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ART AND THE MYSTIC VISION:
REFLECTIONS ON GOD THE POTTER

Lord of the Winds,
The Flame, The Deep;
Lord of the Earth,
Root, branch and leaf!
Circle us now
with the light of your love,
grounded below; opened above.

Let me begin by saying how delighted I am to be here to take part in the birthing of new visions that seek to integrate the wisdom of the arts with the insights of theology. As we shall see, they have far too much in common for the church at large and individual souls in particular to continue to assent to their compartmentalization and separation. As someone whose primary professional identification is that of a "biblical scholar", I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak as a whole person, all of whose gifts are to be about the business of praising God and exalting souls. In my own heart, I am a contemplative artist, a poet, and a feminist before I am a scholar; indeed, it is the artistry that God has birthed in my life that fuels my scholarship. But there is no denying that I often find myself frustrated in

my attempts to blend these many selves into a satisfying, and acceptable whole: my best theology is done in my art-- in clay and color and poetry. Too often in the world of academic biblical theology, the divorce between soul, body and intellect is perpetuated as the only acceptable form of our work, making us worry more about writing the impeccable footnote than facilitating the flights of the spirit. Consequently, I welcome the occasion to reflect with you on the theological tapestry woven by the many-colored threads of the arts; in a world of footnote-writing, I thirst for moments like these when I am allowed to move from what is approved and conventional to what is really real. And see the effect it is having--I have already created a paragraph which, like art and mysticism, is intensely personal, and furthermore, one that has not got so much as a single footnote to bless itself with. (Hold on; there are some on the way!)

I need to say perhaps how strange it is to apply to myself all these rather elitist (and generally male) appellations. As a girlchild from a poor family, I grew up without any formal training in the arts and no access to adequate art supplies. Further, I had never heard of women as artists, and had no reason to assume that was even possible. Besides, as one intimately acquainted with poverty, the prospect of starving in a garret like some nineteenth century impressionist was far from appealing. Yet the visions were there, tormenting me to bring them to

expression. Words were cheap and free; public education gave me the opportunity to excel verbally and carve my way out of the underside of American society. Before I was seduced by the Hebrew language, I originally chose religious studies because it allowed me to study all of the arts as they expressed the highest aspirations of the human being, which I take to be the heart of true religion.

My artistic career began when someone gave my mother a second-hand set of oil paints which she passed on to me--I have it still. With intense desire but no money for canvases, my mother--one who has perfected the art of "making do"--was sufficient to the task of providing. She collected pleasingly shaped beer bottles from around our neighborhood and these became the surfaces which received my first efforts. In college, it never occurred to me to study art--how could a woman survive doing such a thing? (the irony here is that I thought a woman could do better in religion!)--but I continued to paint, especially during periods of intellectual fatigue or uncertainty. I discovered canvas, but it was still too expensive. I branched out from beer bottles to painting dumpsters and police barracades--it was the sixties, remember. Eventually, I had a thriving little business painting "fake" stained glass scenes on dorm windows, and doing customized body-painting for parties. In graduate school, I studied Middle Egyptian hieroglyphics and the floodgates were well and truly opened: here at last my two loves--

words and form--cohered, for now I was confronted with words that were pictures, pictures that were words. Laboring to master the hundreds of intricate picture signs, poetry was born, and large paintings and cartoons that strove, not too successfully I am afraid, to express the drive to unity taking place in my scholar-in-training's brain. Even at that stage, what interested me in my technical research was the possibility of seeing in new ways and creating new, more evocative combinations of data to yield a more comprehensive understanding of how scripture moves us, the how and why of the ways in which meaning is created. In other words, I approached scripture and ancient religion with the questions of an artist rather than the demands of the dogmatician. I did not realize at the time how explosive and unusual an approach this was, but I must say, with the birth of new interest in the bible as literature, my chosen field seems to be coming around--that is, we are beginning to agree that there are many ways to see, and that all of them enhance our collective vision of how God is at work in the world.

