

On Writing Lived Theology¹

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First, I want to thank Charles for the invitation and the chance to once again visit Charlottesville. It is truly an honor to have the opportunity to contribute to the continuity of the Virginia Seminar in Lived Theology.

I come to you today as a representative of the first Seminar in Lived Theology, which I'll call "SLT1"; so let me welcome you who are SLT2! You are launching on far more than an academic seminar, but rather a journey that will draw on the core of your being. The purpose of the group is, in part, to share that process and support one another in the journey. It is very exciting to see the project result in a second seminar – and I hope that you perhaps will have the privilege in a few years of welcoming "into the family" SLT3—and maybe SLT4!

Charles asked me to share a few thoughts on writing about lived theology, and particularly my experience in the first seminar. What I will do is offer some reflections for maybe twenty minutes or so, and then open it up for discussion. My comments have three parts: first, some broad and general comments on writing *about* lived theology; second, reflections on writing *as* lived theology, with more personal comments on the process of writing a book in the first seminar; and third, some "notes" for your own journey, including an eclectic mix of things that were said during SLT1 or recommended readings that seem worth transmitting to the next "generation" (available as a handout). Please keep in mind that all of these comments may tell you more about our particular group and my project than they do about lived theology!

Writing about lived theology

Writing *about* lived theology is what we all think we are here to do. It's what we've been doing – in some cases for many years. But in the seminar context, we may find ourselves asking new questions. I'd like to focus my comments today on a one big issue that shaped our

discussions in the first seminar: how does writing about lived theology vary according to the genre or type of writing that one is called to do? What are the particular challenges—and perhaps related opportunities—for each of the different "genres" represented by the writers in the group?

I would divide our writing into four basic genres (or maybe "categories" is a better word): 1) academic writing; 2) memoir/biography; 3) what I'll call inspirational, moral or didactic instruction in or for organized religion (since I can't think of a short phrase that is fair to this category!); and 4) popular trade writing. I will focus here on the challenges, and leave discussion about the opportunities of varied genre to your discussion and discovery together.

Academic writing

First, then, what are the challenges for those of us who do academic writing? Here I think, for your group, of Shannon Gayk's work on medieval religious expression, and Amy Laura Hall's books on Kierkegaard and *Conceiving Parenthood*. In our group, I may have been the one who wrestled most with this question—perhaps along with Chuck Mathewes, whose passion for academic writing was matched only by his passion for finding excellence in the perfect fountain pen in downtown Manhattan! Carlos Eire was also very familiar with this struggle—until he won the National Book Award for *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, his first book without footnotes. Some of your books more obviously meld lived theology and academic writing for a university press, such as Jennifer McBride's *The Church for the World* and Russell Jeung's *New Asian American Churches*. In the area of academic writing, I think there are four key challenges when it comes to writing about lived theology:

- a) Turning "academese" into accessible ordinary English with an engaging narrative. There is a stereotype that somehow academic sentences reflect the highest intelligence when they are as convoluted as possible. Rather, be clear.
- b) The unspoken audience. We may be subconsciously targeting our book to the agenda of a need for tenure, or to "prove" our academic career.

¹ This talk was originally delivered at the first meeting of the 2012 Virginia Seminar on Lived Theology. It is slightly revised here.

- c) A fear of crossing over into that taboo area of the subjective voice and personal narrative. Am I afraid to use the words “I” and “me”? Do I quail at the thought of even voicing a personal unfootnoted experience or opinion?
- d) A fear that practical relevance of the book may affect your chances for grant funding. Some academic grant committees have a reputation for frowning on projects that are less than “pure” scholarship.

Memoir/biography

Second, what are the challenges for memoir and biography? In your group, I think of Valerie Cooper’s book on Maria Stewart, and Vanessa Ochs’ memoir, *Words on Fire*. Does lived theology mean simply including details about some spiritual aspects in a lived life? Of course it needs more than that, but how do we push deeper? In our first seminar, four of the six members of the group had written at least one memoir and/or biography, so this was a major topic for discussion at every meeting. Charles can speak to this from writing his own memoir, *The Last Days: A Son’s Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of a New South*, as well as his forthcoming Bonhoeffer biography. This is a genre I find very appealing, and the group inspired me to start working on a project, a biography of my great-grandfather, a rather quirky story of contagion, public health, and family complexities, where I need to think more deeply about these challenges and opportunities. That project remains challenged for many different reasons, but it has helped me think about what’s difficult when we seek to bring lived theology to this type of writing. Briefly, I think:

- a) Memoir and biography is in some ways the opposite of academic writing. It is by nature intimate and up close. The challenge then becomes: how do we step back and shape the overall narrative?
- b) Even if the story is not our personal story, it touches on one’s deepest views and biases and motives for writing. How do we get in touch with those views and biases as they will inevitably influence the narrative?
- c) The thread of theology can take many different patterns. How will we weave it?

