Creating in the Image of God:

Poetry, Spirituality, and Survival | BY JOHN MCDOWELL

I am going to present some propositions: propositions on poetry and spirituality. The propositions are not comprehensive. They are just small windows on what I believe about the interconnectedness of art (in this case, poetry) and spirituality. This is personal. I take as a starting line that the creative act is (at least in part) a reflection and manifestation of the image of God. The propositions flow from that assumption. These remarks are followed by some poems. It is to the poems that I wish to direct the reader's attention.

One of my mentors in the appreciation of poetry is Ottilie Stafford. One thing she taught me is that W. B. Yeats—at least in matters of poetry—is a good place to start, so I begin with Yeats. This is from one of his last poems, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," where he writes about his life as a poet: He begins with these lines:

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last, being but a broken man,
I must be satisfied with my heart...

And it ends with these:

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rages, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.[1]

With my own poems, when I see them in print or read them in public and realize that they are my "circus animals on display," I confess that Yeats is right—that I need to go where all ladders start: "In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

Proposition One: Place

The sacred has almost always been associated with an object—a stone standing upright anointed with oil. We come thus to the story of Jacob at Bethel, where he dreamed of a ladder ascending to Heaven and realized that he was in a holy place. A sacred object and a sacred place become one and the same.

In Jordan a few summers ago, as part of the Madaba Plains archeological project at Tall al 'Umaryi, the team I was with uncovered some standing stones embedded in a votive niche. This niche contained five stones with what were clearly some sacred vessels. This niche was part of a large room that was probably a temple. The find dates from the Late Bronze age—about thirty-five hundred years ago—about the time of Moses. But however crude and simple the edi-

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fice, it is clear that this was a sacred space with sacred objects. Today, there is still the sense of an object or a place being sacred or holy.

We still have the need to find holy ground, to find a burning bush that will startle us out of the mundane of our own humanity.

Many ancient sites are still viewed as holy by many people, from Aztec pyramids to the Western or Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. However, when I prayed at the Wailing Wall, I did not particularly feel, as many do, a special sense of holiness. (This may be because of me and not because of the place!) Still, many find places all over the world compelling and holy. There are even modern holy places: we dedicate churches and chapels as part of our desire for the divine to inhabit a space we can enter. We still have the need to find holy ground, to find a burning bush that will startle us out of the mundane of our own humanity. We wait for the command to take off our shoes for where we stand is holy ground. We want to find a ladder.

Adventists and others who emphasize the Sabbath also think about time as sacred. We agree with Abraham Heschel, who writes, "on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to *holiness in time*."[2] This is more difficult. Physical objects and places can be seen, touched, heard (bells), tasted (emblems), and even, on occasion, smelled. They give the imagination something to work with, to interact with. Time cannot really be touched, tasted, smelled, heard, or seen.

Yes, we do make use of physical markers—the setting of the sun—as a way of helping with the experience of time, particularly sacred time. Time as sacred requires concentration and a full exercise of the imagination. For the most part, we use music and prose text (sermons) to help in the experience of sacred time.

Poems open the imagination in a way that can create a space we might not otherwise visit or inhabit. Poetic language exercises the imagination in a way that gives one the sense of a new territory being explored. With the God Poems presented here, I explore the space we call "God" as a way of finding unknown rooms.

The late Nobel laureate, Czelaw Milosz, writes,

> *The purpose of poetry is to remind us*
> *how difficult it is to remain just one person,*
> *for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,*
> *and invisible guests come in and out at will.*[3]

Think of poems as a place: a place to take off your shoes, a place that becomes, if you are patient, *you*. A place with time where the vicissitudes of being human can interact with the divine guest.

Proposition Two: Spirit

Poetry is about the art of breathing: in and out. In and out. In and out. The spirit and air. The image of God as breath.

Proposition Three: Prayer

Art critic John Berger writes in *The Sense of Sight* that, "art"—and I take that to mean poetry also—"is an organized response to what nature allows us to glimpse occasionally. Art sets out to transform the potential recognition into an unceasing one. It proclaims man in the hope of receiving a surer reply....The transcendental face of art is always a form of prayer."[4]

I do not fully understand what this means, but it always somehow validates the feeling that I have long felt that the poem, whatever its "subject," is somehow also a prayer.

Proposition Four: The Bones of Process

I hold that there is a similarity, a correspondence, between the life of faith and the creative process. The following are aspects of that correspondence:

Belief If I do not believe that I can create, I can't and I won't. Belief that you can is basic. The belief is also open. What I mean is this: I have to believe that I can start and that I can write, and if I can write, I can write a poem. I have come to understand that I must believe with openness. I must be open to the realization that the poem

I end up with may well be vastly different from what I thought it would be when I started. Belief gives way to faith in the process of working with language.

COURAGE Rollo May wrote *Courage to Create* about his belief that courage is the primary requirement for living a creative life. He writes, the "chief characteristic of this courage is that it requires a centeredness within our own being."[5] Courage is also needed, I submit, in living the spiritual life. Writing poetry involves trusting inspiration or intuition (whatever you want to call it) and plunging into the unknown with no guarantee of success.

Dedication to and the discipline of craft is needed. Failure is likely. Spending time "writing poetry" (which may sometimes involve a great deal of staring out the window) is not always viewed as practical. There are always more "important matters" at the ready to claim one's time and attention. Courage is needed.