From my self-description--a typical hallmark of the feminist these days, since we don't believe in pretending to an objectivity that no human can sustain, since all experience is intensely personal and colors what we do and say--it should be obvious that neither my interest in art nor my training in Bible prepared me for an encounter with the Living God. Fear of poverty and a concomitant desire

for worldly success assured that I would dismiss such pursuits as spirituality--or what I understood spirituality to be at that time--and pooh-pooh the notion of direct religious experience. The canon had been closed for nearly two millenia; I hadn't seen God doing much talking or redeeming in my studies of the Holocaust or on the streets at home. Failing personal experience of God in the present, it seemed that the best that could be done for the soul was to immerse it in traditions of the past when God was closer, more accessible.

But something happened, a something quite frequent in the lives of the friends of God, I later discovered: my first year of teaching I sickened with a disease no one could diagnose, and fell into the hands of white-coated men who do not know that the human being is not just body, but soul as well. While they dithered around me with tests and xrays and more tests, and a host of diagnoses and inappropriate treatments, I took matters into my own weak hands and began to exploit my own particular field in my efforts to survive. I had written my dissertation on biblical wisdom under the direction of a Carmelite monk, and with his encouragement I began to explore the classical traditions of spirituality of the West and East. A kind of Christian Zen, a combination of fundamental Christian and Judaic insights into the nature of humanity and divinity and Zen practice gave me the strength to survive the pain, the uncertainty, the drugs and the continuing

degeneration. Working with a therapist who--praise God!--understood that the drugs given me had robbed me of my sense of self as they masked my symptoms, I began to draw myself well. Using guided imagery derived from meditation, I gave visual shape to my pain and then manipulated those shapes into more healthful configurations. Though drugged into mute protest, I could at least show the whitecoats how I felt, even if I no longer had the skills to articulate my feelings. Emerging from drugs into lucidity, I came back to the land of the living compelled to speak of what I learned in the land of deep darkness, that others who wander in shadow may also learn to discover the diety--perhaps not the one they expect--who accompanies them there. So, you see why I must speak to you, not only as a scholar of Bible, but as a person who has been to the Pit, that shadowy land of non-existence the bible names Sheol, and lived to tell about it. Please forgive such a lengthy detour into the portrait of the author, but since most of my remarks for next few days will be anchored firmly in experience, it is critical that I give you some idea of what those experiences are.

Now, at last, a quotation, suitable for footnoting: Albert Einstein, one of our great sceintific mystics once wrote that

The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He

(sic) who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle.

For me, this is as good a description as I know of the religious impulse that lies at the core of our humanity. Before there was scripture, before there was tradition, there was experience--sometimes fearful, more often exalting and awesome. Experience of God as that ineffable "Other", the Living One "out there" who is somehow at the same time "in here" is what we are all about as religious beings. Our attempts to systematize what we know through revelation or natural theology, our formulations of belief and practice--all these worthy ministries of the church and her servants are necessarily dependent on the prior experience of the One Who Is and Is With Us. Unfortunately, looking at the state of theology and worship in the second half of the twentieth century, one would hardly guess this to be the case. Hence, the resurgence of interest in some quarters in the role of mystical experience and the arts, and their relation to theology. God desires intimacy and union with whole beings; the 5000 years of domination by left-brained, patriarchal modes of knowing and being have brought us to the brink of technological destruction and ecocrisis. It is time to try another way; it is time to be all that we can be, all that God made us to be. Art and mysticism both articulate the visions borne of a unified consciousness, and as such, they

have the power to begin the redemptive process in the lives of individuals and in the life of the planet.

Classically, the mystical vision in Judaism and Christianity has been grounded in some basic beliefs about human and divine nature. (Though I will be speaking here primarily from Christian perspectives, I have been equally influenced by Judaic and other non-Christian traditions on this topic.) If we define mysticism as scholar Margaret Smith does, as "an intense and continuous awareness of the all-pervading Presence of God...a knowledge of Ultimate reality, and finally...the establishment of a conscious relation with the Absolute" (p. 3), we may reasonably ask how this is able to come about. The deepening and unification of consciousness to which mysticism aspires is grounded in the belief that the soul itself partakes of the Divine nature in such a way as to make union of the soul and God not only possible but the pinnacle of true humanity (p. 4). This is what we mean by the doctrinal statement that people are made in the image of God; this is the great folly of the Incarnation of God in Christ. Mysticism asserts that such union can be attained through the offices of love and spiritual intuition, that is, by the training of natural faculties which transcend intellect and sensation even as they include them. To achieve this, the ego, the greedy self that is always saying "I, I!" must be purified and trained. Hence, the mystic journey has always seemed to fall into several well-defined movements within

