

Bearing Witness: The Christian Writer as Other

Witnessing is an integral component of evangelical religion and its current practice. As a child growing up in an earnestly Christian household, I understood that my faith claimed two high callings: to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and to share the good news with the unsaved. So when I decided to write a book about a church community as my master's thesis, I can't deny the element of witness in the project. All the more so because I would be attending a public university whose English department is one of the most aggressively liberal in the country.

The idea for my thesis, which eventually became a book of linked short stories called *Brick and Mortar*, had its genesis in a small act of witness. At the time when I was preparing my graduate school applications, I fit my daily Bible reading into my subway commute to a job in Toronto. At first I felt self-conscious, reading my Bible in such a public place, even if it was only a small paperback and not my big leather-bound, gold-edged volume. But after I had done this for a few days without being accosted (by whom was I expecting to be accosted, I wonder?), I was able to pull my Bible out with no more thought than if it were just another library book. Eventually this public devotion did spark a few conversations with strangers, usually other Christians who were surprised or pleased to see me with a Bible in that setting.

During my reading in the Old Testament, I was particularly struck by the parallels between the rituals of the Israelite tabernacle and the post-resurrection acts of worship instituted during the New Testament period. These unifying symbols created a fascinating resonance between people and places separated by thousands

of years, and changing cultures and governments. For example, I read the passage in Exodus that establishes the practice of the priests washing their feet before entering the tabernacle—"You shall also make a laver of bronze, with its base of bronze, for washing. And you shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet" (Exodus 30: 18-19)—which immediately brought to mind the image of Christ washing the feet of the disciples, turning an act of cleansing into a beautiful picture of servanthood.

The first idea for a story came while I read the regulations governing the Nazirites, those who dedicate themselves to God's service with a special vow. Samson was probably the best known Nazirite. The image came to me of a girl cutting off her hair and burning it, symbolic of a ritual described in Numbers: "And the Nazirite shall shave his consecrated head at the door of the tent of meeting, and shall take the hair from his consecrated head and put it on the fire which is under the sacrifice of the peace offering" (Numbers 6: 18). This initial image expanded into the idea for a story cycle set in a Presbyterian church, each story dealing with a different character and a different Biblical ritual or act of worship.

I was very excited about this vision for a story collection, but it did present a problem. I planned to attend a public university, the University of Calgary, which was very different from Redeemer College, where I earned my undergraduate degree, first and foremost because Calgary was decidedly not a Christian institution.

In an environment like Redeemer College, where belief in a Christian world view is assumed, students enjoy the assurance of understanding, common values, and shared experience. At Redeemer and other Christian universities like it, religious faith is not a stereotype or an oddity, but a genuine way of living and thinking that can be explored in all its complexity.

But I had no idea what kind of reception to expect at a public institution like Calgary. I could see from the calendar, which listed courses like “Half-Bred Poetics” and “Queering the Nation: Topics in Gay and Lesbian Literature” among others, that the U of C English Department was progressive in its attention to post-modern, post-colonial, racial, feminist, and queer theory. Did I have the nerve to write about a church community in such a liberal context, I wondered? Would my work be taken seriously and read fairly? Would others see my concerns about a faith community as old-fashioned or strange? Living and studying in Christian schools and communities for most of my life had left me with a certain amount of apprehension about making my views and values known outside a familiar setting. Perhaps I would be safer staying away from explicit religious subject matter and expressing my beliefs metaphorically, in redemption motifs, Christ figures, and subtly disguised epiphanies.

But in the end, I decided not to drop the concept for *Brick and Mortar*. I was already too excited about the possibilities for these stories to let them go just because I was afraid of how they might be received. The work posed the challenge of witness as I affirmed my convictions and testified to my experience of faith. I also knew that my thesis advisor, Aritha van Herk, would be open to my intentions. I was very intrigued at how she incorporated Biblical figures and tropes into some of her work, notably in her novel *The Tentpeg*, which is a modern reworking of the story of Jael from the book of Judges. If I had been working with another advisor, I might well have made a different choice.

So, with some trepidation, I committed myself to the task of writing about Calvin Park Presbyterian Church, and my story does have a happy ending. I finished the thesis and received my degree, and earlier this year Oberon Press accepted the book for publication. But the road was occasionally rocky along the way. Writing about my faith community, I encountered several pitfalls, most of my own making, beginning with the very first story I submitted to my advanced fiction workshop.

Just to give you some background on the workshop itself, this was a 500-level course with fifteen students, most of whom were undergraduate or non-degree students, representing a wide range of ages and occupations. The course ran for a full two terms (eight months), and we were all required to produce a book-length manuscript during that time—100 pages for undergrads, 125 pages for graduate students. We distributed copies of our work-in-progress for our criticism and feedback, and we critiqued these manuscripts in class the following week. We discussed two or three submissions per class, and each student's work was discussed two or three times over the year.

