A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE USES

OF RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION IN SERMONS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> During the Boer War, Winston Churchill attended
> a church parade. Five thousand men who had
> faced death the previous week and were soon
> to do it again were assembled around their
> leader. "It was one of those occasions," he
> wrote, "When a fine preacher might have given
> comfort and strength where both were sorely
> needed, and have printed on many minds a per-
> manent impression. The bride-groom Opportunity
> had come. But the church had her lamp un-
> trimmed. A chaplain with a raucous voice dis-
> coursed on the details of 'The Siege and
> Surrender of Jericho.' The soldiers froze
> into apathy, and after a while the formal
> perfunctory service reached its welcome con-
> clusion.[1]

We join easily with Winston Churchill in his criticism of

"the chaplain with a raucous voice" who failed in a moment of

great need. We wish that at the moment of Opportunity when all

eyes were on him he could have given the comfort, strength, and

permanent impression for which Churchill had hoped.

We do not know why he failed. Perhaps he thought that his

was a perfunctory role, and therefore he did not have the perspective

or the expectation which Churchill had. Perhaps, he, like other

ministers, "proceeded upon the idea that folk come to church

desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites"[2]

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[1]Harry Levinson, "The Trouble with Sermons," The Journal of
Pastoral Care XXII (June 1978): 70.

[2]Lionel Crocker, ed., Harry Emerson Fosdick's Art of
Preaching (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1971), p. 13.

(or what happened at Jericho). Perhaps he felt deeply the importance of
the moment, but did not have the words to say which would reflect
that importance, so that he was forced to take refuge in "time-
worn phrases and a raucous voice."

But, whatever the reasons, the fact is that for a while
five thousand men looked to a preacher who could have brought them
strength and hope, but who instead brought boredom and apathy.

But can we hold the chaplain responsible? George Orwell
in "Politics and the English Language" claims that the problem
is much more endemic to society. He believes that the most marked
characteristics of modern English prose are "staleness of imagery,"
"lack of precision," "vagueness," and "insincerity." He says that
"The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he
inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as
to whether his words mean anything or not."[3]

Orwell cites several examples of what he calls "sheer incom-
petence" in the use of language--the use of dying metaphors, the
use of the passive voice instead of the active, pretentious diction
which gives either an air of scientific impartiality to biased
judgments or an air of culture and elegance, and the use of
meaningless words or words which have several different, irrecon-
cilable meanings (sometimes purposefully misleading).[4]

The question is not simply one of incompetence. It is
much more complex than that. If our words are slovenly and vague,
then our thoughts and actions will also be this way. The link

[3]George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" in The
Orwell Reader (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javonovitch, 1956), p. 357-360.

[4]Ibid., pp. 357-360.

between language and experience is such that each one has a
profound effect on the other.

But for the hapless chaplain at that crucial moment in
history, the eyes of the five-thousand soldiers and of Winston
Churchill were on him. And even though Orwell's criticism extends
to language related to all aspects of society, the church, reflecting
on such moments as the one which Churchill relates, feels keenly
the sting of Orwell's words.

We do not have to go so far into the past to hear such
criticism, however. In my exploration of literature concerning
the modern-day church and the dilemmas which it faces, I have
found four major themes: (1) the problem of credibility and authority,
(2) the problem of words and their use, (3) the question of the
connection between the ministry of the church and the lived lives
of individuals, and (4) the question of the purpose (or, as
Fosdick says, "the object") of action.

These themes are inseparable from one another. Because
the ministry of the church is not connected to the lived lives
of individuals, we have a problem of credibility and authority.
Because our purpose is hazy, our language is vague, so that we are
unable to articulate a purpose which has the power to draw us
forward.

The church has not been the only institution in our society
which has had to struggle with problems of authority, credibility,
language, and purpose. But we have had peculiar problems which
have made it very difficult for us to move forward. Society has
developed a language which _does_ represent the style and preoccupation
of our time, one which is very technical and efficient. But it is

remarkably devoid of verbal counterparts of "the felt but inchoate self,"[5] the source of much religious content. As one writer has said, our language does not help us to express "how a man feels when he has been sullen with his wife."[6]

This "inchoate self" is different from the more private view of identity which has arisen in recent years. The private view has prevented us from making connections with the "accumulated masses of human experience and utterance."[7] This other, less-defined self can resonate with the whole of human experience. The church, faced with the problem of not having a language and experiences which will provide connections of depth and breadth, has reverted to atomistic descriptions of the self which separate and isolate us from one another.

It is as if we have, perhaps subconsciously, expected our forms of communication to imitate the technical, efficient language of our culture, and in the process we have lost access to a way to express the religious dimensions of our existence.

In recent years, as a response to this impoverishment, some writers have begun to re-examine our understanding of imagination and its function in religious expression. One such author is Theodore Jennings. In his book, Introduction to Theology: An Invitation to Reflection Upon the Christian Mythos, he says that because of the long struggle between an increasingly-narrow rationalism and imagination, in which imagination "has been relegated to the spheres

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[5] Joseph Sittler, The Ecology of Faith (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 26.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

of poetry and daydream,"[8] we have lost our faculty of "sympathetic participation in the realities of life and world."[9] Objectivity, which separates the knowing subject from the object of knowledge, has become a mode of being, contributing to the suppression of imagination. Reason has often been unfairly burdened with the responsibility for the difficulties arising from this situation. The difficulties have arisen, not <u>because</u> of reason, but because reason has also been unable to fulfill completely its goal of understanding, separated as it is from imagination's apprehension of experience. Jennings says that "we have sought to substitute the literal for the symbolic, the objective for the subject, the detached for the participatory."[10] In the process we have lost the symbols by which those who have gone before us have participated in the world. At the very least, we have lost our ability to participate in the world of our predecessors, since their symbols no longer hold participatory power for us. But, in addition, it can be suggested that we have also lost connectedness with the living structure of experience in contemporary existence, since the symbols to which we turn are often unable to represent reality when "depth speaks to depth."

Another writer who has attended to the loss of imaginative approaches to reality is Bernard Meland. He, too, is concerned that we do not see imagination and rationalism as polar opposites.

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[8]Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., <u>Introduction to Theology</u> (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 12.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid., p. 16.

Rather, imagination is an "indispensable accompaniment"[11] to critical abstraction.

> The significance of the imaginative mode, as employed by the poet, the artist, or by anyone concerned with sensitive inquiry attentive to the penumbra of experienceable meaning of events, is that it both enlarges the range of awareness and discerns its subtle, qualitative depths... Imagination becomes an appreciative mode of inquiry and reflection, extending, deepening, sensitizing the range of apprehension and awareness from within the margin of intelligibility available to technical modes of abstract reflection and inquiry.[12]

We have lost perspective in relation to the limitations of language in its more technical modes. In theology and philosophy of religion we find much concern with the "precise word" or the "chiseled belief." As precision of meaning has been attained, we have lost a richness of meaning. Amos Wilder, in Theopoetics, says:

> There is a gestation proceeding in our epoch whose proper vehicles are symbolic and imaginative. Wide orders of response have long been inhibited or neglected, and men and women in a variety of situations are rediscovering aspects of the spontaneous, the sacred, and the mysterious.[13]

This rediscovery is threatened on two sides. On the one hand, Wilder, like Jennings, believes that the rationalistic, scientific tradition, especially in its more orthodox forms, is lacking in comprehension of our situation. He says that we must give recognition to the new intuitive sensibilities, and see them not as a loss of nerve but rather as "signaling a return to the proper plenitude and

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[11]Bernard Meland, Fallible Forms and Symbols (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 57.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Amos Wilder, Theopoetics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 16.

diversity of our human nature as common to many epochs and climes."[14]

On the other hand, many of the new explorations of intuitive knowing and consciousness have been carried out in an iconoclastic environment, which has cut them off from the accumulated wisdom of our own older religious traditions. The turn to more exotic sources of illumination may be due, not to the insufficiency of traditions like Christianity, but to a shrinking away from what they still validly represent. The dimension which is so often missing from such contemporary approaches (even in the more systematic approaches to myth) is that of "rootedness, creature-hood, and embodied humanness."[15]

We are impoverished, and like starved people, have a tendency to grasp at any nourishment we can find. The vision, the ecstasy, the momentary truth, take on a significance which they might not have had in another time. We are faced with the need to be open to a more imagistic apprehension of reality. At the same time, we need to be aware that not every image is automatically a valid expression of the depth of reality.

This is not an easy task because the result of such an authentic imaginative approach to reality can be much more jarring to our perceptions of the world than we might expect. It is not unlike what Tillich called "ontological shock"--the "jarring of one's reality sense."[16] Imaginative shock awakens us to the

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[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid., p. 18.

[16]Ray L. Hart, Unfinished Man and the Imagination (New York: Heider and Heider, 1968), P. 216.

awareness that our categories do not fit our experience. If our approach to the imaginative modes of consciousness is shallow and not in dialogue with more traditional approaches to "rootedness, creaturehood, and embodied humanness," then I believe we are in danger of losing a vital element which the imaginative process can provide--one which calls us out of ourselves into a different way of participation in reality.

But knowing all this does not solve the problem of the chaplain so tellingly described by Winston Churchill. Nor does it solve the problem of liberal ministers in our time. Faced with the problems of credibility, authority, purpose, and connection with the people (to say nothing of the mere task of writing a sermon each week), we are not aided by knowing that "depth can speak to depth" through the imaginative process. Some have attended to the approach as best they could, adding stories, myths, and narratives to their sermons as illustrations of the points which they were making. Many have found that such additions have enlivened their sermons. But the following questions must be asked: How are images and stories to be used so that a religious depth is tapped and the community is enriched and called to respond? How are images and stories incorporated into the sermon in a way which creates a participatory reality pointing beyond itself? Images have a capacity to be vehicles of power and vitality. But it is crucial that we examine carefully the ways in which we use them, because they have the capacity to be _more_ than that. Is such a process, at best, _ad hoc_? Or is there a framework which will help us embody the imaginative process in our sermons? Wilder cautions us:

> ...Recipes and programmed strategies fall
> short of accounting for the full mystery of
> language where deep calls to deep...Any
> fresh renewal of language or rebirth of
> images arises from within and from beyond
> our control. Nevertheless we can help pre-
> pare the event, both by moral and spiritual
> discipline and by attention to the modes and
> vehicles of the Word. Of first importance
> here are the deeper vocabulary and idiom of
> the Spirit, and all that is suggested by
> such terms as primordial language and dy-
> namic symbol.[17]

While I realize that it would not be useful to provide mere

"recipes and programmed strategies" for the implementation of the

imaginative process, I will construct in this paper a methodology

which will assist us as we attend to it. I am undertaking this

task in the belief that there _is_ a framework which can assist us

as we develop our sermons. This framework imitates the imaginative

process, and suggests the specific context in which we can

experience religious depth and understanding.

I have chosen preaching since it is an event defined within

a specific context which will lend itself to focused examination.

Preaching, while usually done from a written text and thereby

limited to the linguistic forms of imagination, is, however, also

more than the written or spoken word. We will examine in the body

of this paper what that "more" is.

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[17]Wilder, p. 6.

CHAPTER II

THE IMAGINATIVE PROCESS

Many of us think of imagination as the frosting on the cake--
it's nice to have, but not really necessary in the day-to-day
tasks of life. We think of imaginative people as fortunate to
have a more creative approach to life and its problems, but even
without such a skill we know that we can get by. The arts and
other more creative manifestations of the imagination, while
enriching our lives, are not usually counted among the necessities.
At best, they are luxuries. The metaphor and the image are nice
additions to one's writing or speaking, but serve mainly as adorn-
ments to what might otherwise be a straightforward, but possibly
dull, article or speech.

But nothing could be farther from the truth. Imagination
is, instead, the basis of <u>all</u> our understanding of life. It
is the basic process from which our language arises. It is the
means by which we apprehend experience and is that which stimulates
us to respond actively to life. Imagination is a fundamental
process of our minds.

Imagination is not just the formation of images. It is not
just a method whereby we develop word-pictures which are illustrative
of our subject, or artistic representations which are pleasing to
the eye and sometimes stimulating. Rather, it is a way of
experiencing and expressing reality as a unity. Imagination provides

an interconnected web of symbols to which we must respond. It is
the way through which we can participate sympathetically with the
realities of our lives and world.

Theodore Jennings, in his Introduction to Theology, suggests
a three-storied "edifice of human experience" which I find useful.
On the first floor we find "existence and reality;" on the second,
"imagination and its product--the symbol," and on the third,
"reflection." In this chapter I will use Jennings' edifice as a
way to approach what I call the "imaginative process." Initially,
I will describe the expression of reality as proceeding upward from
the first floor ("existence and reality"), to the second, where
it is mediated by "imagination and its product--the symbol," and
finally to the reflection which occurs at the third level. For
the sake of clarity of description, I will describe this process
as proceeding in an upward direction out of the "depths." The
reader should keep in mind that the process is neither as uni-
directional, nor as hierarchical as it seems to be.

At the first level is "existence and reality." Since it
is the claim of this paper that we do not know existence and
reality except as they are made available to human awareness
through the imaginative process, this level is difficult to
describe without reference to the imagination. Since it is also
the claim of this paper that we cannot separate the various levels
of reality, imagination, and reflection from each other, it is
difficult to divide them into categories and to treat them as
separate entities. To the extent that I do so, it is out of
necessity, and in the hope that a holistic view of the process
will emerge.

Existence and Reality

At base, I am forced to make some assumptions which might be called "faith statements" about reality and our apprehension of it. I am assuming that there is a reality beyond our ability, even at an undifferentiated feeling-level, to apprehend it. I am also assuming that there is meaning and order at that level. Although this reality is beyond our ability to apprehend it, it is not separate from us, floating off in space in some pure and ideal form. It shapes and changes us as we shape and change it. The imaginative process includes this reciprocal shaping of reality and our being shaped by it.

Our consciousness does not extend to these depths. We first become aware of this reality at an undifferentiated level which might be called a "feeling context."[1] This "feeling context," the most elemental level of meaning in a culture, is the base of what Meland calls the "structure of experience."[2] It is at this level that we begin to become aware of form. These forms arise out of ongoing valuations which accumulate over time. A history of culture might give us some clues as to how these valuations are formed, but this emerging "psychical structure" partakes of greater depth than mere historical accounts provide. Meland writes:

> The structure of experience is not just
> accumulative. That is, it is not just a
> blind appropriation of heteogeneous valua-
> tions; rather, it simulates an organic

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[1]Bernard Meland, Faith and Culture (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1953), P. 98.

[2]Ibid.

> unity at every stage of history. The
> struggles and crises of concrete events,
> the dedications and betrayals, the dis-
> coveries, creations, and intellectual
> triumphs, become the formative stuff out
> of which rises the persisting structure
> of experience.[3]

The apprehension of the structure of experience is always
partial, and gains specificity in individual cultures and
communities. Meland cautions, however, against the attitude that
individuals can arbitrarily forge out their own meaning. Contrary
to a struggle for objectivity, the structure of experience requires
that we stand in the midst of the feeling-context of the culture
and that we accept as a "burden and an opportunity"[4] the connection
with all life.