the life of the soul, though in practice they are not always so neatly linear: repentance and/or conversion, the way of purgation, the way of illumination, and the way of Union (pp. 6-8). After an initial wakening to consciousness of God's presence and desire for union--a sort of divine tease, if you will--the thirsty soul sets about getting its house in order so that the cosmic guest will find a pleasing room in which to stay. This is the time of purgation, and unfortunately, most people's idea of mystical practice tends to fixate on the asceticism which usually marks this phase. Indeed, we do fast and pray, at times to excess, but this is done not out of disdain for pleasure and the goodness of creation, but so that those things may be dethroned as obsessions of consciousness and rightfully valued as gifts from God. Both senses and intellect must stop masquerading as the whole self; both sides of the brain must learn to work together and cease their struggles to impose domination on the other. When this has been achieved through practice of the disciplines of meditation, the way of illumination is entered. Now the aspiring mystic seeks to conform the soul exactly to the divine life it has sensed within, and walks in increasing light, though often with intermittent experiences of painful yet creative chaos and unknowing. Finally--and a lifetime is scarcely enough time for such journeying--the mystic is blessed with union, now fully conscious of the Presence within which is identical to that Power without,

the moldy
refrigerator

that power which sustains all life. God is no longer "object" of the mystic's search, but the true subject of the mystic's "I": the Bible says it well--"I live, yet not I, but Christ in me" (Gal 2:20).

Two final remarks on the nature of the mystical vision, before we turn to an exploration of its relation to the arts. Tradition has classically suggested that the mystical journey with all its various stages usually follows either the "Positive Way" (the Via Positiva) or the "Negative Way" (the Via Negativa). This refers to the role that imagery plays in each meditative discipline: the Positive Way proceeds by a deep engagement with imagery as adequate expressions of God and our relationship to the divine. Here the sacraments, aesthetically lush liturgies, the narratives of the Bible, the life and work of Jesus as the Christ, in Judaism, the Qabbalah with its Tree of Life are all used to excite and explicate the soul's love and thirst for God. This way is the one most associated with the artistic vision that celebrates form. The Negative Way takes a different approach. Deeply suspicious of the adequacy of any form to express that Mystery which precedes all form, the Via Negativa tries to dampen our dependence on positive imagery as it negates all our concepts of God as woefully deceptive and incomplete. One on the negative way says of each image or concept of God, "No, God is neither this nor that; God is No-thing". This is the form

of Christian mysticism that is most like those forms of meditation practiced in Zen.

In my own experience, the soul most fruitfully partakes of both ways, rather than trying to adhere exclusively to one or the other. There is a rhythm to our spiritual progress, it would seem: the wise seeker would do well to attend to the seasons of the soul, and let each way enrich and correct the other. Matthew Fox, a modern exponent of what he calls "Creation Spirituality", a spirituality which focuses on our original blessedness rather than fallenness, has rightfully explored the relation of the two paths to each other, and adds two more: The Creative Way and the Transformative Way. Without the Creative Way--art as an enlivening form of meditation--the Positive and Negative ways are lifeless and denuded of meaning; without the Transformative Way of solidarity with those who are oppressed for any reason, the Positive, Negative and Creative Ways are nothing but flight from painful reality into pie-in-the-sky piety (175-305).

This brings me to my final comment on mysticism, a concern often raised by my more pragmatically-minded students. Is mysticism socially relevant, or is it rather a shirking of one's responsibilities as a social being? It is quite true that false consciousness is just as much of a possibility in mystical experience as in any other human endeavor. Here, as elsewhere, one must judge by the fruits: does a person's spirituality produce pride,

coldness, unapproachability, and selfishness, or does it produce humility, greater perspective, involved compassion and healing? Given my entanglement with the medical and academic establishments, I take the strongest exception to the notion that those of us with a call to the contemplative life are either pathological or unproductive. In Zen we say, "a Zen master sits for the world". This is a recognition of the mystics' contribution to the creation of a sort of worldwide "critical mass" of consciousness. A mysticism that does not return the monk to the marketplace so that others may be invited to travel the road to union is false mysticism. One of the first experiences that fills the stilled heart is communion with the anguish existing all around the praying soul. As might be expected, I wrote a poem the tendency to slander mystics as socially uninvolved.

