

WHAT LANGUAGE CAN I BORROW?
THEOPOETIC RENEWAL IN PASTORAL THEOLOGY

Phil C. Zylla
McMaster Divinity College¹

The gospel is the “good news” of Jesus Christ. We are called to proclaim and to live the message of the reign of God. This calling is a profound challenge to the postmodern world. We find ourselves overwhelmed by the enormous obstacles of language. Attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux, the hymn, *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*, declares the mystery of languaging the gospel:

What language can I borrow to thank Thee dearest Friend;
For this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?²

Pastoral theology has always attempted to bridge the complex world of experience with the deepest roots of the gospel. As experiences increase in complexity and depth the facility of language loses its capacity to express the hope of the gospel in relationship to the reality that we perceive and into which we attempt to live. Ministers and church leaders are constantly re-framing the ways in which they understand the situations that are unfolding in their midst. Common experiences of perplexity, anguish, difficulty, distress, and tumultuous change make the context of ministry an ever-changing and most complicated reality.

1. This article is the text of Dr. Zylla’s address on the occasion of his being inducted as the Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at McMaster Divinity College on November 7, 2007.

2. This version of the text is by Paul Gerhard, based on a medieval Latin poem ascribed to Bernard of Clairvaux, translated from the German by James W. Alexander, in Fettke, *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, 178.

In his 1993 book, *The Poet's Gift*, pastoral theologian Donald Capps proposed that we consider poetry as a source of vision and inspiration for the pastoral task and as a source of renewal for the field of pastoral theology itself. Capps identified in the parabolic speaking of Jesus a form that is "experience-near," that speaks of human experience in the concrete, that searches carefully for just the right word, and that passionately probes "what is occurring beneath the surface." The pastor and the poet, in Capps's view, have much in common. Both have a common passion for understanding the complex reality of concrete experience; both exhibit a deep care for words; both seek to ground reflection on actual situations; both seek to understand or pursue wisdom; both seek to write about anomalies, tragedies, and the unexpected blessings of life with thoughtfulness, passion, and deep emotion. Capps concludes that the poet and the pastor share what Denise Levertov refers to as "the intense perception of the immediate." He further notes the impulse of William Stafford, who claims that in his poetry he is "driven to uttering things that must seem quite tame to other people."³

The need to "widen the horizons" of pastoral theology has been of considerable interest to the discipline as we explore the new terrain of an expanded, intercultural approach. However, there are aspects of the pastoral theological task that require a more restrained vision and deeper reflection. Capps asks the probing question: "Are we not being rather presumptuous in these efforts to widen our horizons when we have been unable to hear the voices in our very own midst? . . . We must truly learn to listen to one another in a language that excels itself to be itself."⁴

In my own journey as a pastoral theologian, all of this made me wonder if perhaps Capps's own proposal was not radical enough. According to Simone Weil, the function of language "is to express the relationship between things."⁵ If we are to speak meaningfully of the deeper experiences of God in our lives and

3. Capps, *Poet's Gift*, 160.

4. Capps, *Poet's Gift*, 143.

5. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 3.

in the lives of our congregations, we need to pay careful attention to how language may express the depth dimension of our searching. Poetic language moves to the depth dimension.

The Brazilian theologian Rubem Alves reminds us that “Poetry is the language of what it is not possible to say.”⁶

There are words which grow out of ten thousand things and words which grow out of other words: endless . . . But there is a Word which emerges out of silence, the Word which is the beginning of the World. This Word cannot be produced. It is neither a child of our hands or of our thoughts. We have to wait in silence, till it makes itself heard: Advent . . . Grace.⁷

How do we find the language to meet both the sublime and the difficult dimensions of life’s great movements? It seems to me that the theo poetic renewal of pastoral theology would imply at least three foundational tasks:

1. To establish contact again with the complex and concrete world of human experience, or what William James called “primary reality.”
2. To ground pastoral response and pastoral reflection in concrete realities not general abstractions.
3. To move into the mystery of God’s reconciling action in the world as co-participants in the *missio Dei*.

In reflecting on the events of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel exposes the restrictions of language. He declares,

I must bear witness. I also knew that, while I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language.⁸

The theo poetic is the imaginative centerpoint of pastoral theology. I would share the conviction of John Patton who states, “It is my belief that the cultivation of the imagination has not been given sufficient attention in pastoral theology.”⁹ Yet the

6. Alves, *The Poet*, 96.

7. Alves, *The Poet*, 3.

8. Wiesel, *Night*, viii, ix.

9. Patton, *From Ministry to Theology*, 23.

contours of this imaginative participation in the realities of life require understanding. What would the theopoetic movements look like that would facilitate the future of pastoral theology as a discipline?