This unity of objectivity and subjectivity in the midst of
the structure of experience, with its depth far greater than we
can ever know, provides the closest access we can have to the
experience and expression of the Sacred. On the one hand, we stand
within a culture, tradition, and community which specify the forms
through which we apprehend reality and meaning. On the other hand,
we seek to experience and express the totality of existence. The
acknowledgement of specificity as a means of experiencing and
expressing the totality of reality is basic to the imaginative
process. In fact, Meland says that we "may be able to convey the
meaning of the structure of experience more adequately if we
attend to its concrete character."[5] He writes:

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[3]Ibid., p. 99.

[4]Ibid., p. 100.

[5]Ibid., p. 102.

> The full, actual valuational content of the
> structure of experience, which is our imme-
> diate possession, no human consciousness can
> know. It is a depth in our natures that con-
> nects all that we are with all that has been
> within the context of actuality that defines
> our culture. It is a depth in our nature that
> relates us as events to all existent events....
> The degree to which men apprehend this vast
> working depends greatly upon the sensibilities
> with which they are able to receive what is
> more than their self-conscious, self-attentive
> person.[6]

Is this, then, a culture-bound definition of the meaning
of existence? I do not think so. For if the structure of experi-
ence were only a cultural accumulation of valuations over time,
we would be unable to tend to the questions of why there is
ongoingness; why, in spite of the perishing which occurs, there
is "qualitative attainment";[7] and what turns our participation in
the imaginative process into "zestful attachment" and relates us
to a whole which is larger than our ability to perceive it.

A purely cultural definition of accumulated meaning would
block any view of reality envisioned by those questions.

> The structure of experience is a depth that
> relates us to God, a sensitive nature within
> the vast context of nature, winning the crea-
> tive passage for qualitative attainment. The
> actual content of all this, I say, we cannot
> know. Each man lives within his limitations...
> Beyond the perceptual powers of the human
> creature, vast, meaningful processes of crea-
> tivity and qualitative creation transpire. Man
> picks up intimations of this vast working with
> such instruments of perception, conscious
> awareness, imagination and feeling, as he may
> be able to enjoy.[8]

While we cannot fully know the content of the depth, I do believe

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[6]Ibid., pp. 111-112.

[7]Ibid., p. 112.

[8]Ibid.

that we can make a claim for its sustaining, creating, and redeeming nature, if only from the "intimations of this vast working" in our experience.

Imagination and Its Products

At the second level of the "edifice of human experience," we find imagination. It is through the imagination that we are able to experience and express the reality and meaning in the structure of experience. The level of "imagination" is only a part of the whole of the imaginative process. But it is the level at which we respond to the past, experience and act in the present, and envision the future.

At the initial level, our apprehension of reality and experience may appear chaotic--consider the reality portrayed in our dreams, for example--but our task is to be open to the form and meaning inherent in the images we receive. Suzanne Langer says, for example, that imagination involves an acute sensitivity to form.

It is easy to fall into one of two fallacies as we attempt to describe imagination. The first, as we have said, is that imagination is amorphous, unstructured and formless, and found in the midst of chaos. The second is that imagination is described as having form (especially when describing products of the imagination, such as poetry, music, and art), but a form that is derived from scientific or pseudo-scientific reasoning. Langer speaks to this second point in her book, Feeling and Form:

> Since every poem that is successful enough to
> merit the name of "poetry"...is a non-discur-
> sive symbolic form, it stands to reason that
> the laws which govern the making of poetry are

not those of discursive logic. They are
"laws of thought" as truly as the prin-
ciples of reasoning are; but they never
apply to scientific or pseudo-scientific
(practical) reasoning. They are in fact
the laws of imagination. Critics have
treated poetry indiscriminately as both
art and discourse....The fact is, I think,
that they do not recognize the real process
of poetic creation because the laws of
imagination, little known anyway, are
obscured fromthem by the laws of discourse.[9]

The laws of discourse which are products of reflection,

should not be confused with laws of imagination, which are

pressed up into consciousness out of experience and reality. As

we describe the imaginative process, we will take care, while

attending to the laws of discourse, not to let those laws obscure

our understanding and cause us to categorize and separate imagination,

either from the reality from which it has emerged or from its

inherent form.

As this thesis is developed in relation to preaching and

the imaginative process, attention will be paid to the various

forms of the imagination and the ways in which they are embodied

in preaching. If we are not animal rationale but rather animal

symbolicum, as some claim,[10] then are not even the forms through

which experience is apprehended symbolic? I do not claim that I

will add significant data to our understanding of forms of

imagination, but I do believe that attention to these forms in

relation to preaching is crucial if we wish to open new paths of

connection between us and the reality which is imaged. The forms

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[9]Suzanne Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles
Scribner's Sons, 1953), P. 234.

[10]Cassirer and Langer, as reported by Jennings, P. 20.

of poetry, art, and music embody forms of imagination through which reality is apprehended. Our preaching, while remaining in concourse with analogical visions of thought, must do the same.

Imagination reveals a multiplicity of levels of meaning and suggests, rather than describes in a comprehensive way. As Langer says, "It is the power whereby language, even with a small vocabulary manages to embrace a multimillion things...."[11] This can be difficult to take into consideration as we struggle to say what we mean and to try to address reality in a reasonable way. Meland says:

> To cognize this persisting resource of lived experience in which the immediacies of every concrete event share, taxes the mind to its limits. And the truth is, we can only cognize the faintest glimpse or momentary awareness of it, enabling us to acknowledge that we live more deeply than we think....[12]

But this is one of the primary tensions, and an ever-present dilemma inherent in the expression of the structure of experience through imagination. This is a primary difficulty in our use of imagination in sermons. We must embody concrete experience, which simultaneously points beyond the limits of that experience to the more ultimate dimension. As Meland says, such a task taxes the mind to its limits.

Perhaps this difficulty is the reason so few are attending to the imaginative process in expressing experience and reality. This seems to be true of many religious communities, where one

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[11]Langer, Philosophy in a New Key (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), P. 141.

[12]Meland, Fallible Forms and Symbols, p. 184.

might expect to find special attention being paid to forms which point toward dimensions of ultimacy. Instead, we find that the images which have emerged out of the structure of experience and which have served traditionally to mediate experience by suggesting more ultimate depths of experience, have been literalized and subjected to laws of discourse, either to be thrown out or to be concretized into what Whitehead called "misplaced concreteness."

I believe that we liberals, because of our heritage of attending to truth without absolutizing our apprehension of it into creed and dogma, are in a unique position to attend now to the recovery of the structure of experience and the forms and meanings which arise out of it. We live in a time when one wonders if we have not lost our ability to believe that reality even has such depth. While many theologians, whose content for reflection comes directly from imagination, have been denying its importance, the poets have been the ones to bear the burden of belief.

Amos Wilder reports in Theopoetic of a conference held in October, 1967, entitled "Myth in Religion and Literature." He writes:

> What immediately arrested our attention was that the poets of course assumed and demonstrated the use of myth in their work while the theologians insisted on the death of myth....[13]

He also points out the irony of a remark by the poet, Denise Levertov, in the midst of her presentation, that "the poets in their peculiar way are believers and the theologians are skeptics."[14]

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[13]Wilder, p. 85.

[14]Ibid., p. 89.

Fourteen years have passed since that conference and I believe that the lines of belief and non-belief marked in Wilder's account of it have softened a bit. But while theologians have become less skeptical, I do believe that few have found adequate ways to approach imagination as a source of faith. To do this we need first to look at the forms which emerge out of the structure of experience. Langer says:

> Feelings have definite forms which become pro-
> gressively articulated. Their development is
> effected through their interplay with the other
> aspects of experience....If feeling has arti-
> culate forms, what are they like? For what these
> are _like_ determines by what symbolism we might
> understand them.[15]

While there are many forms of the imagination at various levels of articulation (such as art, science, mathematics, fantasy, and dream), Langer has determined that there are four basic modes which serve to shed light on all of them. These are language, ritual, myth, and music. I will examine three of these modes with regard to their importance for our understanding of imagination in the preaching event.

Language

The tendency has been for our language to become increasingly precise, discursive, and practical. We have become used to thinking of language in terms of discrete bits of information. While few of us would side with an extremely positivistic view of language, we do expect language to convey clear meanings and to lend itself to logical patterns of thought. The idea of a few words embracing "a multimillion things" seems to go against our

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[15]Langer, _Philosophy in a New Key_, P. 100.

well-proven methods of representing reality. This can be difficult
to take into consideration as we struggle to say what we mean, and
to try to address reality in a reasonable way. Even a cursory
view will reveal that language is much more than mere bits of
information.

Language is _musical_. There are theories of language
development which suggest that language may have developed from
a sing-song form which was both musical and verbal.[16] As we listen
to languages which we do not understand, it is easy to hear
musical intonations and rhythmic groupings of sounds. It is even
true of our own language, though we may be less aware of it,
focused as we are on the meaning being conveyed. Langer argues
that language is a _Leitmotif_ of symbolic activity, rather than
intelligent signaling.[17]

Language is _symbolic_ and _evocative_. As a symbolic mode,
it names, evoking a reality but not comprehensively describing
it. The depth of reality is conveyed, not because it has been
comprehensively described, but because it has been evoked. Because
language is so easily discursive, it is easy to fall into the
trap of thinking that we must comprehensively describe the whole
of the image, thus forgetting to trust the evocative power available
from within the symbol. Language is at its most powerful and most
imaginative when it _suggests_, leaving at least some of the con-
nections, music, and richness to the ear and mind of the listener.

Language is a _relational_ system. It is much more than a
conglomeration of symbols. It is an "organic, functioning

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[16]Ibid., pp. 129-131.

[17]Ibid., p. 129.

system."[18] The words, rather than standing alone, tend to integrate, making complex patterns. As they do this, they point out equally complex relationships in the world, "the realm of their meanings."[19]

> This tendency is comprehensible enough if we consider the preeminence which a named element holds in the kaleidoscopic flow of sheer sense and feeling. For as soon as an object is denoted, it can be _held_, so that anything else that is experienced at the same time, instead of crowding it out, is experienced _with_ it, in contrast or in unison or in some other definite way....A word fixes something in experience, and makes it the nucleus of memory, an available conception. Other impressions group themselves round the denoted thing and are associatively recalled when it is named.[20]

One interesting aspect of this relational system is that it is based on a concrete context within which a more metaphoric word (usually what the speaker wishes to point out) takes on associative meaning. The concrete context determines what the metaphor means and whether the word is to be interpreted literally or not. The more the word symbolizes an unknown, indescribable concept, the more dependent it is on the concrete context to provide associative meaning. In a genuine metaphor, of course, the image of the literal meaning is the symbol of the figurative meaning. But the main point here is that novelty in language is possible only as contextual meanings are derived from concrete words. According to Langer, this is the process through which new meanings come into common use. Their metaphoric meanings become generalized into what are called "faded metaphors" and

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[18]Ibid., p. 135.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

eventually are stereotyped into literal definitions.[21] She writes:

> Speech becomes increasingly discursive, practical,
> prosaic, until human beings can actually believe
> that it was invented as a utility, and was later
> embellished with metaphors for the sake of a
> cultural product called poetry.[22]

One of the ramifications of this theory of language develop-
ment is that it does not set discursive, practical language over
against metaphoric, imagistic language. Each is necessary to the
other in order for us to gain an increasingly adequate representation
of reality.

Ritual and Sacrament

Ritual and sacrament might be said to participate in a
process much like the one described above. Their origins are
less easily understood, however, because of their usually non-
verbal and apparently impractical nature. They seem to meet a
human need which arises out of a desire to symbolize conceptions
which cannot be fully articulated in verbal discourse. In fact,
ritual has been called "the cradle of language,"[23] which acknowledges
language's connection to "its context of unknowing."[24]

Ritual and sacrament <u>articulate feelings and attitudes</u> in
the presence of life-symbols. They probably have arisen as a
spontaneous response to certain objects which represent attributes
of supreme realities. As these gestures of response are repeated,

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[21]Ibid., p. 141.

[22]Ibid., p. 142.

[23]Ibid., p. 141.

[24]Meland, <u>Fallible Forms</u>, p. 115.

they become more routinized, and become formal. They become a
"disciplined rehearsal of 'right attitudes.'"[25] These attitudes
are very complex responses which become intellectual in that they
"realize life and strength, manhood, contest, and death."[26]

The feelings and attitudes articulated by rituals and
sacraments are always in relationship to concrete experiences
in life. Rituals and sacraments are enlivened not only by the
realities whicy they represent, but also by the experiences and
feelings brought by the participants to them. They arise out of
homely events. Within the particular ritual or sacrament these
homely events take on significance because of this representation
of otherwise unarticulated feelings and attitudes. The relation-
ship of the concrete nature of the ritual and sacrament to
unarticulated feelings and attitudes is like the relationship of
the metaphor to the concrete meanings of the words which surround
it. Acknowledgement is made of the "context of unknowing" in the
midst of concrete representations.[27]

Ritual and sacrament orient and order our understanding of
existence. Patterns of human life are incorporated into these
modes of understanding, that become reference points to which our
actions can be related. Langer writes:

> The driving force in human minds is fear,
> which begets an imperious demand for
> security in the world's confusion: a
> demand for a world-picture that fills all
> experience and gives each individual a
> definite orientation amid the terrifying
> forces of nature and society. Objects
> that embody such insights, and acts which

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[25]Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, P. 152.

[26]Ibid., p. 152.

[27]Ibid., p. 158.

express, preserve, and reiterate them meet
such a need .[28]

The orienting and ordering are in relation to the common
understanding of reality. Ritual and sacrament are "a slow
deposit of people's imaginative insight into life."[29] Individuals
do not create ritual and sacrament, however. These rise up out
of communal and traditional understandings which orient the
individual to the larger whole. They teach the young and others
who are outsiders the communal perceptions of reality. Community
does not arise because of ritual and sacrament, but they help
perpetuate the communal memory and identity. Events which were
originally reenacted in great specificity become more general
reenactments which engender responses applicable to experience in
general (such as thanksgiving, power, and destiny).

Ritual and sacrament portray a relational understanding of
reality. Langer quotes Durkheim:

> Religion is, first and foremost, a system of
> ideas by means of which individuals can en-
> visage the society of which they are members,
> and the relations, obscure yet intimate, which
> they bear to it. That is the primordial task
> of a faith. And though it be metaphorical and
> symbolical, it is not therefore untrue. On the
> contrary, it conveys all that is essential in
> the relations it claims to portray.[30]

We have seen how language by its very process of formation
is a relational system, with words developing meaning as they
stand in relationship with other words. In the case of ritual and

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[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid., p. 158.

[30]Ibid., p. 165.

sacrament, it is as if _we_ are the ones who stand in the midst of the concrete and derive meaning which is largely non-verbal. We embody the process. The ritual or sacrament in which we participate relates us to the world, putting us in 'right relationship' with reality as it is perceived by our community.[31] These relationships to reality in all its varied facets are "obscure yet intimate," as Durkheim says. This odd juxtaposition is true of all products of the imagination. They are obscure, or masked, as Peter Fleck says in his book, The Mask of Religion. But they also must be intimate. If the sacrament or ritual is removed from the intimately lived experience of the people, it becomes a hollow exercise. As it is enlivened with those experiences, it enriches them by relating those experiences to a larger reality.

Myth

It is not clear when myth-making began, although its origins seem somewhat connected with dream and primitive story. Myths are made of the same elements: fantasy and symbol. Langer proposes that myth-making began "somewhere with the recognition of realistic significance in a story."[32] In myth, the gods and demons are not specific persons but "the human estate of such a person, by virtue of which we are oppressed, challenged, tempted, or triumphant."[33] Myths arise from experiences within the culture, but they also arise out of social insight. This insight is

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[31]Past and present, acknowledged and unacknowledged, as it rises from the structure of experience.