Travelling into the silence of God,
 how loud the cries of the world become
 till "Come to Me!" and "Go to them!"
 together merge, to be heard as one.
 The scholars on the soup kitchen's street
 read a living text etched out in crow's feet,
 hear the Exile's tale on every tongue.

Nothing could be more socially desirable or necessary than a vital spirituality capable of infusing our lives with a reverence for planet and self. Only such a grounding in

the experience of ultimate reality can avert the dangers of burnout and sustain us in our struggles for justice.

Hallie Iglehart, a theologian of the womanspirit movement, writes that for women, the recovery of our spiritual heritage

"...is a necessity, not a luxury. Without it, we are operating with only half our potential tools and power....We need tools such as meditation, personal mythology, natural healing, dreamwork, study of matriarchal history and mythology, and ritual to reach beyond the possibility laid out for us by the patriarchy. We cannot wait until after the revolution for the new order to rise up, phoenix-like, out of the ashes of the old. We need to lay the groundwork now through lifetimes of hard work in researching, experimenting with and practicing a new integration of "politics" and "spirituality"....Ultimately, the goals of spirituality and of revolutionary politics are the same: to create a world in which love, equality, freedom and fulfillment of individual and collective potential is possible. If we unite the two approaches to these common goals, we will experience this fulfillment. (413)

Let us consider now how the arts can aid us in the reclamation of our full potential as humans before God.

Speaking as a woman whose hands are always stained with ink or paint or clay or charcoal, my remarks on art will not sound much like those of an art historian or "great" aesthetic theorists. As a feminist, I am only too painfully aware of the biases reflected in our notions of what constitutes "great art". Usually, what we name "great" ^{in our civilization} art is merely the expression of the tastes of elite males: themes of war, heroism, death, abstractions and objectifications. Such bias permeates our view of all the arts: in literature we accept without thinking the notion that the whaling ship is a more powerful and evocative expression of human community than the sewing circle or the kitchen (Baym quoted in Kaplan: 47). Woman is the great theme of art, we are told; she is not the artist. Until we open our eyes and hearts to reflection on the ways such biases have shortchanged our collective vision, we shall never progress, I fear.

To make matters worse, in the modern world, art has increasingly been identified as a "product" to be consumed by a faddish public whose interest is more in hedging against inflation by investment in art than in mystical union with the vision made flesh. Elitist art scorns popular art, and often seems to define the province of art as anything which is useless, artificial, and in our current post-modern phase, ugly (Bovenschen; Gottner-Abendroth in Ecker). Functional art--for example, the exquisite sensibilities displayed in Shaker furniture or a

Navaho blanket or traditional embroidery 15
fine quilt, or needlepoint--is seldom viewed as "real" art,
since it is too intimately related to everyday life.
(Also, functional art is often the realm of the arts
traditionally practiced by women, and I suspect this is
another subtle source for the denigration of practical art
as "handwork" or "crafts".)

Given these difficulties with "art" as a concept--some
of the same difficulties encountered in our thinking about
the phenomenon of modern religion, why do some of us insist
on its vital, and non-negotiable relationship to the
religious impulse? It is when we come to consider art as
"process" rather than "product" that the connection is
made: the Creative Way is another path to unified
consciousness and multiform vision (Fox: 188-200). When
the artist--and for me, that means all of us, since we are
all artists; some of us just haven't found our proper
medium yet--when the artist begins to work, that noxious
ego-self I mentioned before disappears. The self still
functions, of course, or nothing could be produced, but in
the process of observation of the that which is being given
form the artist enters into a direct relationship with the
observed. In effect, the distance between observer and
observed contracts; subjective and objective modes of
perception blend into a way of knowing that is precise, yet
diffused; playful, yet serious; committed yet detached.
Jewish theologian Martin Buber spoke of this effect as an
"I-Thou" relationship, where two meet as engaged equals, in

contrast to the "I-It" relationship where the observer is preferenced and the observed becomes a mere object.