The first draft I worked on was the story of the girl who shaved and burned her hair. Molly is a church girl looking for some adventure, and she sneaks out of her house late one night to attend a party. I was rather proud of how worldly this story was, with its foul language and underage drinking. Molly ends up in the basement of the house, the victim of a (badly-written) pseudo-rape scene. Fade to black. Back at home, she cuts off her beer-soaked hair and burns it in a metal tin.

When I reread this story now, it strikes me as a sophomoric effort to tell the story of my first months in Calgary. I felt desperately out of my element, but I was equally desperate not to show it. I wanted to throw off my identity as a church girl just as Molly did, because it made me feel so out of place. But the story was too full of my prejudgments about a churchgoer's reception in a secular community to survive in its initial form.

When I returned to this story to rewrite it a year later, the key to its redemption was a change in setting. I took Molly out of this party scene (which I frankly had no realistic picture of) and sent her on a weekend church youth retreat. Immediately Molly went from a naïve character trying to lose her innocence to a girl bored with Bible studies and church talk. The pseudo-rape morphed into a late-night cabin raid, complete with water balloons and shaving cream. The only scene in the

first draft worth saving was one that showed Molly smoking a single cigarette bummed from a friend at school: this scene alone rang true as a portrait of a good girl anxious to walk on the wild side.

And so I learned that the first lesson of writing about religious characters was that stereotyping the religious “self” or the secular “other” meant a wooden story that didn’t do justice to either. Trying to prove that I was “with it” when it came to teenage culture, adopting a disdainful attitude towards Molly for her naiveté, just made me look even more woefully out of my depth.

I don’t think I’m the only writer who has run into this problem of where to position myself in relation to my characters and readers. I recently came across an article in Atlantic Monthly that looked at a current best-selling phenomenon, the “Left Behind” books by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. This post-apocalyptic series plays out what happens on earth after the rapture, and it is a little heavy-handed in its delivery of the “We told you so” message. The author of the article, Michael Joseph Gross, identifies as the fundamental weak point in these books not the hackneyed writing or the thinly-veiled jabs at liberalism, but the authors’ quiet desperation to belong. Gross writes,

The great throng of their fans, and even the authors themselves, are painfully aware that they are out of the loop. The harder they try to be culturally relevant, the more ridiculous they become, the further they fall from relevance, the more intensely they are exiled—not only from cultural legitimacy but also from the spiritual power of their own beliefs.

Getting back in touch with what Gross calls the “spiritual power of my own beliefs”, revisiting in the youth retreat a place and situation that was intimately known to me, was what helped me transform Molly from a caricature into a living, breathing character.

The second piece I submitted to the workshop was about Helen, the church matriarch, who arrives late to Sunday worship and has to flounder through the

liturgy without an order of service to guide her. This early draft followed the linear thread of the service, from opening hymn and prayers of confession to Scripture readings, sermon, and doxology, and reproduced verbatim much of the language of these elements of worship. (My respect for ministers has increased tenfold since trying to write sermons. I think it's one of the more challenging literary forms.)

I was motivated to show the service in such detail partly out of a desire for authenticity—I wanted a replica of an actual service. I wanted the reader to experience what Helen experienced in real time. I believe there was an element of curiosity in this as well. I wanted to explore what made a worship service so compelling, to me and to the character Helen. I wanted to know whether a reader, especially an unchurched reader, would connect with the language, or whether it would just be another trapping of the religious setting.

My fellow writers pinpointed the places where this liturgy succeeded—when the character was interacting with what she heard, when the language connected with her thoughts.

For example, during the prayer of confession, Helen anticipates the words of absolution, savouring the joyous answer to the question.

Hear the good news! Who is in a position to condemn?

Only Christ, thinks Helen.

Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us.

But in the end I removed most of the “official” church language in this story. The sermons that I tried to write, for instance, ultimately failed because it was too easy to use them to manipulate the story and the reader. Juxtaposed with the physicality and immediacy of the narration, the language of the sermons was jarringly abstract. They contradicted the very tone that I wanted to achieve in the stories, which was to make them as far from preachy as possible.

And my desire for authenticity had betrayed me into writing something closer to a textbook, a how-to guide on Christian worship, than a dynamic work of fiction. The story, at first dull and suffering under so much religious language, perked up considerably when I let Helen's mind wander during the sermon, and she recalled some interesting episodes in the life of the church and her efforts to get it started in the 1950s.