Three Movements of Theopoetic Pastoral Theology

“What language can I borrow” to say what I see, to name the mystery, to open up the depths, to illumine the way forward? How is it possible for us to weigh the world in which we live? Allow me to attempt to “sensitively articulate” three core movements in the symphony that I am convinced can become the basis for the renewal of pastoral theology in our day.

The First Movement of the Theopoetic: Numinous Silence as our Orientation

At the root of everything there is God. At the foundation of every event, at the source of every movement, at the center of all existence—God. “In him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). The ontological center of our existence, of our worldviews, of our churches, and of our very lives, is God. The deepest strivings of our hearts end in God’s presence. The deepest longings of our souls require God’s touch. The center of all that we ask or imagine is found in God. *Numinous* is the word we use for this unspoken longing. It beckons us to recognize that the deepest search we carry out as human beings is our search for communion with God. Mystery is the basis for our fundamental orientation in theopoetic pastoral theology.

Mystics and poets have known that silence is our original home . . .
There is a Word which can be heard only when all words have become dumb, an eschatological Word which makes itself heard at the end of the world. Pure grace, no encaged bird, a wild bird which flies with the Wind.¹⁰

When we use the idea of mystery in reference to the spiritual life this can seem to indicate that we can know nothing about the

10. Alves, *The Poet*, 25.

spiritual life. On the contrary, we need to be reminded, as John Westerhoff indicates, that “the imagination is foundational to the spiritual life.”¹¹ Here is how he describes this tension:

[W]e do need to rediscover that mystery is not something about which we can know nothing but that about which we cannot know everything. We need to shift our perception about the God who is total mystery, the one who is majestic and unknowable, to the God who is a loving parent and friend. We need to turn from abstract theological concepts about God to narrative, poetry and song. We need a new awareness of the visual, the artistic, imaginative, associative, and relational activities of the mind.¹²

This is the art of discernment—a word that means “sifting through.” The field of pastoral theology has gravitated to embrace the mystery of the encounter with God’s presence as a core feature of the field. Edward P. Wimberley expresses the conviction that “the central task of the pastoral counselor is to focus attention on discerning where and how God is at work in the lives of those who have come for help.”¹³ Likewise, Wayne Oates, one of the pioneers in the field of pastoral care, articulates discernment and wisdom as a central focus of the pastor’s work. He states, “I [have] concentrated on the pastor’s participation in the wisdom or counsel of God in the exercise of the gift of discernment. The pastor is *tebunah*, a person of understanding (Prov 25:4).”¹⁴ Pastoral theology, especially in the most recent decade, has looked to the wisdom tradition of the Bible to enable what Donald Capps calls “the capacity to discern the relationships between and within the various spheres of life, thus disclosing the all-embracing order of things.”¹⁵

But along with discernment there is also waiting—the posture of entering into the mystery of the situation without all the answers: waiting for the Spirit of God to move over the deep;

11. Westerhoff, *Spiritual Life*, 21.

12. Westerhoff, *Spiritual Life*, 21.

13. Wimberley, *Prayer*, 60.

14. Oates, *Presence of God*, 33.

15. Capps, *Poet’s Gift*, 148.

waiting for the illuminating work of the Spirit to come to our chaos, our sorrows, and our hidden searching.

The discernment and the waiting lead us to the posture of prayer, which Simone Weil calls “absolute, unmixed attention.”¹⁶ Prayer is at the heart of pastoral theology. In a sermon in 1933, Leslie D. Weatherhead called for what he termed “sharing the burden of God.” This implies, said Weatherhead, “some conception of entering into the fellowship of His sufferings.”¹⁷ Hope is the fundamental disposition of the one who searches for God. In our deepest heart of hearts, there is a longing, a desire, to know the hidden God.

At the root of pastoral theology is the embrace of mystery. Fredrick Buechner captures something of the unknown dimensions of the spiritual sojourn in this brief account of his conversion:

At twenty-seven, living alone in New York, trying with no success to start a novel and in love with a girl who was not in love with me, I went to hear a famous preacher preach one morning, although I had no idea at the time that he was famous and went only on impulse—I was not a churchgoer—because his church was next door. It was around that time that Elizabeth II was crowned at Westminster Abbey, and the preacher played variations on the theme of coronation. All I remember of what he said is the very last, and that not well, just one phrase of it, in fact, that I’m sure of. He said that Jesus Christ refused a crown when Satan offered it in the wilderness, or something like that. He said that the kingdom of Jesus was not of this world. And yet again and again, he said, Jesus was crowned in the hearts of those who believed in him, crowned king. I remembered thinking that was a nice enough image, as images in sermons go, and I remember how the preacher looked up there in the pulpit twitching around a good deal, it seemed to me, and plucking at the lapels of his black gown. And then he went on just a few sentences more.