People, nature, art and God are all known properly only through the "I-Thou" encounter. Unfortunately, we live in a world where "I-It" relationships are the norm.

From the religious side, there is another reason why the arts are crucial for our quest for meaning: it is in the process of creation that we share most intensely in the divine life of the Creator. Made in the image of God,

nothing is more natural than that the divine creative impulse should be housed in these diverse mansions of flesh. If union of the human with the divine is not only possible and desirable, but the obligatory endpoint of human evolution, collectively and individually, then not to create is a rejection of God and self alike. Further, to

focus on certain forms of creation as the only legitimate ones ^{- always Bach and never gospel and blues -} is to turn one's back on a basic insight available to anyone who can look out ^{of} a window: God celebrates

diversity. Creation hums with it; it is the great theme of Nature's symphony. Whoever heard of a planet like this one: so many species of birds, flowers, mammals, fish, grains, fruits, grasses, insects, people of every imaginable color and size? We may choose to speak of God as "one", but this is a "One" whose property is to delight in the many. Is it your art to sew on the ultimate button or perfect the timing of an engine? Are you at one with the ball when it strikes the pins, or do you sense eternity

* This contraction of consciousness allows the artist to explore the entire universe by means of a very limited range of subjects. E. Degas "Art does not expand; it recapitulates"

when you see yourself in your child's eyes? Your art was conceived in the heart of God at creation, and God takes pleasure in your pursuit, for it is God's own pursuit, too. You can assuage that deep yearning in your soul, that thirst for the living God, by claiming the art God has formed you for, and rejoicing in it. The life of the creative soul is like that of the praying soul: in both, God is met in the arena where the body is allowed to do all the things that bodies do. Listen to Goethe exult in the way the senses, the language of the body, inform the soul's ascent to God in his poem "The Holy Longing" (1814):

Tell a wise person, or else keep silent,
because the massman will mock it right away.
I praise what is truly alive,
what longs to be burned to death.

In the calm water of the love-nights,
where you were begotten, where you have begotten,
a strange feeling comes over you
when you see the silent candle burning.

Now you are no longer caught
in the obsession with darkness,
and a desire for higher love-making
sweeps you upward.

Distance does not make you falter,

now, arriving in magic, flying,
and finally, insane for the light,
you are the butterfly and you are gone.

And so long as you haven't experienced
this: to die and so to grow,
you are only a troubled guest
on the dark earth. (Bly:70)

If we begin to take the creative, artistic aspect of the life of God seriously, things that were puzzling or obscure in our inherited theologies are seen with increasing clarity. For example, I had never really understood why God creates and redeems until I began to acknowledge myself as artist. ^{⊕ damaged paintings} Humanity can be pretty discouraging; the God of the Hebrew Bible is often pictured lamenting the decision to become involved with us. Why, then? Loneliness? Boredom? Some theological mystery we can never untangle? The Genesis stories do suggest that God creates in order to have caretakers to oversee the life teeming in our oceans, our skies and soil, but there is more to it than that. Reasoning back from the basic identity with a humanity that reflects the divine image, I sense that God creates for the same reason any artist does, out of love and engagement with the inner vision. Once a creation is begun, the artist is no clockmaker-god who can turn an indifferent back to the fate

of her or his work. God redeems because the diety has a personal, artistic investment in us that will not be denied. There are inevitably floods of frustration, moments when the desire to sweep away what has been done and start anew win out. The Flood Story of Genesis and the Exile of ancient Israel both attest to the fact that nothing is more exasperating and demoralizing than engagement in a project that simply isn't working. But more often than not, God is an artist who knows enough to keep at it--an ark is kept afloat; a saving remnant returns. There is always a stage in one's art where the process doesn't seem to be going in the right direction, where the creation bears little or no resemblance to the inner vision or outer model and beginning again seems the only sensible response. The accomplished artist with a little experience under her belt, though, has learned not to give up too soon: the painting needs another layer of blending, or the clay needs more water and finer detail. God the artist doesn't give up on us; neither should we.