Inspirational, moral, or didactic instruction about/for organized religion

Third, what are the challenges for those projects that are more intentionally focused on a faith-based reader and setting? Writing that is “inspirational, moral, or didactic about/for organized religion” are typically those books we criticize easily—often for good reason: they can be very badly written! As a *type*, these are not the sort of books that Virginia seminar participants write, but since we all write out of some degree of personal faith and theology, all of our books tend to have aspects of these features in them. Inspiration and moral lessons likely drive at least part of our project and motives, as these aspects are inevitably a piece of our background, our ideas, the things we hold to be important. For seminar members who are ordained clergy (such as Mark Gornik was in SLT1, though his seminar book was based on his dissertation and field work), this category also shapes the pastoral experience in the pulpit or in religious leadership roles. Here perhaps Sam Lloyd can help us think about how he anticipates that writing lived theology for the Seminar might differ from his long years of writing sermons in the Episcopal church, or as Vanessa Ochs shapes new and creative feminist narrative following her rabbinic ordination.² Is it as simple as the difference between art and tool, between creative writing and functional writing to convey a message? Is not lived theology the very essence and heart of all good preaching? How does one weave pastoral experiences together? How does one avoid a book that is little more than a string of interesting stories or, on the other hand, avoid too much use of a prescriptive voice?

Popular trade writing

And what are the challenges for those who write “popular” or trade books? Trade books sell and we all want to publish and have many good, thoughtful, paying readers. What are the ups and down of this genre? As a “critically acclaimed” cultural critic, what would David Dark say about the lived theology in his *Sacredness of Questioning Everything*? And what about poetry—and god forbid, maybe even fiction—as it relates to religion in trade writing? Popular trade writing is something I feel I have not yet achieved. In our group

²See now Vanessa Ochs, “[Free Range Rabbi](#),” her *Huffington Post* blog post reflecting on her ordination.

the successful trade writers included Carlos Eire, Patricia Hampl, Alan Jacobs, and Charles Marsh. Carlos often reminded us that “popular” writing carries a cost for the academic. Academics who succeed at trade books may be treated, in the academy, as less than serious scholars, and so, he advised, might wait until they have tenure before taking the risk. Somewhere I read that murder mysteries were once the only popular genre that the British academy viewed as acceptable for scholars to write – because university professors all read them whenever they get sick! None of our Virginia Seminar books were murder mysteries, but only the English professors in our group seemed to feel safe with their reputation of writing acclaimed trade books. The rest of us approached the issue with fear and trembling. Oxford University Press at least has recently made very deliberate efforts to court and publish manuscripts that combine good academic writing with aspects of popular trade narrative (like the first person), and this trend might help counter this classic problem of image. And feeling safe about writing in this genre does not guarantee you will want to keep it up; Alan Jacobs began one meeting, soon after publication of *The Narnian*, by exclaiming, “I will never ever ever write another word about C.S. Lewis!!”

I offer no answers for these challenges. Your journey will be one of finding some of those answers and opportunities for yourselves, for your own project, your own voices. The type of writing we choose depends on who we are. We are here as writers. Honoring this gift engages us in a sacred dynamic of accountability to all the disciplines of writing as craft and as art.

Writing As Lived Theology

It’s easy to think of lived theology as something we write *about*, as the living of the theology “out there” in direct personal engagement in history or in modern life of religious expression, church work, teaching, social action, and activism. This was how I envisioned it as I wrote about faith-based responses to poverty, hunger, and disease in early Christian sermons from the fourth century, describing a theology in action to invite reader response. But when Charles asked me to think about my own experiences and bring my own voice to the project, this challenge made me conscious of a sort of split personality

issue in my writing that had been there for a long time, and presented a real challenge to the work I wanted to do for the seminar. Here I offer a few notes on the journey to my Virginia Seminar book, *God Knows There’s Need: Christian Responses to Poverty*.