My biggest surprise in bringing these stories to the workshop was how interesting the other writers found them. I suffered from something of an inferiority complex at the University of Calgary, since I was not a writer of colour, I wasn't born in a foreign country, I didn't have any experience with drugs or alcohol or alternative lifestyles. I came from a depressingly functional family. Even my Protestant religion seemed very tame. I despaired that anyone would find my writing captivating when more exotic material abounded.

But my fears were, of course, unfounded, something I should have anticipated just by looking at my own reading interests, which ranged widely in terms of setting and subject matter, but still favoured fresh, surprising writing over a striking locale. Why should my stories of this small church be any different, when I was working so hard to make the characters and situations tangible and captivating?

A crucial moment of affirmation for my work came a month or so before my thesis defense, when my advisor recommended a book by Carol Christ, called *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, which explores the concept of women's spiritual quest in the work of Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, and others. At this same time, I came across a piece in Aritha's own book, *A Frozen Tongue*, on women and spirituality. In this lecture she speaks as an advocate for women who have not seen their spiritual experience reflected in the traditional religious texts. In her words, "It is not enough to make women an addendum to encoded stories, to say that they are present by silent implication. There must be enough room for the development of her own

spiritual quest, room for her imagination to undertake the self-empowered leap of faith, which can only come if she understands the creative powers of the world in terms of her experience" (119). These words, coming from a close mentor and friend, deeply confirmed what I was trying to do in my own stories, which was to explore and narrate genuine moments of spiritual revelation. To see other respected scholars and authors with the same intentions made me feel that I was far from alone in the value I placed on the spiritual in literature.

I wonder whether my work might have gotten a less receptive reading in the workshop had I not been aware of the crucial difference between witness and evangelism. I was not attempting to persuade or convert the reader to my faith or my way of thinking: I believe that most didactic fiction will fail at the literary level, whatever cause the author attempts to promote. Readers do not take well to lectures. Rather, I wanted only to present the world of Calvin Park Presbyterian Church as one giving evidence, sharing my personal knowledge of a community that might be unfamiliar to some. I leave the readers on their own to weigh that evidence and act on it as they choose.

And some do act. One woman in my workshop announced to the class that reading my stories had intrigued her enough that she took her family to church for the first time. One of my examiners, a non-Christian theology professor, wrote in her evaluation, "I am indebted to the author for reminding me on many different levels of the richness that can still be divined in this particular community."

But other people's reaction to the work is beyond my responsibility, and to some extent, my interest. To keep conversion statistics, as Jenkins and LaHaye do for their "Left Behind" series—they estimate that about 2,000 people have been born again as a result of reading their books—seems to reduce fiction to an elaborate evangelistic pamphlet.

Postmodernism, a critical framework still held in suspicion by much of Christian academia and the larger faith community, also helped prepare the way for a favourable reception of my work. An article in *Mars Hill Review* by Don Hudson called “The Dance of Truth: Postmodernism and the Evangelical” identifies several aspects of postmodernism that help foster this sympathetic climate, starting with “a reversal in rationalist thinking which opens the door to mystery” (17)—in the case of *Brick and Mortar*, mystery in the form of an unseen spiritual dimension that infuses the physical. Second, postmodernism advocates “a re-turn to the past ... [which] is not to be thrown off as something which has no meaning for today, but rather, something that is evoked and reinterpreted for the purpose of discovering meaning in the present” (20-21). The past, in the histories of Christian religious worship and the Presbyterian denomination, plays just such a role of evocation and reinterpretation in the lives of the parishioners in *Brick and Mortar*, as rituals instituted thousands of years ago spark moments of recognition and connection. Third, postmodernism offers an approach that “emphasizes difference by recognizing that many perspectives give us a better view ... even though this cacophony of voices decreases ... power and infuses [the] community with chaos” (22). I soon found that in the new community of the writing workshop, and also in the larger English department, my particular experience of difference had a valued place amid the diversity of voices.

Bearing witness to my faith was only one of my goals when I came to write *Brick and Mortar*. During these two years of intense study I also wanted to learn as much as I could about the craft of writing, to produce a great deal of material for critique and feedback, to become part of a community of other writers, to acquaint myself with the writing life, and to finish with a high-quality, publishable manuscript. I’m very glad that the kinds of stories I wrote did not hamper me, but in most cases assisted me in achieving those goals. I don’t know whether my next project will be

so decidedly Christian; the stories I have written since graduating, for instance, don't deal overtly with religious subject matter. But inasmuch as my fiction is an expression of my self and my identity, which is bound up inextricably in my faith, bearing witness will continue to be an integral part of my work as a Christian writer.

Works Cited

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