[32]Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, p. 178.

[33]Ibid., p. 179.

personified and placed within a setting appropriate to the culture.
Langer writes:

> Myth...is a recognition of natural conflicts,
> of human desire frustrated by non-human
> powers, hostile oppression, or contrary
> desires; it is a story of the birth, passion,
> and defeat by death which is man's common
> fate. Its ultimate end is not wishful dis-
> tortion of the world, but serious envisage-
> ment of its fundamental truths; moral orien-
> tation, not escape. That is why it does not
> exhaust its whole function in the telling, and
> why separate myths cannot be left entirely un-
> related to any others. Because it presents,
> however metaphorically, a world-picture, an
> insight into life generally, not a personal
> imaginary biography, myth tends to become
> systematized....[34]

Myths <u>personify relationships</u>. We have seen that language
is a relational system, and that ritual and symbol portray a
relational understanding of reality. Myths personify those
relationships to social forces and those of a more cosmic nature.
Symbol and meaning are not kept apart in myth. For example,
in Polynesian cosmology, the moon does not become a woman, but
the woman becomes <u>lunarized</u>.[35]

> The savage does not, in his innocence, "think"
> the moon is a woman because he cannot tell the
> difference; he "thinks" it is a round fire, a
> shining disk; but <u>he sees Woman in it</u>, and
> names it Woman, and all its acts and relation-
> ships that interest him are those which carry
> out that significance.[36]

As these relationships in nature and in human society become
systematized in myth, their personification takes the form of
elaborate genealogies. These genealogies, which are quite often

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[34]Ibid., p. 177.

[35]Ibid., p. 193.

[36]Ibid.

irrational, often represent physical and logical relationships in society and in nature.[37]

Myth is the poetic embodiment of general ideas. For the first time, in this discussion of products of the imagination, we are seeing events and characters portrayed in some logical form. Events occur within the temporal order, and have a certain amount of credibility in relation to the world. Myth may have elements which are fantastic, but its portrayal of the world and people in it usually has a strong connection with reality. There is a unity of events in the myth which makes sense.

This, of course, leads to the problem of literalism. Up to this point, we have been able to relate to products of the imagination as either fantastic and useless, or as metaphors revealing deep meanings. Couched within a reasonably credible setting, however, myth presents this new problem. Dealing as they do with cosmic relationships, myths are easily transformed by literalists into stories of supernatural beings to which an appropriate response is either affirmation or denial.

> But this is to confuse the myth-making stage
> of thought with the literal stage. Belief
> and doubt belong essentially to the latter; the
> myth-making consciousness knows only the
> appeal of ideas, and uses or fogets them.
> Only the development of literal-mindedness
> throws doubt upon them and raises the
> question of religious belief. Those great
> conceptions which can only dawn on us in a
> vast poetic symbolism are not propositions to
> which one says yea or nay...The Homeric
> Greeks probably did not "believe in" Apollo
> as an American fundamentalist "believes in"
> Jonah and the whale, yet Apollo was not a

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[37]Ibid., p. 194.

literary fancy, a pure figment, to Homer, as
he was to Milton.[38]

As myth is subjected more and more to the organizing
principles of poetry, it becomes more accessible to our conscious
understanding of reality. It presents and initiates ideas. It
is the job of more discursive and rational thought to manipulate
and abstract its concepts. But myth, poetry, and other symbolic
modes of expression retain the power to transform our perceptions,
usually "through some great and bewildering metaphor."[39]

> Bare denotative language is a most excellent
> instrument of exact reason; it is, in fact,
> the only general precision instrument the
> human brain has ever evolved. Ideas first
> adumbrated in fantastic form become real
> intellectual property only when discursive
> language rises to their expression. That is
> why myth is the indispensable forerunner of
> metaphysics; and metaphysics is the literal
> formulation of basic abstractions, on which
> our comprehension of sober facts is based.[40]

The "increasingly articulated" forms through which we
experience and express feelings have been examined briefly in
the imaginative modes of language, ritual and sacrament, and
myth. We will now turn our attention to mythos and logos, the
streams of thought and experience which are the content of the
imaginative process.

For Jennings, mythos arises out of the first level,
experience and reality, and is apprehended at the second level
by imagination in the form of stories, rituals, narrations, and
assertions. In general, this corresponds with the description of

[38]Ibid., p. 195.

[39]Ibid., p. 291.

[40]Ibid., p. 202.

the structure of experience and its relationship to the imaginative
forms which emerge in the imaginative process. Jennings writes:

> Mythos is used here to designate that set of
> symbols, rituals, narratives, and assertions
> which, taken together, announce and mediate
> the presence of the sacred so as to represent,
> orient, communicate, and transform existence
> in the world for a community of persons.[41]

The third level for Jennings is "reflection," which he says is
the task of theology, which renders " the symbolic language of
faith accessible for contemporary self-understanding."[42]

While I am not in disagreement with Jennings, and have
found his "edifice" useful for our discussion, I find his application
of the structure somewhat disturbing. In his chapter, "Past and
Present," where he discusses "The Mythos and the Past," it becomes
clear that the horizon comes out of the past in a set of texts and
their subsequent interpretations. He writes:

> [The mythos] receives crucial and early for-
> mulation in a set of texts, and, in addition
> ...the subsequent interpretations and elabora-
> tions of that mythos are also committed to
> writing.[43]

For the Christian community, that <u>mythos</u> is based largely on the
authority of Scripture and the documents which have subsequently
interpreted and elaborated upon it.

I believe this definition is too narrowly conceived, and
will suggest a broader interpretation. Before doing that,
however, it would be helpful to consider the three ways Jennings

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[41]Jennings, p. 2.

[42]Ibid., p. 20.

[43]Ibid., p. 110.

believes Scripture gains authority as the basis of the _mythos_. Such

a consideration will help us as we broaden the base of our under-

standing of _mythos_.

> (a) its character is a product of the religious
>   imagination (i.e., its character as embra-
>   cing myth, symbol, and apocalyptic)
>
> (b) its communal character (its limits fixed by
>   the community, its images forming and in-
>   forming the continuing life of that commu-
>   nity);
>
> (c) its character as not only describing that
>   to which it points but actually conveying
>   it.[44]

I find these three ways by which one looks to the authority

of the _mythos_ very helpful. I believe that Jennings is mistaken

when he limits the Christian _mythos_ to Scripture and the written

documents of elaboration and interpretation which have followed.

But I also believe that when we consider a system of substance

which reflects the structure of experience for a specific religious

community, these three characteristics are useful bases. Let me

add a few additional comments.

I have found it very difficult to distinguish "religious

imagination" from products of imagination in general. I am

aware that certain products of the imaginative process, such as

ritual, are usually found in the religious domain, and that certain

life-issues have been traditionally considered to be addressed

adequately only with the language of religion.

If the question, "What is an appropriate manifestation of

the imaginative process in the religious domain," is asked, I would

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[44]Ibid., p. 116.

have to respond, "One which arises out of the concrete experiences

of the community and which is apprehended is such a way as to pro-

vide congruence with the past as structure of experience and as

system of substance, the possibility of novelty in the present,

and a psychical thrust into the future." I do not believe that

this is only possible in a religious community, but I do believe

that it is possible only in communities which have a common under-

standing of the structure of experience and a system of substance

and which have imaginative forms with which to experience and

express events and understandings.

This response is not as tidy and manageable as the ability

to respond with certain documents. Nor are the religious and

secular worlds clearly distinct from each other in it. That is

because I have found that traditional lines which have been drawn

in the past between what is religious and what is secular have

become increasingly blurred, with the arts and sciences becoming

rich resources for religious reflection, and many religions

becoming controlling, literalized, manipulative approaches to

reality. For the purposes of this paper, religious imagination,

from whatever source, arises out of our concrete experiences and

points beyond ourselves to the depths of reality. It is best

experienced and expressed in a community which self-consciously

attends to the imaginative process, and which provides forms

through which its members approach the fullness of experience much

more nearly than would otherwise be possible.

The third characteristic which Jennings uses to justify

the authority of Scripture, and which I believe is useful even

though our sources are much more broadly based, is based on its

embodiment of that which it is conveying. The importance of this point will become increasingly clear as I discuss the imaginative process and preaching. For now, it must suffice to say that preaching imitates the imaginative process and embodies that to which it points. This is an important point, and one which I hope the reader will keep in mind throughout this paper.

But what is embodied in an imaginative form such as preaching? We have denoted certain characteristics of the products of the imagination. They are symbolic and musical (with timbre, rhythm, and tone), they articulate feelings and attitudes, they have realistic significance even in moments of extreme fantasy, and they poetically suggest rather than comprehensively describe a reality. We have said that such a form arises out of the structure of experience where there is form and meaning, even beyond that which we know and perceive. These forms and meanings come into our consciousness in ways particular to our culture and, even more narrowly, particular to our specific communities, and in forms which allow us to experience and express those meanings. The closer the experience and expression of reality come to experiencing and expressing a unified whole, the more one could say that they are an experience and expression of the Sacred in our lives.

While we have concentrated on the forms and process within which the experience and expression of the Sacred occurs, is it possible to speak about the content within those forms which emerges in the imaginative process? If we cannot point specifically to the Scriptures and documents of interpretation and elaboration which have followed, can we point to any system of substance which

emerges out of the structure of experience? Do we have any way
to distinguish between systems which are open to transcendence
and those which are oppressive?[45]

While it is the peculiar legacy of liberalism not to be
able to provide a definitive answer to those questions, they are
extremely important to our continuing task of embodying the
imaginative process. While I have criticized Jennings' use of
Scripture and related documents as too narrow a base of the
mythos, I would also caution that our broadened base should
begin there. The mythos and motifs of faith which have come to
us in the West have largely come through the forms and structures
of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is unwise for us to cut
ourselves off from such depths. While we must not be limited
either in content or critical judgment to the Judeo-Christian
tradition, I believe that it is important that we always stand
in thoughtful relationship to it.

This relationship, and others like it, are the bases of the
imaginative process. Unlike other structures which have formed
and focused liberal thought and action, this process is based on
the experiencing of relationships. It is not centered on the
individual. The individual, to be certain, participates in it,
but is not its primary focus. The individual brings his/her
subjectivity to it, but its substance comes from the relationships
formulated among those in the community, and between the community
and its mythos. Certain motifs of faith arise and are substantiated
in the thought and experience of the people. This substantiation

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[45]Robert Bellah in "The Normative Framework for Pluralism in
America" in Soundings, Vol. LXI (Fall, 1978), criticizes liberalism
in that very area. He believes our structures have been based on
self-interest and in principle are anti-social.

is not limited to that, however. A community which attends to the imaginative process seeks an engoing embodiment of those motifs of faith in ways which promote a critical view from more analogical visions of thought, and which relate the community to depths of experience and expression.

As the _mythos_ gains substance, its inextricable connection to the _logos_ becomes apparent. We have learned to view Spirit and rationality as separate from each other, and in some ways Jennings' edifice perpetuates that view, with reflection appearing to be applied from the top while the _mythos_ emerges from the bottom. I believe that a better view of this edifice might include _mythos_ and _logos_ as intertwined, and as penetrating every part of the structure:

THE IMAGINATIVE PROCESS
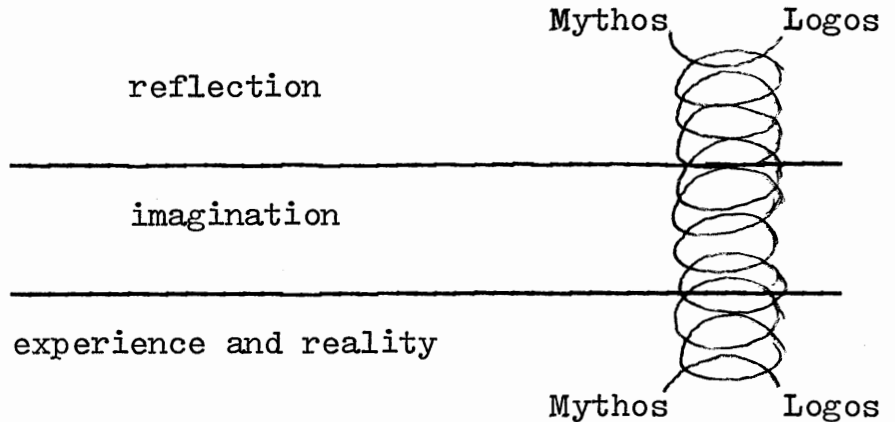
Mythos and _logos_ become increasingly articulated and available to consciousness in this structure, with _mythos_ representing the hopes, intentions, psychical energy, and sensitivity that arise out of the structure of experience and undergird all our actions and perceptions, and _logos_ representing our increased awareness of

form and rationality.[46] Our perception of reality and its meaning

comes from the relationship of the two as we participate in the

imaginative process.

This increasing intelligibility and intentionality which

come to us through the imaginative process do not preclude a

reflective stance in relation to the products of the imagination,

or to the resulting system of substance. We reach this level

when we ask the question, "But is it true?"

Reflection, with all its methods of critical thought, is

then given the task of devising ways to relate this imaginative

conception of reality to the facts as they can be discerned.

These discursive principles allow "yea" and "nay" saying to the

conception placed before us. It is at the level of reflection that

we live out our lives, believing that we have a handle on "the way

things are" and that our perceptions are true (that is, until some

"great and bewildering metaphor" emerges to turn our worlds around

in a different direction).

One of the arguments of this paper is that in recent years

the truth which has emerged from the products of the imagination

has been too narrowly apprehended at the level of reflection

because we have applied only laws of discourse and logic where

other structures were operating. Our society has developed

elaborate ways of embracing scientific truth. I need not explore

that approach here. But I believe there are other ways to apprehend

experience at the level of reflection which can enrich our

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[46]See Meland, Fallible Forms, p. 109.

understanding of reality.

John Hayward has provided us with a typology which I believe is useful in our quest for "truth" in relation to the products of imagination. In his discussion of categories of belief about myth, he designates three types: pure fiction (people believe it only hinders society, is pure fantasy, and should be eliminated as much as possible), useful fiction (people agree with the first category except that it is a useful social force which should be maintained inasmuch as it is effective), and true fiction.

"True fiction," the category of most interest in this discussion, reveals to us the paradoxical quality of the products of the imagination in relation to truth.

> On the side of truth it is maintained that myth yields a type of understanding of existence that is in part capable of rational correlation with scientific and philosophical knowledge. But also on the side of truth in myths it is asserted that there are unique features of genuine mythical discourse which are recognized as self-evident and are incapable of being stated in philosophical or scientific discourse without some loss of essential quality. Myth, like art, becomes in this view a correlate of the insights of science and philosophy without becoming a merely dispensable adjunct or predecessor of either.[47]

Hayward's definition of myth, it should be noted, is broader than the category of myth which was discussed in the previous section of this paper. It includes what I have called "the products of the imagination."

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[47]John F. Hayward, "The Theology and Philosophy of Mythical Symbolism" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1949), pp. 8-9.

> When we say "myth" we are not referring to
> legendary narratives involving divine agents.
> A mythical symbol in the modern sense is any
> concrete reality appealing to the senses and
> the imagination and at the same time containing
> suggestions of meaning that in some way pur-
> port to embody the most nearly ultimate truth
> available for its protagonists.[48]

The child's question, "Did it really happen?," leads us

first to admit that our question of truth does not have much

to do with literal events as they are portrayed in poems or

imaginative stories and myths. The character of these portrayals

is basically fictional. Our truth-question, then, is not the

question, "Did it really happen?"

