legacy, recent history, and current imperative of a prophet’s speaking truth to power. Interwoven throughout this issue are eulogies that were offered about Bill at his memorial service at Riverside Church in New York City where he served as pastor from 1977-1987 after seventeen years as chaplain of Yale University.

I am grateful to Bill Moyers, Marian Wright Edelman, and James Carroll, each one a prophetic voice in his or her own right, for their immediate willingness to contribute their own memorials to this issue. I am also thankful to the Reverend Samuel Slie, Bill’s long time friend and colleague, for contributing several of his legendary prayers offered at Battell Chapel during Bill’s tenure. Though these words were prayed nearly four decades ago, they remain hauntingly relevant to our current situation. Noel Paul Stookey, of the renowned folk group Peter, Paul, and Mary, graciously offered his poetic lyrics to enrich this issue.

I am indebted also to Bill’s widow, Randy Coffin, as well as David Coffin and Eva Rubinstein for their generosity of spirit, time, and support in guiding me through the selection of artwork. For some viewing this edition of Reflections, the artwork may seem contrary to Bill’s noted jovial and good-humored disposition. The photography illustrating this issue is the work of Ms. Rubinstein, a prominent artist and Bill’s first wife. When I first viewed her photography, I was struck by the ways in which the moods and tones of the photos resonate symbolically with the theme of prophecy. As many of the articles contained in this magazine attest, a prophet’s life is often spent on the edge of a community, and therefore is often deeply challenging, lonely, and isolated. In these melancholic spaces, the prophet continually attunes her or his vision to witness more deeply the living presence of God in all who cry out for love and justice. Prophets find the courage to enter into the most fractured and marginalized places in reality, and thereby become the hopeful beams of light that break into dark, empty spaces. No wonder Christians throughout history have avoided or abandoned their biblical mandate to be prophets in their religious and civil circles!

There is only one photo featured in this issue that was not taken by Ms. Rubinstein, the image of Bill of the back cover of the issue taken in July 2004 by Gabe Cooney. I was with Gabe on the trip to Bill’s home in Strafford, Vermont, for the photo shoot. Bill allowed only nine frames to be taken of him, and insisted on spending the rest of our visit in the kitchen for lemonade and bantering. Those hours I spent with him seemed somehow out of space and time—an experience that undoubtedly has been shared by many who have been graced with such an opportunity. Though we spent little time talking about me, Bill’s spirit was such I came away from our meeting with greater insight into myself and my own vocation, and more painfully and profoundly aware of the call of my own prophetic spirit. Some of our readers are aware that last year, I left my full time post as director of pub-
O God, who hast manifested thyself in lives of men and women who have honestly lived and died, give us today some deep measure of insight and of understanding. As we participate in the perspectives of this hour of worship, help us to gain a new vision of the hurrying events of our crowded days. Free us from pettiness and foolishness, give us the wisdom to discern the deeper issues of our time, and give us the power to meet the obligations they place upon us.

We are grateful, O God, for home, family and friends, for our studies and work, for the green world, blue skies and pure air thou hast given us despite our poor stewardship of these gifts. We thank thee for all the beauty that we may see and feel and touch and know; and the skill and the science to put it all to meaningful use. We thank thee for high thoughts, happy days, after feeling and hope of peace, and a faith that looks through gloomy days toward a larger life.

Help us, O God, to use our education and our faith to achieve a commitment about life, upon which we may act; bring us out from behind our words to responsible action, bring us out from behind our rhetoric to truth.

Help us to express our prayers in action O God. Make our humble-honest-real actions be a form of prayer in the midst of our increasingly polarized community. Help us to reach the hearts of persons for whom justice is a club and those for whom it is a ploy and a scapegoat. Help us to reach the hearts of those who have never learned to love, and those who have stopped loving.

Lord God Almighty, purge our land, we beseech thee, from the secret power and the open shame of great national sins. From dishonesty and corruption, from cruelty and violence, from vainglory and Towers of Babel, from covetousness and impurity, from stupidity, intolerance and intemperance which give birth to many crimes and sorrows -- purge us and deliver us, our children, and our children’s children into a land and a time blessed with the truth of thy love - through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Reverend Samuel Slie

Battell Chapel

Jamie L. Manson
Editor