He said that unlike Elizabeth’s coronation in the Abbey, this coronation of Jesus in the believer’s heart took place among confession—and I thought, yes, yes, confession—and tears, he said—and I thought tears, yes, perfectly plausible that the coronation of Jesus in

16. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 3.

17. Weatherhead, *Discipleship*, 141.

the believing heart should take place among confession and tears. And then with his head bobbing up and down so that his glasses glittered he said in his odd, sandy voice, the voice of an old nurse, that the coronation of Jesus took place among confession and tears and then, as God was and is my witness, great laughter, he said. Jesus is crowned among confession and tears and great laughter, and at the phrase great laughter, for reasons that I have never satisfactorily understood, the great wall of China crumbled and Atlantis rose up out of the sea, and on Madison Avenue, at 73rd Street, tears leapt from my eyes as though I had been struck across the face.¹⁸

Here then is the first movement of the theopoetic. Grace. Advent. Mystery. Small, diminutive, vulnerable we stand before our Creator. Discerning. Waiting. Prayerful. Our complete attention turned toward the cross at the center of the world. Moments of unexpected serendipity. God meets us in these moments of contrition, light, and opening of the eyes. Tears fall unexplained down our cheeks. We hear the sound of the Wind blow.

Numinous Faith

Silent tears
fall
with gravity

sorrows
collect
at soul

what is this
lightness?
this hopeful
Word?

awakened
the simple
heart

to sing
your Majesty

to hope

18. Buechner, *Alphabet of Grace*, 43, 44.

your Love
to crown
your Presence
kneeling
with
these tears—
this contrition—
this simple
holy laughter.
O Holy God
may
we never
dim
to your
Love
in our lives.

-PCZ

The Second Movement of the Theopoetic: Radical Engagement of Complexity—Ministry as Disorientation

Life is messy and those who are called to ministry are invited into the center of this messiness to bring the hope that only God brings to bear on the life situations of the Church. This call to face up to the complicated aspects of ministry life is not an easy calling. It calls for the integration of *the without*—that is the external situation of complexity—and *the within*—the emergence of hope that comes from God to each situation.

Some things cannot be spoken or discovered until we have been stuck, incapacitated, or blown off course for a while. Plain sailing is pleasant, but you are not going to explore many unknown realms that way. We articulate the truth of a situation by carrying the whole experience in the voice and allowing the process to blossom of its own accord. Out of the cross-grain of experience appears a voice that not only sums up the process we have gone through, but allows the

soul to recognize its timbre, the color, texture, and complicated entanglements of being alive.¹⁹

Think about the complexity of ministry at any given time. At the root of every ministry situation are hidden realities: sufferings, brokenness, losses, disappointments. We try to maintain a consistent vision but the elusive nature of people's commitments and the roaring fires of diverse expectations continue to undercut sincere efforts for uniformity. We hope for clear outcomes but often we are left to contend with the stops and starts of life in all of its amazing color.

Can we grow our *hope* in such a way that it can take on board all of the ambiguity and disappointment of life? Can we enliven our *faith* so that with risk and abandon we can embrace the call of God to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ? Can we expand the capacity of our *love* to enter into the affliction of others with God's compassion and the tenderness of Jesus Christ?

Pastoral theology requires diligent reflection on the nature of situations that are constantly unfolding as we pay attention to the contours of God's Spirit in the life of the Church.

Who among us has not been perplexed by some confounding and intractable problem in the life of our congregation? And yet, as Soren Kierkegaard advises in his journal, "the intractable problems of life cannot be concluded by 'copying the answer out of a book without having worked out the sum for ourselves.'"²⁰ We must yield to the complexity, all the while opening ourselves to the prompting of God who invites our courage and our expectant participation. We must pay "absolute, unmixed attention" to the convoluted pathways of ministry, recognizing that "our perplexity may serve Him."²¹

But not all ministry experience is of the perplexing type. Many encounters would fall into the categories of the awe-inspiring, the sublime, and the transcendent: holding a child in the moment of dedication with blessing; entering into the

19. Whyte, *Heart Aroused*, 95.

20. Dru, *Journals of Kierkegaard*, 53.

21. Newman, *Prayers*, 339.

mystery of faith convictions forming before your very eyes; tasting reconciliation; transfixed by the worshipping congregation or that worshipping soul moved to profound contrition.

We are called to move with the Spirit into the ambiguity and the depth of life itself with all of its complexity. We are called to serve in places of beauty and moments of abandonment. We must address the fears and doubts of our congregations, along with their joys and freedoms. We are called to share in the strain of anxiety and the ministry of restoration. Our vocation is to be shepherds of the subtle persistence of hope.