An investigation of the biblical image of God the Potter is enhanced by an understanding of the artistry and hard work that undergirds this presentation of God found in Genesis and the prophets. First, we should mention that Yahweh, the God of the Hebrew Bible, is not the only potter god known to the ancient Near East. Khnum, a creator god from Egypt, manufactures ^{the likenesses} humanity on his wheel. In Mesopotamia, the midwife of the gods, Mami, creates

humankind from clay mixed with the flesh and blood of a slain god (the method is worked out by the god of wisdom; see Polichand: 99-100); in the Gilgamesh Epic, the goddess Aruru creates a double of that hero from the clay of the steppe (74). (One feminist historian has recently suggested that creation via word or pottery on the part of male gods represents a displacement of the more ancient mother-goddesses who gave birth to creation directly (Lerner:149ff.)). Obviously, given the participation of Mesopotamian goddesses in the process, there is more going on here than that, but the male gods' inability to give birth does seem to give rise to the need to create in less biologically determined ways. So, granted that Yahweh creates artistically precisely because that god is viewed as a "He", and not a mother who gives birth to her creations, what else does this biblical image have to offer us?

First, the Bible alludes to the physical labor involved in the potter's work (Isa. 41:25) when it speaks of the potter treading on the clay to condition it. It knows as well of the fragility of the vessels produced, for the image of broken shards of pottery occurs frequently (Ps 2:9; Isa. 30:14; Jer. 19; etc.). The report in Jeremiah 18 of the prophet's visit to the potter's shop and the relevance of that object lesson for the fate of a wicked Judah emphasizes the extreme versatility of clay as a medium that responds to its maker's ever changing intent.

So collecting all these insights into God's craft as potter—the hard work, the malleability of the vision and the medium, the delicacy of the finished product—we get the picture of a laboring, engaged Creator who is open to the accidents inherent in the medium, one who allows changing visions to inform the process of creation. In other words, to speak of God as potter and artist is to speak of a god who is rendered vulnerable by the very act of creating.

use of the
wheel:
coordinated
embodiment

There is further evidence for this vulnerability on the part of the Creator when we consider the actual fashioning of "ha'adam", the earthling, out of clay in Gen 2:7. We are simply told "Yahweh God shaped the earthling from the soil of the ground, and blew the breath of life into its nostrils, and the earthling became a living being". Anyone who has worked with clay to fashion a human figure knows the hours and the hushed expectation concealed in that simple verse. Clay will yield a human figure, but it takes patience, and extreme care. Minute detailing is required to approximate the human figure; hands, elbows, ankles, knees, noses are especially difficult to sculpt and so fragile that they must be covered with damp cloths, repeatedly wet and affixed to the figure to keep them from drying too fast and breaking off before the rest of the form has dried. The finished form must be carefully dried, exposed to the air for only a few hours at a time over a series of days or weeks to insure even drying. Worst of all, even assuming the figure dries without breaking,

committing one's work to the kiln is a total act of trust and faith: one never knows which piece will survive the firing and which will explode (though the rule here is that usually the pieces you like the best and spent the most time on are the ones which break). Perhaps others, ^{like Jeremiah, whose art is poetry and ritual, rather than ceramics} think of the potter god as a total autocrat, making unilateral artistic decisions and imposing them upon the passive clay, throwing aside spoiled wares with no regret from the time spent on them, but people with clay on their hands know better. I can never read of God puttering around in the studio of creation without a sense of compassion for the intensity invested in the process, and a glimmer of purely human hope. I know how hard it is to be a potter; I know the love lavished on the clay; I can never believe that God is not anxiously hovering at the kiln of this life to assist us in coming forth whole. The potter god is willing to do whatever it takes to ensure the success of the process. The diety who is sculpting my life is never absent or disengaged, though, to be sure, different phases of the enterprise demand different sorts of presence. This is the god who is available to you in all the phases of your lives, a god made known in the process of meditation and the arts. Rightly entered, each one leads to the other, and then beyond, to the One who created us to create.

One of my favorite lit crits, Tzvetan Todorov, has said "Poetry must be consumed while it is hot" — that we can never understand poetry of another culture if we disdain the poetry of our own time. So, since we will be turning in further sessions to a consideration of the biblical arts of language use, I'd like to conclude with a poem that tries to bear witness to what we learn when we commit ourselves to the twin processes of prayer and art:

23
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