A further answer to that question is that any representation

of reality which comes through a form of the imagination does

not purport to represent a one-to-one correspondence with reality.

(This is true of any theoretical view of reality.) As for the

Reality which is beyond our knowing, I believe that the best we

can do is to make somewhat bald assertions (such as those at the

beginning of this chapter), and to test continually our experience

over against such assertions.

When our experience is not congruent with what we have held

to be "the way it is," it seems to me that we have several choices,

of which some are more viable than others. We can change our

view. We can deny the applicability of our experience to this

view. Or we can decide that we have misinterpreted what really

happened.

This is the point which Meland calls both "a burden and an

opportunity." There is no decisive test by which we can determine

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[48]Ibid., p. 11.

if our view of reality corresponds to "the way it is." There is
no decisive test by which we can decide whether our experience is
to be the center of our interpretation, or whether the categories
which we have received out of the structure of experience are
the larger test. I do not believe that it is healthy or wise to
hold exclusively to either pole. Liberals in our time have by and
large held experience to be of greater weight than tradition,
sometimes too quickly adapting a new view and avoiding the critical
test which emerges from the tradition. On the other hand, some
traditionalists, clinging to their creeds, have been unable even
to allow themselves to perceive experiences which do not correspond
to the realities they imagine to be described in the creeds.

How are we liberals to be rescued from the extreme subjecti-
vity which one friend has said, "amounts to checking with the
current issue of Psychology Today to see if our experience compares."
I must admit I do not have a decisive answer to such a question.
My answer is functional. I am more interested in a view which
gives us a way to relate to reality in its fullest dimensions
than I am in having, by some unknown standards, an accurate view.
From the view of metaphysics, this would be perceived as an
inadequate stance, I suspect. But since I do not believe that
we can finally know if we are accurate, I choose to seek the way
in which we can experience reality most fully. For me, the products
of the imaginative process are more truthful representations of
reality than a metaphysical representation which seeks to be a
transcription of reality.

There are certain characteristics which can be kept in mind,
however, as we become aware of the products of the imaginative

process, and decide if they are truthful representations of reality and valuable for the future.

Imaginative Truth is Relational

Having a relational approach to reality does not guarantee the presence of truth or value. However, relationality is an important characteristic of such truth or value. A system of substance that arises out of experience and reflection and that is derived from relationships and maintained within a community which attends to the larger relationship with the mythos, is more likely to represent truth and value than a more individualistic one.

Imaginative Truth Does Not Seek a Comprehensive Description of Reality, But Points to a Larger Meaning

Even though it is usually verbal and/or dramatic in form, imaginative truth does not explain away the larger meaning or block it. Peter Fleck, while recently explaining the title of his book, The Mask of Religion, said that it is necessary to be gentle with such truth. If we seek to know it face to face, it will flee from us. We must look around the corner for it, and then softly and gently, with the understanding that to attempt to grasp it wholly will cause it to be lost.

On the other hand, it is important that this truth not be so obscure that we lose our access to that which is inherent in the imaginative form. It must reflect the intimate wisdom of our lives. Thus we find a paradox: though the truth is veiled, it is clearly accessible as it relates to the innermost parts of our being.

Imaginative Truth is Open
to Rational Reflection

The gentle way by which we must approach such truth does
not prohibit approaching it with our discursive rational tools.
But when we do reflect upon the truth we have found in the
imaginative process, we must understand that all rational stan-
dards cannot be met through such an examination. "The myth simply
cannot be rationalized."[49] This is to say that there must be some
congruence between rational truth as we know it and the truth
revealed through imaginative forms. "If the imagination produced
no sense of an objective correlate it would not be used nor its
products respected."[50] On the other hand, it must be remembered
that:

> However detached one's theoretical under-
> standing may be, one is concerned with it
> and refines it and gives it allegiance and
> respect because its underlying myths have
> grasped one's nature and compelled the rise
> of theoretical curiosity.[51]

Imaginative Truth Leads to an Answering
Action on the Part of the Experiencer

Because this truth is relational it pulls us from our
atomistic view of the world to an inter-subjective involvement
with it. While the imaginative form conveys this truth to us,
it also gives us a tool by which we may express our response.
This is especially true when imaginative forms are used within
the context of a societal entity (such as a church or some con-
fraternity of workers, artists, poets, or a political party).

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[49]Ibid., p. 29

[50]John Hayward, in a letter to the author, February 19, 1981.

[51]Hayward, "The Theology and Philosophy of Mythical Symbolism,"
p. 24.

This "answering action" is, as some ethicists claim,[52] much more possible through imaginative approaches to reality than through reference to rational principles alone.

Imaginative Truth is Connected to the Cultural Mythos

While we are more aware than ever that we live in a pluralistic culture, imaginative truth connects us to the abiding streams of thought and experience which have sustained generations before us. We are compelled by imaginative truth to accept the burden and the opportunity of the cultural inheritance we receive without becoming iconoclastic. We must reinterpret that mythos in the light of our existential situation.

I would reiterate here what I have said previously: it is important that we acknowledge that for many generations deep truths have emerged from the structure of experience through the Judeo-Christian mythos, and we ought not do less than stand self-consciously in relationship to it. We may do more, but we should not do less.

Imaginative Truth Embodies That to Which It Points

The imaginative process is a peculiar combination of form and substance. As we have seen in Jennings' criteria in relation-ship to Scripture, its character not only describes that to which it points, but actually conveys it. We might add that the products of imagination are symbolic both in form and content, and they embody that which they represent. It is in this peculiar way

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[52]For example, Stanley Hauerwas.

that mythos and logos intertwine in the imaginative process, which allows us to experience both the form and substance as part of the imaginative process.

The imaginative process, then, is a way by which individuals in a community experience and express reality. It emerges out of the structure of experience with its cumulative valuations and becomes increasingly available to consciousness through the various modes of imagination, through which a community expresses and responds to it. It is available for rational reflection, although it is never completely subject to such objective validation.

Let us look now at preaching as a unique embodiment of the imaginative process.

CHAPTER III

THE IMAGINATIVE PROCESS AND PREACHING

In the first chapter, I named four areas which are concerns
for the modern-day church: credibility and authority; words and
their use; the connection between the ministry of the church and
the lived lives or people, and the purpose or object of action.

In the second chapter, I stated that the imaginative process,
with its attendant forms and structures, is a way for us to
apprehend reality wholly and deeply. The process is dramatic,
relational, and contextual, and is experienced most fully within
a social entity, such as the church, which can support such a
process.

In this chapter, I will show that the imaginative process,
while certainly present in many facets of our lives, is uniquely
embodied in the preaching-event.[1] I believe the form and function
of the preaching-event imitates the form and function of the
imaginative process. To demonstrate this I will show the dramatic,
relational, and contextual elements in preaching, especially as
they are related to the concerns of the church stated in the
first chapter. While this chapter will be divided into four
sections, of which each will address an area of concern in the
church, I hasten to remind the reader that it has already been

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[1]I choose the term, "preaching-event," to designate the
whole nexus of responsive relationships around the preparation and
delivery of a sermon.

stated how inextricably involved each of these areas is with the others. It will be quickly apparent that certain parts of the imaginative process which are said to apply to one concern may, in fact, be of significant importance to all the other concerns. Such divisions, helpful in the cause of organization and clarity, sometimes separate arbitrarily where separations might not be warranted. In a paper which seeks to find ways to approach reality in its wholeness, the irony of categories and divisions is ever present. It is my hope that even though this section is structured into categories, an image of the preaching-event as a unified one will emerge by its end.

In preparing for the writing of this chapter, I made the discovery that there is very little contemporary literature on the <u>process</u> of writing, developing, and delivering sermons.[2] Most of what has been published is from lectures. <u>Harry Emerson Fosdick's Art of Preaching</u> was published posthumously because during his lifetime he refused even to lecture on the subject. In <u>The Anguish of Preaching</u>, Joseph Sittler writes:

> ...What it means to preach out of the swirling
> change in basic patterns of thought and re-
> solution that characterize our time is, I am
> convinced, something no one knows very much about.
> The role of the sermon in the transmission of
> tradition cannot be certainly specified; all
> one can do is face facts, assess the vitality
> of this or that possibility, and probe for a
> way to preach that shall be as appropriate as
> he can make it to his moment, his place, his
> people, his own maturing toward conviction and
> clarity.[3]

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[2]See bibliography.

[3]Joseph Sittler, <u>The Anguish of Preaching</u> (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. vi.

As I talked to ministers in our churches who must grapple week after week with this dilemma, I found a similar reluctance on their part to analyze the process which occurs during the development of the sermon. Ministers are not at all reluctant to share their sermons or to discuss the congretation's response to them. As part of my research for this paper, I sent letters to a selected group of Unitarian Universalist ministers, requesting that they send me sermons related to this topic. I received a much larger number of sermons than I had anticipated, along with many helpful comments. I was educated to a significant degree as to the quality of our ministry in this area. But my efforts in discussions with ministers to elicit an analysis of the sermon-event were not very fruitful. As one minister said, perhaps for many, "I don't like to think about it."

I believe that there are two reasons why this is the case. First, the writing of a sermon is an extremely personal process. This process was described to me as "excruciating" and "painful." One minister said, "Every week I think this week I can't do it." Another minister, when asked about vulnerability, said, "It is as if I am naked when I write." Another said of the process, "I am wrestling for my blessing like Jacob with the angel," and acknowledged the wound that Jacob received in the process. Such experience is not easily analyzed.

Secondly, there is the feeling that to analyze what happens, especially in those vulnerable hours when the minister writes the sermon, might cut us off from the very depths which make that process possible. The one who said, "I don't like to think about it," continued, "because it's like walking--if I thought

about it I might not be able to do it." An analysis of the process could result in the separation of the knowing subject from the object of knowledge and cause us to loose our deep connections with the living structure of experience. We could fall into what Langer named the mistake of many critics of poetry: the application of laws of discourse to the products of the imaginative process.

Is this attempt to discern structure and form in the preaching-event misplaced, then? I do not think so. At its most theoretical levels, it is very limited, giving only a thin representation of the reality which is present. But if there are "order and meaning at the heart of things" which arise out of the living structure of experience and are apprehended by us in the imaginative process, it is incumbent upon us, however feebly, to seek to understand that order and process so that we might be more available to it.

Credibility and Authority

Where do authority and credibility come from in our time? This section will deal with one aspect of that question--the authority and credibility of the minister as he/she participates in the imaginative process. To this end, I will consider him/her as an individual, and as a participant in the preaching-event.

It is not new to say that the minister and his/her message should be credible. Certainly in the liberal ministry it is expected that the minister be intelligent and that what he/she says has a congruence that engenders respect. The sermons should be stimulating. They should be interesting. They should challenge. His/her personal life should correspond to what he/

she says on Sunday morning. All of this could go without saying.

Our ministry, on the whole, has taken this responsibility very seriously. We are skilled at crafting well-thought, well-formed sermons. Reason has been our watchword. We have attended well to the various academic disciplines and the gifts of knowledge which they have given us. "Making sense of our world and our place in it"--a credible goal for ministry--has been largely possible for us because of the windows onto reality opened for us by the various sciences. But those windows have not been doors. It has been difficult for us to enter and participate in the reality being described,[4] which leads more and more in our preaching to the substitution of "the detached for the participatory."[5]

To recover the preaching-event as a participatory one requires that the minister embody the imaginative process in a way that allows the members of the congregation to participate with him/her as the sermon is delivered. This requires much of the minister as an individual. The credibility and authority of this participatory approach rest largely on the quality of the minister's ability to perceive his/her life experiences, the experiences of those around him/her, and their connection to the mythos which arises out of the living structure of experience. He/she perceives those experiences, not so much as data to be understood, but as narrative events to be re-experienced within a specific communal context.

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[4]I am indebted to Earl Holt for this image.

[5]Jennings, p. 16.

The minister is the narrator for the same community week
after week at its regular gathering, a gathering which also
attends to the deep needs of the people for music and ritual.[6]

He/she must be able to discern those articulated and
unarticulated needs, hopes, and desires of the people, and embody
them in narrative form, remembering that the community is more
than those he/she faces on Sunday morning, and that their needs,
hopes, and desires are much deeper than even they know.

To accomplish this awesome task, the minister must know
his/her own needs, hopes, and desires and their connection to
the larger _mythos_. This can only come through study, reflection,
and acute self-awareness. The rhythm from week to week requires
such discipline, as credibility and authority will be lost the
moment it is discerned that the minister does not speak from a
grounded perspective. We shall see in a later section that this
does not mean the minister must practice foolish consistency.
He/she, in fact, will have to attend to the question of consistency
less, once his/her faith is grounded. But there must be a cohesive-
ness about what he/she says which arises from a continuing relation-
ship with the _mythos_. John F. Hayward writes:

> Whatever the preacher's skills of mind or
> utterance, he needs to keep firmly before him
> this primary task: namely, to bear witness to
> his own conviction about elemental resources
> found in the context of a faith-seeking
> community. No sermon is a sermon unless
> some basic article of the minister's faith is

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[6]Following the discussion in the previous chapter, I do
not believe that ritual only means elaborate priestly manuveurs.
Any community that meets week after week and follows a pattern in
its meeting is participating in ritual. Some rituals represent
the community _mythos_ more effectively than others.

> at least implied and preferably articulated.
> Furthermore, this act is rescued from subjecti-
> vism by its seeking to meet the faith-pre-
> suppositions, concerns, actions, prejudices,
> and directions of the people. Here "the
> people" means not only the flesh-and-blood
> congregation to whom the minister speaks, but
> also their ancestors, history, and heritage--
> what used to be called "the Communion of the
> Saints" living and dead.[7]

For credibility and authority to be gained in the preaching-event, the minister's life must also be congruent with what he/she says. This might be assumed in relation to one's moral actions. But I believe this congruence exists even more primarily and more necessarily between the process of one's life and the process of the sermon-event. I asked one minister if he was different from his usual self when he was in the pulpit. After pausing for a moment, he turned to a friend and said, "Am I?" She responded, "In intensity, yes. But not in process." I believe this distinction is well-stated. It is crucially important that the minister recognize him-/herself as dramatically embodying a process which reflects his/her intimate grappling with the realities of life, while at the same time recognizing that the sermon-event requires that he/she be able to transcend that self.

Although it may be hazardous to use illustrations from sermons to elaborate on the points I am making, because of the possibility that the illustration might suggest a technique rather than an understanding of the process as a whole, I will risk suggesting some examples. The sermon by Burton Carley, "God, Little Girls and It," is introduced by a paragraph which I believe nicely juxtaposes a self-understanding with its more

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[7]John F. Hayward, "The Purpose of Preaching," The Register-Leader 150 (March, 1968): 12-13.

transcendent dimension. It does so in a way which reveals a
healthy ego, at the same time that it pulls the congregation into
relationship with the topic.