Longings

it's the stillness that I long for.
quiet rays of streaming sunlight
ease into the room
in absolute stillness.

it's the word that I have longed for.
that simple precept—
all-encompassing truth
for a time like this.
a word that emerges from silence.

it's that embrace that I have dreamed of.
the Love that will not let go,
that holds one
as one holds a treasure—
unwilling to let anything ruin.

it's the stillness,
the word,
the embrace,
that we each, all of us,
long for;
and it has arrived.

-PCZ

*The Third Movement of Theopoetic: Ministry as Reorientation:
The Birth-Hour of a New Clarity*

In his *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke captures the essence of the third movement of the theopoetic:

Everything is gestation and then bringing forth. To let each impression and each germ of feeling come to completion wholly in itself, in the dark, in the inexpressible, the unconscious, beyond the reach of one's own intelligence, and await with deep humility and patience the birth hour of a new clarity.²²

Only after the first two movements can the final stage be set for the hard work of theopoetic articulation. The "founding Word" governs this movement to articulation. The silence of the first movement of prayer and the radical engagement with the real-life experiences of ministry are brought into conversation with the Word of God. The task of articulation is the task of pastoral theological reflection.

Walter Brueggemann nuances the world-disclosing task of the theopoetic when he states, "By poetry I do not mean rhyme, rhythm, or meter, but language that moves . . . that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion and pace . . . Poetic communication, the very kind given us in the text of the bible."²³

But articulation is not the beginning of the third movement, it is the climactic crescendo that comes only after the word has been eaten, assimilated, lived. The lived transforming Word guides the sensitive articulation of authentic pastoral conversation.

Henri Nouwen concludes, rightly I think, that "The art of spiritual living is to eat the word, digest it, and incorporate it concretely in our lives . . . The Word of God has to anchor itself in the center of our being."²⁴ We are called to speak from the depths as "one speaking the very words of God" (1 Pet 4:11). We are compelled, like Koheleth, to theopoetic articulation:

Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. The words of the wise are like goads,

22. Rilke, *Letters*, 29.

23. Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 3.

24. Ford, *Dance of Life*, 30.

their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails, given by one Shepherd (Eccl 12:9–11).

Baptism

Wading into these
murky
waters of suffering—
a new baptism
immerses
each of us;
all of us.

say what you see.
poetic illumination—
spilling into
hope-words,
grace-words,
half-words,
to match
the loneliness,
the lostness,
the fragmentation.

from the top of
the hill
you cannot help us.
we can't hear your voice.
we can't see your face.
we can't feel your tears.

come down
from
the
pulpit
into our questions,
into our anxiety,
into our diagnosis,
into our fear.

did you see it there
in the eye of the lamb?

“feed my lambs.”

“Lord, you know all
things,
of course I love you!”

I wandered
today
to a far away
place
deep in the forest of
non-encounter
non-speaking
non-community

a Shepherd came
to me;
wounds in His side,
scars on His hands.

“Are you here
for
the fellowship
of my sufferings?”
he inquired.

I was speechless.
what was I to say?

to this infinity?
to this immensity?
to this “calling out”?

the sea is too
wide
and the lake is
too cold.

I cannot bear up.
it is too deep
for
words.

“Be not afraid.”
“It is I.”

I lift my
eyes
up . . .
He is gone;
He is here;
He is gone;

He is risen;
 He is gone,
 He is on high

Alleluia!

I enter the
 cold, crisp lake
 wading once again
 into these murky waters
 of suffering—
 a new baptism.
 a new way of being.

all attention.
 ready to read
 the Wind
 once
 again.

- PCZ

Bibliography

- Alves, Rubem. *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Buechner, Fredrick. *The Alphabet of Grace*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1970.
- Capps, Donald. *The Poet's Gift: Toward the Renewal of Pastoral Care*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.
- Dru, Alexander, ed. *The Journals of Kierkegaard*. New York: Harper and Row, 1958.
- Fettke, Tom, ed. *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*. Waco, TX: Word Music, 1986.

- Ford, Michael. *The Dance of Life: Weaving Sorrows and Blessings into One Joyful Step*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2005.
- Levertov, Denise. *Poems 1960–1967*. New York: Direction Books, 1983.
- Newman, John Henry. *John Henry Newman: Prayers, Verses and Devotions*. Ft. Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 1989.
- Oates, Wayne. *The Presence of God in Pastoral Counseling*. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986.
- Patton, John. *From Ministry to Theology: Pastoral Action and Reflection*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*. Translated by M. D. H. Norton. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1962.
- Weatherhead, Leslie D. *Discipleship*. London: SCM Press, 1934.
- Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace*. New York: Routledge Press, 1952.
- Westerhoff, John. *Spiritual Life: The Foundation of Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.
- Whyte, David. *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*. New York: Doubleday, 1994.
- Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.
- Wimberley, Edward P. *Prayer in Pastoral Counseling: Suffering, Healing, and Discernment*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990.