My tension was one that I think is common to many scholarly writers. On the one hand, I was and am a person of faith. I take theology very seriously and throughout my life have been long and deeply formed by it. It is profoundly personal at many levels. As faith issues relate to ethics and political action on social justice and human rights, of course, they affect my research and writing. But as they concern worship in relation to deity, and my spiritual identity as a religious person, this faith-based focus is more private. So the challenge to use “personal voice” forced me to think: What aspect of personal voice has its best fit in public space? How much can I use the first person? What personal experiences “work” in such writing? And how do you take those risks? The fact is that I’ve had most success at writing things that are solidly academic, that focus on critical objectivity. My “public voice” writing has been shaped by the fact that I started what might be called my “professional” writing in the sciences. And yet, in fact, my science focus is not at all a “natural” fit. It followed from pressure in my life to prepare myself educationally for a field where I was likely to find a “real” job. Writing about nutrition and health issues began simply as a tool for survival, a way to use the writing process that I love in the field where I happened to find myself employed.

Like most of you, I suspect, I’ve also written lots of other things, across other genres, that—thank God—were not published. In *What Color is Your Parachute?*—that famous book about finding the ideal job—one exercise asks the reader to remember what you most enjoyed doing as a child for play. For me, what I liked best was always creative and usually creative writing: poetry, plays, fiction, even reflective and descriptive journaling essays. But then I grew up, and realized that no one except my English teachers (and sometimes my mother) was reading them. So I switched, to academic and science writing. This was in part to survive (whatever I did, I had to be writing), and in part to have a voice in the issues I cared about, a voice that might be heard. My personality is such that my need to write far exceeds any inner desire to talk. As a result, I continued to journal,

reflect, encourage, imagine – living in this split that seemed an inevitable aspect of my personality and temperament.

My natural vocation is very solitary, and this affects the way I write and the way I teach, and the way I find it possible to stay sane as a human being. Writing, even in social justice and poverty response issues, became for me a way of *living* theology, a way to embrace theological action in itself, a way to live. Writing is perhaps like prayer in its capacity (for those of us who believe in prayer) to pursue effective expression that might make a difference. Lived theology is so much bigger than what we *do*; it goes to the theological foundations of what we *are* as beings made by God—to *be*.

I find writers from Greek Christianity and modern Orthodox Christianity most helpful in expressing lived theology as it relates to writing and being. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, is immensely relevant to this point. Gregory was intentional about both theological expression and writing, and both of these in the context of living faithfully. He is deeply reflective, for example, in all of his preaching. And yet his spectacular refusal to serve as bishop in two very different appointments—one in backwater Sasima and the other in glittering Constantinople—created a huge mess for his life, one that he spilt much ink to complain about. His theological treatises are the foundation of traditional Trinitarian doctrine today, while his writing about himself is full of details, specifics on friendships and family dysfunctions, and objections to circumstances. In his old age he wrote hundreds of poems, many or even most of them still un-translated—and yet hauntingly beautiful. Even his last will and testament, which we have in translation, is an expression of his lived theology in relationship to community.³

In the Orthodox Christian tradition, true “theology” is about LIFE, about living and breathing prayer rather than intellectual expression. Theology is relational by definition. Evagrius of Pontus, for example, taught that, “If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian” (*Prayer* 60). One of my favorite modern Orthodox writers is the late Father Dumitru Staniloae,

a Romanian priest who spent long years in prison under communism. In his life work on Orthodox dogmatic theology, he wrote:

Theology will be effective if it stands always before God and helps the faithful to do the same in their every act: to see God through the formulae of the past, to express [God] through the explanations of the present, to hope and to call for the advancement towards full union with [God] in the life to come.⁴