> Like Harry Crews, I grew up in a time filled
> with the mystery of God and little girls.
> When I reflect on my childhood I can see that
> both God and little girls are interconnected.
> It was on a church hayride that I experimented
> with something called "french kissing." It
> was on a church camp trip embarked upon for the
> purpose of meeting little girls that I walked
> down the aisle and gave my life to Christ. I
> don't think I have ever recovered from either
> experience.[8]

Reverend Carley says that one member of his congregation
has called this skill "public intimacy," not just because in this
sermon he is talking of his socialization as a young male into our
society, but because he can relate very personal details of his
life in a way that draws the congregation into the larger dimension
of the topic. It is a kind of seduction, as the minister uses
his/her vitality and force of personality to draw in the congrega-
tion. If the power of the minister rested solely on charisma,
it would quickly be viewed as cheap and sensational. Coupled with
the ability to point beyond one's own personality, it becomes a
vital part of the imaginative process.

Another way in which the minister might use images related
to one's self to point to a more transcendent dimension is as the
narrator of an event which has universal mythic overtones. The
following passage introduced a sermon which Kathy Fuson preached,
called "The Burning Fountain":

> The way was long and difficult, winding through
> thick, tangled forests inhabited by unseen
> monsters, then across barren wastelands in-

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[8]Burton Carley, "God, Little Girls and It," a sermon preached
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Shreveport, Louisiana.

habited by no one, then down into valleys filled
with the shadows of death. Just as I felt that
I could follow the way no longer, I suddenly
came upon the place I had been seeking unknow-
ingly.

And I beheld there a wondrous thing: a burning
fountain. Flames danced across the flowing
waters of this fountain, but never burned the
fountain dry, nor did the waters ever extin-
guish the fires that blazed in their midst.
And as I stood unmoving, amazed at what I saw,
a voice said unto me, "Draw near and drink of
the burning fountain. It is there for you.
You must, however, beware of drinking, for the
fiery waters of this fountain give a bitter
satisfaction. If you drink, the water will
relieve your thirst, but the flames will leave
you scarred. The wholeness you seek, along with
its pain, is yours at the burning fountain.[9]

The hearer realizes very quickly from the mysterious tone

of the story that this is not an experience which Kathy Fuson

has, in literal fact, had, but the image quite obviously comes

from her experience with wholeness and accompanying pain. It is

in fact a very personal, human story which has arisen out of

the life-experience of the minister and which points to a deeper

dimension.

It is not necessary that the minister's selfhood be

explicitly part of the sermon in order for him/her to "dramatically

embody" the imaginative process in the sermon. In fact, biogra-

phical anecdotes which do not draw in the congregation experi-

entially and then point them to the larger mythos are inadequate.

The presence of a narrator and a plot which is evocative is not

enough. Evocative plots can be powerful. But the imaginative

process conveys more than mere power when it relates the hearer

to truth present in the living mythos. The hearer is drawn into

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[9]Kathy Fuson, "The Burning Fountain," a sermon preached at
Unity Church, St. Paul, Minnesota, January 25, 1981.

the imaginative process, not only because it is powerful, but because it connects him/her to the living mythos of the community. That connection is paramount. Burton Carley says:

> How do we transcend our individual egos? How do we feel connected to the universe and others? I believe that the religious experience is one of feeling connected to the great Mystery and of saying "yes" to it, a "thank you" which is lived out in the very center of our being.[10]

The minister transcends his/her individual ego by demonstrating a relationship to the congregation. One minister told me that many of his sermons could not be preached elsewhere because they were such a personal reflection of his relationship to his congregation. "This comes after people know you and love you and you love them," he said. On the other hand, he continued, "I let my congregation know that my first loyalty is to the Church Universal, second to the Unitarian Universalist movement, and third to the congregation." The connection, though intimate, is always in relation to a larger context of understanding.

It is through such a relational embodiment of the imaginative process, which evokes a response to the universe such as "yes" and "thank you," that the sermon-event has credibility and authority in the eyes of the people.

Words and Their Use

I have described at several points in this paper the unique relationship of the concrete to the abstract in the imaginative process. At one point I stated that the persisting structure of experience arises out of concrete experiences and valuations

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[10]In a letter to the author, February 17, 1981.

accumulated over time. At another, I said that our language grows as concrete meanings are related to provide an associational context in which metaphorical meanings can be inferred. I also said that the minister transforms concrete experiences into a reality which enables us to transcend our atomistic selves. This he/she does, for the most part, by keeping the knowing subject and the object of knowledge together. It is easy neither to do, nor to describe.

It is this very difficulty which has made religious language so problematic. Words have come into use which carry all the vitality and richness necessary to describe this concrete/ transcendent reality in which we find ourselves. But over time these words (following the process of language development described in the previous chapter) have become stereotyped into literal definitions. Words which once served generations of people as vital symbols for the most intimate and transcendent realities have become flat, literalized, and prosaic.

But if we were to continue to follow the description of the process of language development, we would find that new words continue to arise out of the structure of experience which derive contextual meanings in relation to the older, more stereotyped words, and which in turn enrich our understanding of those older words.

One of the primary imaginative tools of the minister is the use of words in sermons which have traditional meaning, but which have become stereotyped and literalized in our time, in relation to words and images which provide new richness and vitality. This juxtaposition not only applies to individual words, but also to

images in story and parable.

Sometimes such a juxtaposition can occur in a phrase, such as in the title to Judith Urquhart's sermon, "Who's Afraid of the Good Samaritan?," which adds the puzzling element of fear to the more prosaic concept of the "good Samaritan." Sometimes it can take the form of a sermon in free verse such as Joseph Barth's "To Evil Open," which says, in part:

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. . . o . . . . . . . . . . .
Bela Bartok
    living under the shadow
    of his wide flung passionate, flailing wing;
    (Hitler's, I mean)
Bartok, to ease his breast
    where each heartbeat was
    strumming
    a taut wire strung strung
    between tightening winches
    called
    Beauty and the Beast
the tight wire
    many Germans walked on
    from now into eternity
    (if also Jews
    and no need to be pious)
            to quiver
            quaver
from love's home center
    to gas chamber--
    the long-short
    tense last stretch strung
    between life and death:
The string
    strung to sing
    a tragic threnody
    if tragedy
    can be wrested
        from insanity
by Bela Bartok's Concerto.
    Violin!
Can violin sing
    Peace ("in our time")
and black booted warriors
    strike strident left
                beat
                right
                beat
    left-right, beat
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                    and wave baton
                    at the end of stiff waves
                    of saluting arms
                    geared to a war machine?
                    Shout:
                    Heil Hitler!
        . . . .[11]

This artful sermon reminds us of the words of Arthur Miller
in his introduction to "After the Fall." He said, "This play is
not 'about' something; hopefully it is something."[12] This sermon
is not about evil, it is an evocation of all the rich and terrible
meanings which surround that word. It differs from a traditional
dramatic event in that it is presented by a minister in a specific
relationship with a congregation. While this sermon can certainly
be appreciated by those of us outside that congregation, it was
experienced most fully, and the words had the greatest depth of
meaning, in the context of that day.

Every word carries a specific purpose, but the purposes
are not made explicit in this sermon. The images are piled upon
each other in a way that might disturb some, but in a way which
requires the hearer to make connections which are made in the deep
reaches of our beings where reflection and emotion are merged: the
area we have called the "living structure of experience."

The musical intonations and groupings of sounds are explicit
in the form of this sermon. Much of the deep impact comes from
the rhythm which echoes the strident evil. Such musical intonations
and rhythmic groupings can be part of any sermon, however, and can

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[11]Joseph Barth, "To Evil Open," preached at King's Chapel,
Boston, February 22, 1959. The full text is in Appendix A.

[12]Arthur Miller in a forward to "After the Fall, The Saturday
Evening Post (February 1, 1964): 32.

be used intentionally as a vehicle of the imaginative process.
We might do well to look to Fundamentalist and black preaching
for lessons in this area. We may not choose to imitate their style,
but we might become more sensitized to timbre, rhythm, and tone
in the sermonic event.

One sermon which I received which dramatically illustrated
the effective use of rhythm was James Madison Barr's sermon,
"Life is Sometimes Like a Horse Race: A Genuine Risk!" The story
Reverend Barr tells is of the career of the horse (a filly),
Genuine Risk, which won the Kentucky Derby, and which, on the
verge of winning the Preakness, was fouled by another horse and
lost. At the time the sermon was written a grievance had been
filed by the owners of Genuine Risk, but had not been settled. It
was not clear whether this wrong would be rectified.

It is not possible to quote the sermon at sufficient length
to document the way the sermon builds momentum, much as a horse
race does. Even reading the written sermon arouses the tension
which must have been felt even more keenly when it was preached.
The disappointment and outrage which the hearer feels is capped
by the fact that Reverend Barr leaves it unresolved at the end.
It is also underscored by the admission that he had bet ten dollars
on Genuine Risk. He ends, "So be it."[13]

The sermon is certainly about more than a horse race. But
my point here is that the concrete image which carries the sermon
is that of a filly which has a chance to overcome odds and win,
and which is fouled out. And the image is enlivened by the

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[13]James Madison Barr, III, "Life is Sometimes Like a Horse
Race: A Genuine Risk," preached at the First Unitarian Church of
Memphis, Tennessee, on May 25, 1980.

rhythm of the sermon which builds, embodying the tension which would be present in an actual horse race. It is this rhythm which helps make this sermon a vehicle of the imaginative process, and which helps the hearers experience reality in a way that points to the depths of experience.

The process of writing such a sermon involves, as one minister said, "hundreds of little decisions." Among the ministers to whom I have spoken, there seems to be general accord that a process, which at least in part proceeds out of a consciousness which is relatively unfettered, "works" best. One minister, now retired, said:

> My best sermons (to my way of thinking) seemed
> largely to write themselves, an outpouring
> from some deeper part of the mind, with the
> rational part just holding the reins to pre-
> vent a runaway.[14]

The imaginative process involves being open to that "out-pouring from some deeper part of the mind," attending to the "hundreds of little decisions" which involve careful juxtaposition of word with word and image with image to vitalize older, more prosaic meanings; attending to timbre, rhythm, and tone; and seeking the evocation of meaning in the form of the sermon itself.

Connection Between the Ministry and the Lived Lives of the People

The connections which are made between the minister and the people, the people with each other, and the congregation with its own living _mythos_, are subtly formed. Although it helps, one does not just _decide_ to become connected, with the bonds

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[14]Arthur Foote, in a letter to the author, February 20, 1981.

automatically following. We Unitarian Universalists are at a
distinct disadvantage in this area, with many of our members
coming from other traditions, seeking to renounce their past
religious connections, and in the process cutting themselves
off from the roots which have connected them to the living
structure of experience. For this reason, it is especially
incumbent upon us to attend to the question of connections. In
this section, I will ask the question, "How do we, in the sermon-
event, tend the deep connections which are forged in a church
community?"

This question was partially answered in the first section
of this chapter. The minister enters into a love relationship
with her/her congregation. It is reciprocal. The sermon-event
expresses that love by its sensitivity to the deep needs of the
people. That sensitivity is focused in the sermon in a way that
responds to these needs. As Harry Emerson Fosdick writes:

> Week after week one sees these topical
> preachers who turn their pulpits into plat-
> forms and their sermons into lectures,
> straining after some new, intriguing sub-
> ject, and one knows that in private they
> are straining after some new, intriguing
> ideas about it....One who listens to such
> preaching or reads it knows that the
> preacher is starting at the wrong end. He
> is thinking first of his ideas, original
> or acquired, when he should think first of
> his people. He is organizing his sermon
> around the elucidation of his theme, whereas
> he should organize it around the endeavor to
> meet his people's need....Nothing that he
> says on any subject, however wise and impor-
> tant, matters much unless it makes at the
> beginning vital contact with the practical
> life and daily thinking of the audience.[15]

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[15]Crocker, ed., pp. 31-32.

The minister starts with "the practical life and daily thinking of the audience." But, as has been stated several times in this paper, he/she must not stop there. The congregation must be put in relationship to that which is characteristic of the human condition. To do otherwise would promote a community that was ingrown and limited in scope and vision. One minister who said that he always had specific people in mind when he wrote a sermon also said that he maintained "a dialogue with outsiders" when he wrote, often articulating things of which the members of the congregation had only been vaguely aware.

Beyond that relationship which is explicitly developed between the minister and his/her congregation, there are many implicit ways in the sermon-event in which deep bonds are forged in a church community.

One of these is the dramatic mode of the sermon-event. An existential situation is created in which the congregation 'lives' the subject. This is situational, and is also brought about through careful use of language, as we have discussed. It is also brought about by the minister consciously assuming a role as 'representative' of the congregation as its members all grapple together with a certain life-issue. This 'representation', I believe, created what the minister's friend referred to when she said he was different in level of intensity in the pulpit. His process of living through a situation was heightened in a dramatic way as he represented the congregation.

This is beautifully illustrated in a sermon by Alice Wesley, in which she, in fact, was a representative, not only of her own congregation, but of the situation itself. She preached this

sermon on tolerance at the Saint John's Catholic Church in Silver
Spring, Maryland. After an introductory section in which she
spoke of Jesus and Paul and their lessons of love (thereby
establishing her openness to the language of that congregation),
and then related some "mistakes" in our history, she said:

> Our similarity as Roman Catholics and Uni-
> tarian Universalists: all of us, in all our
> traditions, have human ancestors who have
> made mistakes, sometimes naive mistakes,
> sometimes vicious ones. Yet all of us have
> also received great gifts of idealism, of
> dreams, of service, of truth from our tradi-
> tions. All of us are presently called to
> oppose evil; yet not one of us is more than
> finite. It is part of our human condition
> that we must do what we must do bearing the
> burden of risk, which our human limitations
> impose. All of us, too, share the hope of
> learning the ever new lessons of love.[16]

While the language appears didactic in the sense that it
does not conjure up a visual, aural, or kinesthetic image, its
embodiment of tolerance and forgiveness takes it out of the
realm of discussion about something, and into the experiential,
dramatic mode. She is not talking about historical events which
have been less than successful. She is saying that we have to
forgive ourselves and forgive each other, and, in the saying,
she is demonstrating the forgiveness.

She reported later to her own congregation that at the
conclusion of the sermon at St. John's she received a standing
ovation. She also said:

I need to confess that during that service

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[16]Alice Wesley, untitled sermon preached at St. John's
Catholic Church in Silver Spring, Maryland, included in the text
of a later sermon to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Silver
Spring, Maryland.

> and especially afterwards, as people spoke
> warmly and appreciatively to me as they went
> through the door, my sermon turned out to be
> a fulfilled prophesy for me. Even as I spoke
> of shattered preconceptions, some of my own
> were mercifully shattered by the manifest
> freedom of love in that congregation.[17]

This event was unique in that it did not occur in the midst of
an ongoing, reciprocal relationship. It was specific to a
particular time and a particular place. It was a powerful event,
however, because Reverend Wesley connected it to the roots of
both traditions represented in a way that had communal relevance.
It pointed to the mythos shared by the two religious communities.

The dramatic mode is not limited to what the minister
says in the sermon. It permeates the whole of the service from
week to week. A visit to All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa,
Oklahoma, where the minister, John Wolf, has developed over the
years a dramatic mode which permeates the whole of the service,
would document this point. This style, which one member has
described as "watching Reverend Wolf walk a tightrope each week,"
has emerged out of his many years with this congregation. The
tension comes partly from the texts of his sermons, and partly
from his dramatic presentation which the congregation has come
to expect.

We Unitarian Universalists have, for the most part, stripped
our services of formal ritual and sacrament, freeing ourselves
of formal ritual and sacrament, freeing ourselves from the
restrictions those impose, but at the same time losing some of
the explicit vehicles of the imaginative process.