PLAY A sense of play—openness to possibilities, not taking one's self too seriously, is necessary. Allowing for alternatives, cultivating curiosity—all are needed to make connections and imaginative leaps. Play feeds, keeps the imagination (and the spiritual life) vibrant.

DOUBT Perhaps it is surprising, but I have come to appreciate the value of doubt in the creative act. (I also believe that it is a valuable part of the spiritual life.) Doubt keeps the eyes of belief watchful and alert. Doubt is a generator of questions that, when explored with belief, open the door to insight. Belief without doubt opens the valve that balloons ego to arrogance. Art becomes propaganda. Doubt without belief opens the heart to depression. The poetic force withers and the poem becomes impossible to write.

AMBIGUITY Poetry uses ambiguity as an ally. Ambiguity allows the reader to enter and construct meaning from his or her interaction with the poem. The poem must be able to move from the orbit of the poet to the reader's realm. There must be room for the reader to claim a dialogue. Lewis Thomas, in *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*, writes:

> *Perhaps it is in this respect that language differs most sharply from other biologic systems for communication. Ambiguity seems to be an essential, indispensable element for the transfer of information from one place to another by words, where matters of real importance are concerned. It is often necessary, for meaning to come through, that there be an almost vague sense of strangeness and askewness. Speechless animals and cells cannot do this. The specifically locked-on antigen at the surface of a lymphocyte does not send the cell off in search of something totally different; when a bee is tracking sugar by polarized light, observing the sun as though consulting his watch, he does not veer away to discover an unimaginable marvel of a flower. Only the human mind is designed to work in this way, programmed to drift away in the presence of locked-on information, straying from each point in a hunt for a better, different point.*
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> *If it were not for the capacity for ambiguity, for the sensing of strangeness that words in all languages provide, we would have no way of recognizing the layers of counterpoint in meaning, and we might be spending all our time sitting on stone fences, staring into the sun. . . . The great thing about language [in particular, poetry]* is that it prevents us from sticking to the matter at hand. [6] *(Emphasis supplied)*

Part of the spiritual journey, as with the creative one, is to come to realize that "the matter at hand"—that which we happen to think is the most important concern of the moment—is not always what should have our attention.

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Proposition Five: Survival

Poet Gregory Orr notes that "simply to be a human self as a body in time is to know a number of significant jeopardies," and that crises bring religion forward "to offer its consolations and explanations."[7] We have all heard the phrase that "it"—it being whatever the tragedy or crisis at hand is—"is a part of God's plan." I remember

little of my mother's funeral sermon except the alienation I felt with that kind of proffered sympathy. But religion does, as Orr notes, provide "an alternate, ordered world beyond death, which complements and compensates for this world's suffering and confusion."[8]

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If the crisis is existential, "philosophy steps forward also with its own ways of making sense of things," notes Orr.[9] He is referring to the idea in Western philosophy that reason can triumph over confusion and emotion. We have the sense that if we can find the reason for the event—cancer, the killing, the emotional scarring—then things will be better. If we can only find the logic and rationality of the event, we will be able to deal with it and move beyond the emotion of the moment. Such reasons are seldom forthcoming—at least in ways that we would like.

Finally, Orr notes, lyric poetry can also step forward. I quote an extended passage because Orr writes so well:

> *The personal lyric steps forward and says: "Bring me your disorder. Turn your confused world into words and I, in turn, will step forward with my primordial ordering principles of story, symbol, and incantation. Together we will meet in the white space of the blank page of the clearing in a forest where someone might stand and sing quietly. And out of your personal, human confusion and the possibility of linguistic ordering we will make a poem. That poem will be a true picture of your grief or joy—an expression of your experience of disorder and your need for order.... Rather than transcendence and abstraction counseled by philosophy and religion, the personal lyric urges the self to translate its whole being into language where it can dramatize and re-stabilize itself in the patterned language of a poem.*[10]

Orr's position is born out of his long experience as a poet and out of the fact that as a child he accidentally killed his brother. I have felt the truth of this myself with the death of my mother by cancer. I have felt it to be true with the death of others I have known.

A Final Proposition before You Enter the Poems Themselves

I give you the words of Jeanette Winterson: "Art is large and it enlarges you and me. To a shrunk-up world its vistas are shocking. Art is the burning bush that both shelters and makes visible our profounder longings."[11] Let us now take off our shoes. We are about to step on holy ground. The ladder of poems now awaits.

Notes and References

1. "The Circus Animals' Desertion," in *William Butler Yeats: Selected Poems and Four Plays*, 4th. ed., ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Scribner, 1996), 212–13.

2. *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 10.

3. "Ars Poetica?" *Selected Poems: 1931–2004* (New York: Ecco, 2006).

4. *Sense of Sight* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 9.

5. See *Courage to Create* (New York: Bantam, 1975) esp. Chap. 1, "The Courage to Create," 3.

6. *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* (New York: Bantam, 1974), 111–12.

7. "Poetry and Survival," *The Writer's Chronicle* (Sept. 2002), online at <www.awpwriter.org/magazine/>. See also, Orr, *Poetry as Survival* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002).

8. Orr, "Poetry and Survival."

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 66.

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