So then, these were a few of the issues and perspectives that shaped my thinking throughout the first seminar, as I worked on writing *God Knows There's Need*. When it came to the practical aspects of that writing process, perhaps it might encourage you in your own ideas to know that when I first joined the seminar I had nothing at all except an idea and an opportunity. When the Fedex envelope from Virginia first arrived at my house out of the blue in 2004, with an invitation from Charles to apply for the seminar, I had no plans or notes to write this particular book. I did not even realize that I wanted to write this particular book. The first hurdle I had to face was to realize that I was actually eligible to apply for the grant. I did not even read the details Charles sent for a couple of weeks, because I thought I was probably not eligible and did not want to be disappointed. I have chosen locational stability in life, and don't have a traditional academic teaching position—and no academic department or institution has yet offered to hire me in what would be my dream job: a regular post that would allow me to be a resident scholar, writer, and out-of-the-classroom mentor. This means that most grants are simply not available to me. So the first piece of good news (which I realized when Charles sent me a little reminder) was that this seminar grant was indeed compatible with a non-traditional career. One idea led to another, and in this opportunity the book was born.

We met twice in the first year and my goal for those initial meetings was simply to develop an outline. The final book was radically different from any of the early outlines, thanks to the group feedback and conversations as we shared our pieces with one another.

³ For more on Gregory's life, the best biography is by John McGuckin (himself an Orthodox priest, highly respected scholar, and poet), *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).

⁴ Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology [1]: The Experience of God*. Brookline, Mass: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998, p. 93.

Outlines are helpful, especially in the early stage when you are not ready to write in full sentences yet. But prepare to throw them out once the book starts to take life.

I also had no publisher. Cynthia Read, who had published my revised dissertation, *The Hungry are Dying*, was interested, but she needed a manuscript before she could market the book to her board for a potential contract. My academic writing takes shape through laborious and repeated drafts; I know what it's like to be possessed with a pen, in frenetic stream-of-consciousness happenings, but this is most common in creative writing; in the academy I am fond of carefully argued ideas that are richly supported with footnotes! The book developed slowly, and the contract with Oxford came very late in the process. At each meeting the Seminar members couldn't believe that, despite all efforts I didn't yet have a publisher—or an agent. In the end, the contract was not my greatest challenge. My greatest challenge was finding the right tone, the right mix of personal and scholarly voice for this particular book. When *God Knows There's Need* finally came out, my *Doktormutter* and former dissertation director, a wise and deeply spiritual woman, said to me, “*This is the book you have always wanted to write. Not everyone has that opportunity.*”

Writing to find voice means taking other risks of personal exposure. I know of at least two academic colleagues (outside the Seminar) who read material from the drafts that was more “personal” than fit their comfort level with a scholarly book. Their honesty was hard, but it saved me from public mortification. The best advice I received on how to write in this personal voice came from Patricia Hampl, who said: write as one standing beside your reader, pointing *together* at something you can both see. That way, the personal voice is not “look at me!” but rather “look at that!”

Mine was not the only Seminar book that changed every year we met. Others' books differed, sometimes radically, from their description the previous year. There are several books that did not take shape that I hope to see from our group, someday. These constant shifts and transitions encouraged me, by the last meeting, to present a new idea for a biography somewhat outside of my usual focus. Discussions gave me internal “permission” for frenetic research into the obscurities and biases of 19th century government politics in Chile,

medical education, and the American newspaper business in Ohio, as civic duty shaped one undistinguished Unitarian doctor in American public welfare activities. When this proposal hit a wall, an amazing surprise door opened for an entirely different book, my current project, a book that relates justice, belief, human rights (particularly economic, social and cultural or ESC rights), and global health. The 1850s doctor may still get his voice, as a chapter draft for the new project and perhaps longer book someday. None of this would exist without the landscape of the Virginia Seminar, conversations that continue in email and friendships today.

An Invitation to Dare

In conclusion, I would like to offer you, on your SLT2 journey, an invitation to dare:

- Dare to be subjective—and outside the box—as long as you're honest;
- Dare to use plain English—including first person;
- Dare to tell stories;
- Dare to cross genres, or even mix them up if it makes your creative writing more effective;
- Dare to abandon footnotes—or god forbid even merge them into reader-friendly comments;
- Dare to let one another read what might indeed be truly awful;
- Dare to want sales and marketing—and help make it work;
- Dare to follow your heart in your first draft, putting the inner critic on hold for the 3rd or 4th draft;
- Dare to endure 3-4 (or more) rounds of edits before you seek a publisher;
- Dare to continue academic writing that is heavy—if it works and is your calling;
- Dare to enjoy your time together!