[17]Ibid.

Roy Phillips has argued that with the removal of the altar and communion table, the _sermon_ has been transmuted into sacrament.[18] He says:

> The crossed-out, caret-marked essay carried
> into the pulpit by a sweaty-palmed human
> being concerned about projecting the voice
> and emphasizing the proper words: I mean you
> and I—oh, so very much of _this_ world—
> incomplete in knowledge, not ever as prepared
> as we might have been for this particular
> Sunday's venture. I mean us—this-worldly,
> standing before the waiting congregation
> with manuscript or outline or scratchings
> on the back of an envelope—this human person
> with a tattered essay to share. I mean that
> precisely _this_ is the sacramental element.
> Not bread, nor wine, nor water, but finite
> human person standing to give the essay of
> the morning—this is the sacramental element,
> mundane, physical, fleshy, finite, faulted.
> The preacher, herself or himself, is the ele-
> ment in the sacramental act.[19]

This part of the event, couched within a regular formal service, and embodying an ongoing relationship between a minister and a community and the community and its _mythos_, becomes a sacrament. Its concreteness is revealed in finiteness, while at the same time it becomes a vehicle for more than the words, and more than the actions, of the minister. I believe it is highly appropriate for us that it be so. It is important that we, who hold the sermon central to our worship, and who consider the imaginative process to be an ongoing one with new truth continually available to us, hold a weekly representation of that living process in high esteem, and value what is revealed to us in it.

The preaching-event, then, helps form explicit connections

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[19]Ibid., p. 12.

between the ministry and the congregation as it reflects the reciprocal relationship between them. As it embodies the imaginative process, the finite concreteness brought to it by the minister and the congregation is transformed through the ritual and sacrament in the event itself into vital connections with the living structure of experience.

Purpose and Object of Action

It might be said that the imaginative process leads to a certain vagueness of purpose, with "outpourings from some deeper part of the mind" being inadequate to meet the needs of our day. It might be said that attention to the sermon-event as ritual and sacrament, as music, and as vital language and drama which connect us to the living structure of experience, does not suggest a vision which has the power to draw us forward. This underestimates the power and vitality of the mythos. It underestimates the deep purposes inherent in the imaginative process. It also under-estimates the concrete reality which is attended to in the process.

The imaginative process involves "sympathetic participation in the realities of life and the world."[20] It is a process to which we must continually respond. This response shapes and focuses our ongoing action.

John Hayward believes that part of our confusion about the purpose of sermons has resulted from our notion "that religion itself is limited to the imperative mood."[21] He writes:

> Liberal preachers, Christian or otherwise (not
> to mention many of their fundamentalist

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[20] Jennings, p. 12.

[21] Hayward, "The Purpose of Preaching," p. 12.

> counterparts), have long regarded the sermon
> as an elaborate commandment or an extended
> persuasion summed up in the phrase, "Do
> this," of "Don't do that." But more freshly
> conceived, religion should help the worshipper
> to recognize strengths, opportunities,
> remedies, and healings which are in fact
> available to him.[22]

If, as we discussed in the last section, the sermon-event is
truly connected to the communal life of the people, as it is
characteristic of the human condition, it will open the hearers
to healing, redemptive responses.

The sermon is not a random, chaotic accumulation of images,
but is rather "a critical organization of action and attitude."[23]
Our perception of reality as it comes to us in the imaginative
process is, as we have said, "an organic unity which is greater
than anyone's ability to perceive it and which brings with it
both a burden and an opportunity." In the sermon-event we are
confronted with that continuing burden and opportunity, not as
exhortation, but as a reality which compels us to act.

We see the sermonic event, then, as a dramatic imitation
of the imaginative process in which the minister's intensity is
heightened as he embodies the process. It arises out of the
interrelationship of the minister and the congregation, and of the
congregation with the mythos as a sacramental event which transmutes
the concrete realities in which its members live into vital
connection with the living depths.

Would all of this have made a difference to the chaplain

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[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid., p. 13.

whom Churchill denounced so strongly? I believe it would have.
If he had been able to speak out of the fear and uncertainty
which must have been present in his own heart, and related
them to those of the soldiers before him; if he could have used
the traditional stories and language in a vital way to reflect
the burdens and possibilities in their actions; if he could have
envisioned himself as a representative of what they all were
going through, and embodied those struggles and hopes in the
sacramental sermonic act, then the comfort and strength might
have been given "where both were sorely needed."

CHAPTER IV

THE IMAGINATIVE PROCESS IN A SERMON BY ROY PHILLIPS

Roy Phillips has been one of the ministers who has been self-consciously attending to the imaginative process in the sermon-event. In the course of the development of this thesis, we have had several conversations about how he approaches the event, especially while writing the sermon itself. The purpose of this chapter is to explicate in a very practical way how the imaginative process takes form in an actual sermon.

This chapter, then, is based on the sermon, "To Speak of God," which Roy Phillips preached at Unity Church Unitarian in St. Paul, Minnesota, on March 1, 1981. In addition to the conversations which we have had, he wrote a detailed commentary on the purposes of each paragraph in the sermon, upon which I have relied heavily in the preparation of this chapter. The full text of the sermon, may be found in Appendix B.

This chapter is not intended to be a critical comparison of this sermon by Roy Phillips with my theory of the imaginative process. My intention is rather to explicate further the theory by reference to Phillips' process, which is a rich resource for our further understanding.

Phillips has been the Minister of Unity Church since 1972, and considers the weekly sermons as an ongoing dialogue (perhaps "wrestle" would be a better word) with the congregation, in which

he cajoles, lures, pushes, comforts, and reassures them. The prodding and pushing he does in the prophetic role, the reassuring, congratulating, and comforting in the pastoral role. All this is done within the priestly role.

This sermon originated from a conversation Phillips had over lunch with an older member of the congregation. The member, a warm, supportive person, said, "It seems that you have been saying 'God' more lately in your sermons. I meant to ask you today, 'What do you mean by God?'" Phillips sent him some sermons in which he had explicitly tried to say what the term means, and, even though he did not believe that he had actually been using the word 'God' more, he decided in response to do the sermon, "To Speak of God."

Amost the whole of this analysis could be done on how the sermon is written in response to the congregation. Its conception is only the first example of this responsiveness. The conception sets the stage for the sermon, which, in the same relational mode, arises out of the community. To be sure, the request was stated by one person, and Phillips says he usually writes his sermons with certain individuals in mind. It is, however, a response to a community. One must intuit the sense of a community, and that is done by keeping open to the responses of individuals and responding to them. It is a delicate balance to maintain, responding to individuals while understanding the final task to be the response to the community as a whole.

Phillips' understanding of the sermon-event in relation to the community is well-illustrated by the statement which is

on the cover of each of his printed sermons:

> Preaching is an unrepeatable communal event
> which occurs among a particular people at a
> specific time in the context of the wor-
> shipping congregation. Rightly considered,
> fully experienced, preaching is a sacramental
> event, endowed with the life-concerns, the
> energies, the longings of the people gathered.
> The words contained herein are taken from
> the minister's manuscript as written and
> delivered. They are here lifted out of
> their proper context and should be con-
> sidered the thinnest abstraction taken out
> of the fullness of the worship event.

The sermon is more than a topical response to a certain problem
of an individual or individuals in the congregation. The
sermons are "endowed with the life-concerns, the energies, (and)
the longings of the people gathered."

I would add that while much of the immediate vitality of
the preaching-event comes from the life-concerns, energies, and
longings of the people there, its sacramental quality comes from
a much deeper representation of the mythos, including the past
life of the community as it is articulated and remembered, and
even that part which has been lost to consciousness. A community
is not just its history, however, as Meland has pointed out. It
is its relationship to events which have occurred as streams of
thought and experience. Even though these relationships are not
explicitly acknowledged in the statement on the back of the sermons,
they are present in this sermon in subtle but important ways. He
does not point out the relationships, but they are embedded in
the sermon.

The first paragraph of the sermon is an excellent example,
as Phillips fills the chancel with various protagonists who
participate with him as he narrates the sermon. It could have

been an intellectual, discursive view of Augustine's thought about God. By moving from St. Augustine's statement in English, "If you can comprehend it, it is not God," to his statement in Latin, to Wallace Robbins (a former minister of Unity Church), and back to his own statements, Phillips intentionally creates confusion about who is speaking, and what is really being said. At the same time, he is drawing in protagonists from the Christian tradition and from the history of Unity Church. In paragraphs four and six, he uses the words "what Augustine and I are saying," implying that both he and Augustine are preaching the sermon. By paragraph six he has the chancel full of participants in his drama: Augustine, Wallace Robbins, the "backslappers of God," the ones aware and afraid of the shadow "looming out beyond the boundaries of the human enterprise," the children of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Enlightenment, the ones who build towers and high walls in their attempt to seek mastery, and, of course, Phillips himself. The members of the congregation, at this point not explicitly acknowledged, are also participants. They have been told that not understanding the use of the word 'God' is acceptable at the beginning of this sermon, and that in fact such a concern has been one of religious people for a long time. If they did begin with a clear mind-set about the use of the word, he muddies it a bit with the quick shift of narrators.

This introduction is a concrete illustration of the point which I have been making throughout this paper with regard to the importance of the preaching-event as embracing the mythos in a specific place and community. This congregation on March 1, 1981, is involved in a narrated enactment with traditional and

contemporary participants through the unique imaginative process of preaching.

This enactment is descriptive and evocative. In paragraph three, for example, he uses the image "the great looming shadow," which is intended to evoke fear. It is immediately followed by the phrase, "...that produced us," which allays the fear. The phrases which follow are all either reassuring or manageable, "...was before we were," "will be after we are gone," "that was and is and evermore shall be." Phillips says that his intention in this paragraph is to create a sense of Earth-community--the sense that we are all (not just all humans) in this together under God. He subtly shifts the position of smallness in relation to the great looming shadow from one of fear to one of reassuring communal relatedness. This is a significant shift in the midst of the ongoing drama.

'God' has now entered the chancel, too, as a participant in this drama, albeit an invisible, undefined one. The definition of God is accomplished now because all the other relationships are placed in relation to this incomprehensible and uncomfortable, but-not-altogether-unmanageable, thought.

Here enters another participant, also invisible. This is a member of the congregation who years before criticized Phillips for spending too much time arguing with those who disagreed with whatever position he was taking. He includes a phrase to reassure that man, and any others like him, in reference to the two groups "who won't like what he and Augustine are saying." He says, "I won't say much about these two groups today, but I must at least acknowledge them and their point of view." The critic

from the years before, it is presumed, exits.

There are two additional participants to enter this dramatic event: Laotzu and a feminine relationship with reality. They enter in paragraphs twelve and thirteen.

It is clear in this short description of the "cast of characters" that some are actually characters from the present or past. Others, however, are less easily described as characters. They are not in time and space except relationally. This is certainly true of the development of the theme "to speak of God." It is given certain characteristics. But these are developed as we relate to them. While not comfortable with the shadow, we are not to fear it. While feeling small, we are not to be overwhelmed. G-O-D, for example, is only a word with no magical power. We are to "take the female part" which he describes in paragraph twenty-one, as a "life stance of open receptivity to the mystery." This 'life-stance' I would call a 'relational protagonist.'

These 'characters' form complex patterns through the sermon. Some of these patterns are explicitly developed by Phillips. Some of the connections are intentionally left to be made by the hearers of the sermon. And some, I believe, are made available by this relational approach, but are not consciously known either by Phillips or by the members of the congregation. In this dramatic form, Phillips has tapped into the mythos of the community, right through to the structure of experience and its unarticulated meanings and relationships.

The explicit relationships in the sermon are quite dynamic, providing some of the vitality that Sittler has said we must

hope for. For example, in paragraph five, Phillips ties the "back-slappers of God" to the Fundamentalists, and names them as "bad guys." (In this paragraph he also describes elaborate rituals with the intent of courting the favor of God as a "back-slapping God," alluding at least to some Catholic and high-church approaches to "the mystery.") He then names the Humanists as "bad guys," too, saying that their measuring and planning is a similar way of controlling the mystery.

In these paragraphs Phillips is self-consciously using a technique which he found in the Old Testament Book of Amos. This is one of getting people focused on other people as "bad guys," and then saying "and you are the worst of all!" He does this much more gently at Unity Church than did Amos of old. But the technique is effective.

The use of a Unitarian, anti-Fundamentalist bias leads the members of the congregation into feeling rather smug, right-knowing, and right-organizing. Phillips then turns that around, so that it is the very attitude of right-knowing which keeps them from being receptive to the Mystery beyond knowing and controlling.

In this significant shift, Phillips has changed the relationship of the congregation to the Fundamentalists. He has merged the categories of Fundamentalist and Humanist into one: believers in the myth of mastery. Then he suggests that those listeners who are afraid of the word "God" might also be resisting being open to the presence of mystery, and might possibly belong in the same category as those other "bad guys."

The dramatic focus shifts at this crucial point onto Phillips himself. He says, "I will take a risk now...." They are off the hook, and I suspect they actually experience a sense of relief.

There are other examples of relational shifts in the sermon. But the point I am making is, I believe, clear by now. This is not a discursive sermon. It is an event which incorporates, in a dynamic way, many "characters," both explicitly and as defined by their relationships to the more concrete realities. These relationships shift and change throughout the sermon, which involves the hearers in the dramatic form of the imaginative process.

Since, as was stated in Chapter Two, language consists of the relationship of concrete meanings to metaphorical concepts with multi-level meanings, let us look at some of the ways in which Phillips uses language to move from the concrete to the metaphorical. I said there that "the more the word symbolizes an unknown, indescribable concept, the more dependent it is on the concrete context to provide associative meaning." Certainly in a sermon of this type, this dependence on concrete images is crucial.

First, let us consider his images of God as perceived by the "back-slappers" and by the "measurers and planners." For the "back-slappers," God is "a trinket," "an amulet," "a large man," "a glow-in-the-dark figurine," "the electric light bulb of their life," who relates to them by serving their whim and will. For the "measurers and planners," God (the Mystery) is "a shadow looming out there beyond the boundaries of the human enterprise" who should be ignored.

These images are concrete representations of two ways to
relate to God. One is so accessible that it is trite. The other
is so distant that it is ignored (except for the fear which
motivates this need for distance).

Both images point to a relationship to the transcendent
by saying what it is not. Phillips could have said, "Some people
reduce God to something small that they can control. Some people
make God to be something far away and unavailable." But such
descriptive sentences, while probably useful, would not, I believe,
have had the deep impact of the images which he did use. Trinkets
and shadows are the stuff of our existence, and the use of such
images adds vitality to what might otherwise be a very stereotyped
word and relationship, 'God.' They do this even as they describe
what the word and relationship are not.

Phillips throughout the sermon is self-consciously keeping
the topic related to actual life-experience. In paragraph three
he says, "To speak of God...as we tend to the moment-by-moment
daily living of our lives...." This juxtaposition, I believe,
says that even as I speak of the mystery beyond our knowing, I
will not forget that we live our lives moment-by-moment in the midst
of very concrete realities. In sentence two of that paragraph,
he suggests that our doing, thinking, saying, and that with which
we are concerned, are only a small part of reality, and a very
subjective view of reality at that. In sentence three, he places
that subjective self in relation to the great looming shadow, in
an image that he himself describes as "suggesting, evoking and
containing the subjective experience described in the previous

sentence."[1]

By far the most vivid image in the sermon is developed around the Laotzu quotation, "Can you, mating with heaven, take the female part?"[2] This is a risky moment in the sermon, which Phillips acknowledges by asking for a liberal, open response to what he is about to say. He acknowledges that the quotation will imply a passive, feminine sexual role, but adds that this is not what is important about it. He places the social context back in the time in which it was written, suggesting that even centuries ago and in another culture besides our own, the issue of relationship to God was important.

Phillips uses the image of mating to describe concretely the relationship which we have with the shadow, saying that we should take the stance of receptivity. He calls this moment in the sermon, "X-rated." It does not appear to pander to sensationalism, however, because of its sensitive juxtaposition to the mystery. I believe it is a good example of the vividness of imagery which is possible when used in a trusting community and used in an effort to speak of powerful but indescribable realities in our lives. What makes this image such an excellent example of a vehicle of the imaginative process, is that by the means of concrete images, it describes a <u>relationship</u> which is understandable in human terms, and which can be projected out into an understanding of our relationship with a transcendent dimension. It has all the elements necessary to be a vehicle which can point us to the

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[1]Roy Phillips, "Commentary on 'To Speak of God,'" unpublished, p. 4.

[2]Phillips, "To Speak of God," paragraph thirteen.

depths. The associative meanings within these concrete images give him a way to talk about relating to a dimension he could not otherwise describe.

Phillips often speaks of trust in his sermon. He wants to create a sense that the people in the congregation will learn to trust the mystery and not feel that they have to control it. He asks the question, "Can the mystery be trusted?," in paragraphs nineteen and twenty-two, with the closing section being an affirmative answer. This is the change which he wants to occur as a result of this sermon: that the people will become receptive and trusting of the mystery.

I found it very interesting to note at the same time how many places in his commentary where he mentioned ways of making sure he had the congregation's trust. This is an excellent example of a concern stated earlier in this paper that the minister embody that of which he/she is speaking. If he is expecting that through this sermon the congregation will have been brought to a position of increased trust of the mystery, he will have to embody trustworthiness along the way. I believe he does this very successfully.

For example, after the initial confusion which was purposefully created in the first paragraph, Phillips resolves it with a bit of humor: "Don't try to slap God on the back, you'll miss." He reports in his commentary that there was vigorous laughter here.[3] Then he says:

> I want them to know that we are in this
> together and to trust me for the next few
> minutes, so I relieve the tension by re-

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[3]Phillips, "Commentary," p. 2.

stating the opening sentence again.[4]

It is imperative that such attention to trust be paid in the preaching-event, whether the sermon is based on some aspect of trust or not. If the trust is established over a period of time, the congregation will accept a much broader range of imagery, and be much more receptive than would otherwise be the case.

In his comments on his use of the words "we" and "us" in paragraph three (a practice which he calls "presumptuous"), Phillips cautions that it is a potentially dangerous and powerful technique. It requires that the minister truly know his/her people. I have spoken in an earlier chapter about the power of this kind of language and imagery, which could be used carelessly and dangerously. Within the context of trust, and always in relation to a specific congregation, these words can be used. Sometimes, as he has shown, it takes courage. It always takes integrity.

Another way Phillips promotes his trustworthiness is by constantly attempting to unify the presentation, and connecting it to other elements of the service, and even other services. The message in this is that he is not just running off spouting what has come to mind on the spur of the moment, but that what he says is connected to deep tradition, and has been thought through and presented as a complete whole.

For example, the phrase, "to build towers and high walls" is from the reading of the morning which was taken from the hymn, "Heart's Remembering."[5] It also refers back to a sermon on the

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[4]Ibid.

[5]Hymns for the Celebration of Life (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1964), p. 112.

Tower of Babel story which was preached in November at Unity

Church. He did not expect that the congregation would remember

those two references, but did expect that the connection would

be "felt" at some level in at least some of the listeners.

He believes that this sort of thing, when done frequently, builds

a sense of community. The references also connected the people

to the contemporary poet, Archibald MacLeish (author of the words

of the hymn), and to the Old Testament story of Babel.

Another way by which Phillips promotes trust is by mentioning

the title in the body of the sermon. He is saying, "What I

promised here is what happens." He says that this came out of a

comment, made many years before, in jest, by a member of the church,

who said, "You ministers never preach about what your title says

you're going to preach about." He decided then that it was

important to be explicit and to show that at least he thought he

was doing what he said he was going to do. In the process he was

telling the congregation week after week that he was to be

trusted. He did what he promised he would do.

I believe this trustworthiness is crucial if the sermon-

event is truly to become a vehicle of the imaginative process. If

there is not trust in the concrete relationships participating in

the sermon-event, then we cannot expect that those concrete

relationships can in any way point to a trusting relatedness with

indescribable realities.

If the shifts in imagery, the repeated phrases, the

entrances and exits of the "characters" which move and shift in

relation to one another, and the trust and care which Phillips

exemplifies, are taken together, we see a thrust in the very process of the development of the sermon which is purposeful and forward-moving. There is an actionable purpose, that the congregation would begin to allow themselves to experience a more receptive stance in relation to the mystery, and would use the word 'God' as one way to represent that relationship. During the sermon they have, in fact, been moved from a position of being proud of their "right-knowing" and "right-organizing" to one of seeing that this very position might be keeping them from being open to the mystery. By the end of the sermon, they have <u>experienced</u> the movement intended by the purpose of the sermon. There has been risk (especially around the Laotzu quotation) in an atmosphere of trust, and they have been asked to be receptive to it. In this safe community where trust has been explicitly nurtured, they were asked to be receptive to a vivid image which probably was threatening to most. Phillips <u>could</u> have said at that moment, "See, it wasn't that bad. Being receptive to the mystery is just like that. We can be trusted, and so can the cosmos."

The imaginative process is that very experiencing which opens people to a larger reality than they can imagine. Images, relationships, trust, are all intertwined within the sermon-event which is repeated weekly in the midst of an ongoing community. There are other places in our culture where the imaginative process can work among us. But it is clear, I believe, that the liberal church is in an extraordinary position to use fully the process for religious development. We can dip freely into other traditions. We are not bound by creeds and dogmas which could limit our responsiveness to the existential situation. At the

same time, we have a tradition of our own which allows us to risk
and dare as we trust one another.

I have tried in this chapter to show specific examples of
the way in which one minister imitates the imaginative process in
the development of the sermon-event. The relationship of each
individual congregation with its minister will of course influence
the style in which the imaginative process is incorporated into
the sermon-event. My purpose in this chapter has been to be as
specific as possible, in an effort to deal intentionally and self-
consciously with our process as we write sermons.

CONCLUSION

I have developed in this thesis an understanding of the
imaginative process which I believe can undergird and inform our
participation as ministers in the sermon-event. This process
involves the apprehension, through the various imaginative forms,
of the structure of experience. This structure contains the
content, meaning, and forms deposited there by the whole of
existence. It contains more depth than we will ever be able to
perceive or experience. Through their form and content, these
various imaginative modes not only reveal the depths of experience
but are the ways by which we can respond to that depth.

In our particular communities this structure comes through
the imaginative modes in the form of motifs of faith which partake
both of the _mythos_ and the _logos_. Together, these motifs form a
system of substance which guides us and orients us. At the same
time, we continually subject it to the rational tools which we
have at our disposal, knowing that it will never be completely
subject to objective verifiability.

The preaching-event, for several reasons, is a unique form
of the imaginative process. It takes place in the context of a
community with a specific identity and relationship to the _mythos_.
The community intentionally attends to its stories, rituals,
music, and language, which are vehicles of the structure of
experience. The sermon is presented each week in that context,
a nexus of relationships and forms which I have called the sermon-

event.

Not only does the context of the sermon invite its imitation of the imaginative process, but the interrelationships which take form in the sermon itself also embody the process. The sermon is a dramatic event in which the minister, by sensitively articulating his/her life experiences in relation to those of the people in the congregation, raises those concrete realities and experiences as ways to relate to the ultimate dimension of reality.

The sermon itself is a process of articulating an interaction which takes place between various protagonists from real life and protagonists which represent relationships to reality. It is this interaction within a form narrated by the minister (does the minister represent logos?) which embodies the imaginative process and relates the hearers to both the mythos and the logos.

This thesis has suggested ways by which the church can, at least in the area of preaching, attend to some of the problems which are facing it: purpose, language, credibility, and connection with the people. The imaginative process attends to the task of the church in all these areas, as has been shown.

This thesis has suggested ways by which the minister can attend intentionally and self-consciously to the week-to-week preparation of sermons. Basic to this conception of preaching is that the sermon does not arise out of a personal well of intellectual ability and social sensitivity, though each of these abilities is very important to the imaginative process. Its primary source is the interaction and relationship of the experiences of the people to the mythos and logos, as they are constantly reinterpreted

and experienced by the community.

This thesis has also suggested a way of implementing a significant shift, especially for liberal religion, in its Doctrine of Man/Woman. This shift is away from an heroic, self-reliant view of the individual who attends to the problems of existence with fortitude and tenacity, and toward a more relational understanding of humans, and the network within which we participate and by which we are nourished.

Through the imaginative process we have access to both the experiencing and expressing of our relatedness to each other, and to the past and future, as well as to our present relationship to the wholeness of existence.

APPENDIX A

"TO EVIL OPEN"

A Sermon Preached by The Reverend Joseph Barth at King's Chapel, Boston, on February 22, 1959

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Someone:
In each one
    "There's always someone
    playing Job."
Even to the world-fresh child
    Job comes soon
        to break the child-song.

"Sing me at morn
    but only with your laugh (life)
Even as Spring that laugheth
    into leaf
Even as love that laughed me..."
        to life.
Child-song broken is
        with broken doll
    The favorite toy gun
        broken by planned obsolescence.
    Ecstasy broken by Job-sob.
Evil discovered in the world,
    worse still: strong in the soul
    where fumes and fulminates
        mama's often commented
        "Bad Boy"
        "Bad Girl"
        "Bad Boy"
        "Bad Girl"--bad.
"There is always someone"
        something
    punished,--punishing--

        "...taught in Paradise
    to ease my breast of melodies"
Remember the Avon poet's
        hurt
        burst of words:
"Oh God!  I could be bounded
        in a nut shell
        and count myself
        a thing of infinite space;
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          were it not that I have bad dreams"
Bad dreams!
"But I am bound"
     The "real" King
     remember (Lear) said: "But I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that my own tears
     do scald like molten
          lead"
          he said
(Well, now) obviously the thing
          to do:
          Escape the fire-wheel
          Escape!
Escape the fire?
Escape?
     The wheel is life!
     The fire is
          fire of desire
          and sensing,
     fire of unwritten hungers
          that will not be satisfied
          not blotted out:
Hunger for flowing breast of nature
          joys of the mother
          cool springs of water
          sight of the fresh flamed sunrise
          sound of a pure far bell
     meaning of starshine in purple
     fresh snow on the Common
     the crocus--flash out of rot
          of dead leaves
          dead winter's dead!

Give up (escape?) the fire
          that lit the eye of seeing?
Damp down (escape?) the ear's power
          to inform the soul?
Renounce (escape?) the nose
          that leads to honeysuckle sweetness
          (or runs afoul of bitter)
Dull (escape?) the skin's message
          that speaks deep of love's delight
          (hell of heat and cold also)
     all this--
          Kill sense
          (and sensing)
     with the nonsense (non-sensing)
          of non-being
     to escape evil?
stop-taking the informing newspaper
     when news-storied lines
          hang their black crepe
          black in the mind,
     to kill fire--
     kill firewheel?

Even love! Kill love
     that shining, shining
     cross-we-log-to-glory?
Kill the tenderness of union to kill the pain of losing?
Reject this sickness
     which would gouge out eyes for beauty!
   Not blind us, not blind
     to hurting evils
     we do best to face,
       face down,
         ameliorate!
   Or if they be proven
     the absolutely necessary evils
     of living
     then learn to live.
     To live with!

(For instance)
   I saw a letter
   Willie Mae wrote
     for Christmas
   Willie Mae had an operation
     for Christmas
   For Christmas
   Willie Mae (absolutely necessary)
     had a leg off;
   I saw Willie Mae at Christmas
   I saw her cry at Christmas,
   I heard her apologise for crying at Christmas.
   I saw,--I heard
     Willie Mae cry at Christmas. Apologise
     and (absolutely necessary) smile.

   I will go back to visit
     Willie Mae for Easter
   For Easter,--Willie Mae
     will have a leg off
     (that's her last one!)
   I will go back
   I will see,--and hear
     Willie Mae
     cry, apologise, and--smile
     (absolutely necessary) for Easter.
We do not escape
   the wheel of fire
     (Willie Mae)
It is not delight and dazzle
     altogether.
   Sometimes,--ofttimes
     flesh-scarred
     soul-scorched
   by beautiful flame turned wickedly advancing.
But then! to retreat from evil
     (close the eyes of seeing
     or the mind's eye)

from evil to retreat
        is: leave the field
        for enemy advancing.
Seeking to escape evil evil is,
        (a possible goodness) betrayed
        without the fight for goodness.
"A good man
    before he can help a bad man
    finds in himself
    the matter with the bad man."
We do not seek escape who know
        it has no finding
    Proof?
        The Mary Baker Eddy
        died in bed!

"Almighty God" (we pray)
        "that we may be defended
        from all adversities
            that may happen to the body--and
        from all evil thoughts
            which may assault and hurt the soul
    through Jesus Christ, Our Lord."

And (we pray)
    beneath all praying
        as Jesus did
        for answers
"as may be most expedient for us."
Even the Christ did not escape ("if it be possible")
        the grim bite.

If seek ye his Kingdom
        open yourselves to evil.
        Cowards run away.
        Stand!
        They that are whole (if any be so)
            Physicians do not need.
        "Call sinners"--there or here
        "sinners to repentance."

This
        hard gospel is--
        and is too pat.
Open to evil wider
        for worse and wider
        evil is.
Some evils faced, fought,
        can be chiselled
        into hard rock
            righteousness.
    Not many such.
Goodness is quicksilver
        treasured in the horny hand
        of history

and easily splattered off
        onto unwisdom's soil
    out of which are generations newly sprung
their wholeness still to be discovered
        long garnering required anew
        to capture.
Some evils give way
        to earned goodness.

    Evil is--simply understood--
        not goodness!
    Goodness not yet learned.
    Goodness forgot.
    Goodness passed by.
Evil is the not-goodness
        of dreams--beyond doing
        of wishes--beyond fulfillment
        of hope--beyond achieving
        of love--set in fleeting time
            which yearns for an eternity.
    Evil is the persisting insult
        all lives know
        who dream they will perfect evil:
        the fairy-tale Utopia
            moral imagination would
            but won't build.
            Should would?
        Negation of the good
            is evil.

Bigger than I
    evil is.
    Nations dream bigger than I
        (the "I" projected);
    so sometimes
        standing with our feet
        anchored in cloud
        (earth head--down in self-centered wishes)
        upside down
    and failing (gravity says "no," you know)
        to pull the whole world up
        to high perched toe hold
            with imagination's stars,

    and failing,
        we turn our frustrate wrath
        first on the world--as if the world
        knew, cared much,
    and failing still,
        measure the full force of fury
        at feeble
            foibling self.

If we could escape evil, or
    if all evil
        we could translate, transmute
            metamorphse
            meliorate

would man ever know (I wonder):
Man is not God,
        and limited
        very limited Saviour.

(I learned)
    hard way Learned I
    learned not alone. Did you?

Bela Bartok, musician
    "taught in Paradise
    to ease (Hungarian) breast of melodies"
        wrote Concerto Violin
        in Europe's 1938
        (Hitler's, I mean).
Bartok reminds me of
        "How odd of God" and
        "To make a poet black
        and bid him sing"
    also: "How shall we sing
            (How shall we sing)
            the Lord's song
            in strange land?"

(In words otherwise):
    Bela Bartok
        living under the shadow
        of his wide flung
        passionate, flailing wing;
        (Hitler's, I mean)
Bartok, to ease his breast
    where each heartbeat was
        strumming
        a taut wire strung strung
        between tightening winches
        called
        Beauty and the Beast
    the tight wire
        many Germans walked on
        from now into eternity
        (if also Jews
        and no need to be pious)
            to quiver
            quaver
    from love's home center
        to gas chamber--
        the long-short
        tense last stretch strung
        between life and death:
The string
    strung to sing
        a tragic threnody
        if tragedy
        can be wrestled
            from insanity

by Bela Bartok's <u>Concerto</u>.
     Violin!
  Can violin sing
     Peace ("in our time")
  and black booted warriors
     strike strident left
         beat
         right
         beat
     left-right, beat
     and wave baton
     at the end of stiff waves
     of saluting arms
     geared to a war machine?
     Shout:
     Heil Hitler!
And
    the motor cycle corps,
    the storm troopers,
    ride herd
       charging
          on every freedom
          or any:
       four abreast
       hell-bent dark angels
       searching the roads of Europe
       "Whom they may devour."

Bartok saw
I saw,
    The hollow eyes of a hollow world
    saw.
    (Our eyes!)
As it was written in that day:
    "We are the hollow men
    We are the stuffed men
    Leaning together
    Headpieces filled with straw, alas!
    Our dried voices, when
    We whisper together
    Are quiet and meaningless
    As wind in dry grain
    Or rats' feet over broken glass
    In our dry cellar.

    Shape without form, shade without colour,
    Paralyzed force, gesture without motion."
(As it is written):
    "Thus saith the Lord:
    Thy bruise is incurable
    and
       thy wound is grievous
       thou hast no healing
       medicines."
Jeremiah
On Bartok's violin;

"Played," though
    is not the word for it
Groaned, screamed, moaned,
    sought to sing, but sighed,
    or lashed out furiously
(In modern music,--tenderness is
        not.)
Our day makes music bitterly:
    "Lord's song--strange land."

(The point is)
    not that it happened
    so--
    It always happens
      always--more or less
      so happens.

The point is
    some noses smell it
      in the air
      before,
    "see it coming"
    gasp perhaps then
    but fill up the hollow
      left by fear
    gird up their loins
    against all
    cruel happening
    evil.
Do battle!

Yet it happens (as they saw).

Try temper madness with wisdom
    is human
Try tincture insanity
    at the clean spring
    of spirit drawn
      from wheel of fire
    is divine in human:
alleviate suffering, battle death.

To fail is human
    Yes,--against evil to fail
    is inevitably human
      though some evils yield.
(The point is)
    I saw Hitler coming!
    a cloud no larger than a man's hand
    or a billboard
    outside old Rottenberg:
    "Juden Verboten."
    Saw madness swell
    tensed like Bartok's strings
    in frenzy spreading
    over Europe

                but sanity could not stop it
                    (risking "Peace in our time").
                Close eyes to evil
                    hollow men.
                Ears do not message
                    to "headpiece
                    filled with straw"
        (Germany, or, in context, Russia, China:
                    Africa and South America
                    still to be heard from!)

        So little German Aryans
            did safely wash innocent playtime dirt
                    off innocent sweet faces
                    with lye
                    tempered only with the
                    thin line of sweet fat
                    that flowed from
                    Hitler's collection vat
            at far end of gas chamber
            that bore the label "Israel--
        Five Million."

        And he could nourish
        (Hitler, I mean)
                    Jew baiting
                    and a war to come
                    on carrots
                    grown in soil
                    intermixed with powdered bones
                    (femir, tibia, vertebrae and skull) of those
                    who once turned loving hearts
                    to Zion.

        They say man chews with shark's teeth in a shark's jaw.

        In those days
            every Christian I knew
                    who was a Christian
            (I too)
                    was a Jew.

        Once madness grows
                    beyond a point,
            is madness cured only
                    by cultivating
                    madness?
                    i.e.--
                    (Oh God! Is this thy way?)
            gargantuan
                    funeral pyres stinking
                    across the world
                    to kill a nation's
            Will to killing conquest?

IT HAPPENS!!
    (Organ crash and clamor: followed by persistently
        held high notes of clashing chord)

God on the cross, between thieves on the cross!

In the predicament
       of egocentric
       or of self-centered hollow men
       it is all the same
       (yells softly violin) and
    learns the hard way
       the cross is always there,
          not avoided
          not evaded
          no escape
      never transmuted entire.
Always the best given
       to worst the worst: atonement!

"If it be possible, let this chalice pass!"

    But the better arrived--(a vision)
       always naming a worse.
    The best discovered
       turns goodness itself
       to evil (not-good).
It happens (if the better is
       worse is then)--
    good dreams make bad dreams.
Utopia seriously sought
    invariably brings on nightmares,

"Thine is the Kingdom":
       for ours a humbler
       seeking.

For I saw
    in war-torn tension
       a shipload of brethren
         ("Jews escaping Germany")
       pass and pass by
       the Port of Miami, Florida
         seeking refuge
         in freedom
    (Open the heart to their evil).

In those days
    Every Christian I knew
(I too)
    Who was a Christian
Was a Jew.

Aristotle frown
       but this is empathy:

"All men are human.
   The Jew is a man.
      Therefore:
         A Christian is Jew."

I saw sweet freedom seeking freedom
      a home
      some place to lay his head
saw ship pass and pass by
   (yes, in Miami Beach)
   no landing could be arranged
      not in days of large trying:
and left the land of freedom.

Let them go "back
   where they came from"
      and Dictator Trujillo
      (shameful)
   shamed us,
     took them in.
     We would not:
      (Could not
      with our would).

O, I have carried
   (this finite little man and minister,
  haven't you?)
      "the burden of responsibility"
      "to feed the hungry" of the world
      "to clothe the naked" of nations
      "to stop the war"
      "to save all souls"
   in heart carried and piggy-back
   and banged my stubborn
      my head
   against such hard high walls
      of evil
    and banged
    and banged
    and--
      take it now away
      bloodied and
      bowed
  (the high organ notes cease)
     accepting
      evil; yes
Accept! Do not resign to evils!
   I did not say resign! Accept!
   I am a man
   I am not God
     not Saviour
   Accept (I am a man) Do not resign.

Finite persons

open to evil--yes
always open
(the cross--yes).

Responsibility for doing
    (writ large in us and felt, yes)
       should not be larger
       than we can bear.
Responsibility for doing with evil
Responsibility
    for what we can
       try--do.

Do:
    by trying how much
    we can do--by trying.

"And indeed there will be time
To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and 'Do I dare?'
Time to turn back and descend the stair."
      (--or go forward--trying)
"With a bald spot in the middle of my hair--
They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!'
(But they will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!')
'Do I dare'...?"

      Care?

      Work!
      Also, the (absolutely necessary) smile.

(And pray:)
"Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks...
Suffer me not to be separated"
      (and compassionate smile)
"And let my cry come unto thee."
      ...Through Jesus Christ Our Lord. So be it.

"TO SPEAK OF GOD!"

A Sermon Preached by Roy D. Phillips
at Unity Church Unitarian, St. Paul,
Minnesota, on March 1, 1981

"If you can comprehend it, it is not God." So said St.
Augustine. Actually he said, "Si comprehendis, non est deus."
Wallace Robbins, who was minister of this church from 1938 to
1944, who returned to preach that spellbinding Easter sermon
here a year ago--Wallace once tossed off a rough translation of
Augustine's Latin words: "Don't try to slap God on the back,"
he said, "You'll miss."

"If you can comprehend it, it is not God."

To speak of God is to acknowledge in words that our life
is lived in the presence of a great mystery which we cannot
comprehend. To speak of God is to admit--as we tend to the
moment-by-moment daily living of our lives--to admit to ourselves
that what we are doing, what we are thinking, what we are saying,
what we are concerned with is only a little, is but an infinitesimal
bit of the fullness of what is. To speak of God is to put into
words what is always in the back of our minds: that we are
small and fragile, and that out there beyond our control, beyond
our capacity to comprehend--out there is a great looming shadow:
an otherness that produced us, that was before we were, that
will be after we are gone, that was and is and evermore shall be
greater than any one of us is great, greater even than all the
creatures living together on the Earth could be great.

There are two groups of people who won't like what St.
Augustine and I are saying. I won't say much about these two
groups today; but I must, at least, acknowledge them and their
point of view. First are the back-slappers of God. Second are
those who think it best not to admit that there is a shadow looming
out there beyond the boundaries of the human enterprise.

The back-slappers of God--no matter what their words--deny
that there is a mystery beyond our comprehension. God, to them,
is a trinket which they fondle, an object which they possess, an
amulet which makes them magicians, a large man whose favor they
court by obsequious fawning and cowtowing, by bowing and scraping
rituals designed to seduce the Mystery into giving them whatever
their hearts desire. For them God is a trinket, a glow-in-the-dark

figurine fastened to a pull chain so they can turn on at will the
electric light bulb of their life. For the back-slappers of God,
God is a servant whose reason for being is to wait on their whim
and do their will.

Those others who won't like what Augustine and I are saying
are those children of the 18th and 19th century Enlightenment whose
basic approach to life is to measure and to plan, to build
towers and high walls, to seek mastery over all, over human
intransigence, over nature, those whose goal is the conquest (note
the word) the conquest of space--inner and outer. They want
mastery and will hear nothing of mystery. Man is all. Mastery
is the goal: mastery through conscious knowledge, mastery through
conscious organizational control.

To speak of God--in the manner I advocate--is to take a stand
different from both the religious Fundamentalist and the religious
Humanist. When you do stand apart, you notice how similar are the
Fundamentalist and the Humanist. Underneath it all, both Fundamen-
talist and Humanist strive for mastery--the Fundamentalist through
right manipulation of the correct god-object, the Humanist through
right-knowing and right-organizing. To speak of God in the manner
I am advocating is to give up the myth of mastery and to try to
live in the presence of Mystery.

Man--humankind--is a thinker and a manipulator. I do not
deny these, nor do I consider them evil. I say that man is
potentially more than thinker and manipulator. I say that we
live better, more fully, we do less damage to our fellow earthlings--
animal, vegetable, mineral--we have a richer sense of profound
relatedness--when we allow ourselves to sense that we are more
than mere thinkers and manipulators.

What is this "more"? The "more" comes in admitting into
our awareness that shadow which looms out there beyond the boun-
daries of the human enterprise. This is frightening and threatens
to bring about upheaval and we would rather not admit it into
our awareness. We would rather not put it into words--a word:
God.

Why "G-O-D"? Because "God" is the word which, though it
has tended to be corrupted, as most important words are--G-O-D
is the word in our language which signifies the transcendent,
which stands for the shadow which looms out there beyond the
boundaries of the human enterprise. For starters, that's why
"God."

Some object, rise up again and protest that there is no
shadow beyond the boundaries of the human enterprise. I know
they will object, but I have long-since noticed that their knowledge-
seeking, their tower and wall building is a way of distracting
their attention from the looming shadow. I say there is a shadow
out there and we'd best acknowledge it. Our lives might then be
less fearful, might begin to make more sense.

I will take a risk now and speak some words written many centuries ago in ancient China by Laotzu. This is risky in two respects. The lesser of the risks is that his imagery is blatantly sexual. The greater risk is that he uses a classical feminine image which will be disturbing to some whose consciousness about men-women issues has been raised. Please remember that this was written about twenty-six centuries ago and give the guy a break.

These are his words:

"Can you, mating with heaven, take the female part?"

This is not meant to be a prescription for healthy 20th century sexuality. It is a sexual image for something far more important than that, far more basic, more all-pervasive.

First, think of the shadow out beyond the boundaries of the human enterprise. Laotzu's words suggest a relationship with that shadow, an intimate relationship indeed: mating. But assuming a very specific stance, taking a particular role. And to get Laotzu's meaning we must think of the genital interaction in male-female mating. His words advocate that we sense ourselves as related to the shadow as in mating, and that, specifically, we relate ourselves as receivers.

Can you, relating to the shadow beyond the boundaries of the human enterprise, be openly receptive? That is the theological and the primary spiritual question. Can you be utterly, intimately receptive to the Mystery which surrounds you?

Well, this is difficult for us. First, because we are taught to ignore or to deny the Mystery; second, because we are taught to be actors, doers, thinkers, manipulators. But the spiritual question still stands and it is the human side of the question of God: can you--with all your acting, doing, thinking and manipulating--be utterly, intimately receptive to the Mystery which surrounds you?

To speak meaningfully of God pushes us, toward the fundamental life-stance of receptivity, of openness to the Mystery. If there is anything that over-controlling, earth-ravaging 20th century human beings need to learn, it is this: the life-stance of receptivity, of openness to the Mystery.

But then, the very great fear arises, comes as a question perhaps: What is the nature of this Mystery? Can it be trusted? If we let ourselves go with it, will we not be destroyed?

(Well, first let us be clear, no matter what life-stance we take, we will be destroyed. Death is real. Death happens-- to all of us, it happens. Like it or not--probably, preferably not--we shall die. God won't prevent that. We have the gift of life on those terms.)

We will die. We will be destroyed. But only once. The point trying to be made by the great religions of the world is that if we can let ourselves be openly receptive to the Mystery while we live, we will die only once. For denial of the Mystery and a life of guarded, mistrustful closedness is a half-life, is a continual death-in-the-midst-of-life.

We are not fully alive if we are merely thinkers and manipulators. That way, we are half-alive, half-dead. If we can take the life-stance of open receptivity to the mystery, we are fully alive while we live.

But can the Mystery be trusted? The question arises again-- and it will arise, I expect, again and again. You have to brave it, to try it yourself to really find out--empirically, pragmatically to test it by risking it--to see if the Mystery can be trusted.

But to call the Mystery "God"--as many before us have done: is to say that the Mystery is creator, sustainer, transformer and renewer of our lives.

This--which you'll need to check out for yourself--this is the testimony of religious men and women down through the ages: that when they did courageously open themselves to the shadow, to the Mystery which looms out beyond the human enterprise, they found themselves blessed. Their entire approach to life was made different. Because when they opened their lives, the Mystery came in from the boundaries, came into their daily living and was seen and felt as a real presence in their lives. Now nothing happened that did not shine. Yes, there continued to be sadness and loss, disappointment and pain--but now even these began to shine.

"God is at work even here," they said. "Somehow even in the darkness in the midst of my life, there is the presence of One who, through this very darkness is continuing to create me, to sustain me, to transform and renew me. "God is acting," they said, "in all actions upon me." To speak of God is to say that nothing happens to us that cannot be seen as serving to create us, to sustain us, to transform us and to renew us.

It will not always go as we want in our lives--but, admit it, it doesn't go that way, "God" or not--but we will then be able to live creatively, courageously, peacefully, come what may. The Mystery--creative, sustaining, renewing--will be seen to be at work out beyond the boundaries and here on Earth. Here, too, in our very lives: eternally, infinitely, creating, sustaining, renewing.

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