

MATTER ANTHOLOGY

CREATIVE | THEOLOGY

V. 01

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2010907326

ISBN (10) 0-9800841-1-3

ISBN (13) 978-0-9800841-1-5

First Edition – June 2010

Shechem Press PO Box 131694 Tyler, TX 75713



Cover design by Rebekah Wilkins-Pepiton
<http://www.bekawp.com>

Printed in the United States of America

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Special thanks to Sharon Pepiton for her help with copyediting and to the writers and artists for their inspired contributions both at the conference and for this anthology.

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Foreword

PETER ROLLINS

There is a well-known saying which tells us that politicians speak the truth in order to tell lies while artists tell lies so as to speak the truth. We would do well to reflect upon this little piece of wisdom, for there is something profoundly instructive about it, at least if we approach it in a particular way. In order to begin to penetrate this saying let us take the example of dreams. Generally, we think of a dream as a way to escape reality. Often we long to drift into a sleep in which we find ourselves occupying a radically different world. Perhaps we find that we have abilities that we would not be able to possess in reality or possessions that we could never hope to acquire in our lifetime. When we awake, we often long to return to this surreal paradise and so reach out to put our alarm on snooze and try to regain the fantasy.

Yet, this is not our only experience of dreams, for we can sometimes be plagued by a less congenial narrative, one which we do not wish to return to, but rather one that we strive to avoid. These are nightmares, and they can be so disturbing to us that we actually jolt ourselves awake so as to escape them. However, the questions must be asked as to what we are escaping from and what we are escaping into.

We may reassure ourselves that the nightmare was nothing but an unpleasant fantasy and that now we are awake we have re-entered reality. The images and feelings that we experienced in the nightmare were nothing but unpleasant fictions that dissipate in the cold light of day.

But, what if the reality of our waking life is actually a type of fiction and the fantasy that we encountered in the nightmare was so frightening precisely because it brought us close to something profoundly true? What if the person I am in public is actually a type of character I perform in order to be accepted, liked, and embraced by those around me? And, what if the feelings I encounter in my nightmare are so horrific and terrifying precisely because they reveal something of my deep desires, insecurities, and suffering? Realities that I cover over through a cacophony of activities from work to music, socializing and drugs.

Viewed in this light, the truth of my daily life begins to reveal itself as a type of mask or fiction that protects me from getting too close to the desires and fears that haunt me. What is more, the seeming fiction of my nightmares comes into question as

I realize that it touches on some profound truths that I could only ever begin to approach in an indirect manner.

In a similar way, artists of different stripes have often been those outsiders within society who have attempted to draw out deep, and sometimes unpleasant, truths about our lives through the guise of a fiction.

Through painting, music, prose, parable, or poem the artist invites us to look again at life for what seems like the first time, to dimly perceive a reality, as if through a glass darkly. This is not the revealing of some reality that lies shrouded behind appearance, existing beyond the world, but rather as something that lies nestled within appearance itself. A truth that is always before us and yet rarely grasped.

As a discipline driven by a desire to unearth and live in the light of the deepest truths, theology has always had a close relationship with the arts. Indeed, from a certain perspective one can say that it has always itself been a form of art. A type of theo-poetics wedded to the unconcealment of truth through the use of various symbols, rituals, liturgies, sacraments, and signs.

Yet, sadly all too often theology seems to fall into the hands of the professional politicians of the sacred. Those who would use it to make us feel comfortable in our waking life and who would employ it as a means of protecting us from facing up to the mysteries and anxieties of life. Not that we can blame these people alone, for it is often we ourselves who demand this. We who want someone to tell us what to believe and how to think so that we don't have to reflect too hard. For while it is popular to

hear people say that thinking can make a person depressed, the more disturbing possibility is that thinking too much is frightening because it may simply reveal that we were always depressed but just never knew it.

And yet, when theology falls into the hands of the poet, something profound takes place. We can find that through the theological dis-course we come into contact with ourselves with all the difficulties and possibilities that entails. Through ideas like Creation, Fall, Salvation, Eucharist, Heaven, and Hell we come face to face with what it means to be human.

This collection of essays, images, and poetry represents an attempt to put theology back into the hands of the dreamers. To give it back again to those who would speak lies in order to reveal the deepest, most transformative truths.

Editor's Note

CHARLES M PEPITON

The artist is a self-critically engaged agent in particular situations, calling for reclamation of the sacred and the future in a world that seems in many ways to be dying. - Deborah Haynes¹

Haynes's definition of the artist and the vocation of the artist is as precise as any I've heard. Her statement rings with the right mixture of melancholy and hope, keeping it rooted in reality. The urgency to preserve, rediscover, and interrogate the sacred—religious or otherwise—while providing such things for the future is constantly in tension with the ongoing death and decay of human cultures and natural ecosystems. Think of the iconic photograph of a Louisiana brown pelican soaked by British Petroleum. Think of the sound of a Tibetan monk's chanting against the cacophony of Chinese rail lines.

These are the type of conflicts that creates an immediate need to express and preserve, to resist the Fall—in a sense. This is the tension that drives a playwright to dramatize the memories of his people² and a photographer to document so-called “altars of decline”³, the sacrosanct flotsam of fading particularities. At their best, artists and allied thinkers engage their particular situations from oblique angles and by methods others overlook.

Furthermore, how do these tensions, or perhaps how *should* they, play out for artists within local faith communities. As a theatre artist, I’ve often said that the history of the Western theatre is the history of the conflict between the Church and the Stage. It’s a bit of an overstatement, perhaps, but the point is clear. The historic and ongoing tension between the arts and religions is simultaneously life-giving and alienating. So what can the arts do for faith? And what can faith do for the arts? How can we address these questions without pushing anyone out of the discussion?

It was with these questions in mind that Shechem Ministries devised the Matter ’09 conference and this resulting anthology. Our goal was to consider these questions and to create a space for meaningful conversation between working artists, theologians, philosophers, theorists, and others interested in the intersection of faith and the arts.

To this end, I am indebted to the groundbreaking work in the field by Wilson Yates, Kimberly Vrudney, and Deborah Haynes, to name just a few. Their work, standing on the shoulders of many before them, continues to legitimize the efforts of artists

within religious contexts beyond mere entertainment or decoration where enduring questions can be raised.

Similarly, the artists and authors who took part in the September 2009 conference in Austin, TX, and whose work is included in this anthology, embody the lively world of art, art criticism, philosophy, activism, and scholarship at the intersection of faith and the arts as it stands today. Amid the tension and immediacy of reclaiming the sacred and the future in a dying world this remains a hopeful conversation.

Think about a photograph in which a screen door is collapsing...Anyone or even the wind could walk through it or push the door down, but still it hangs by a single chain or by a single thread of wire. Think about that image. Some old homeplace with a weak screen door. We might find the resistance of a wire or chain futile, but there is still resistance. The falling and the resistance then are necessarily linked. – Damon Falke⁴

NOTES

¹ Haynes, Deborah. *The Vocation of the Artist*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 23.

² See <http://www.squaretoptheatre.com/?p=93>

³ See http://www.bekawp.com/?page_id=86

⁴ Falke, Damon. *The Sun is in the West*. Tyler: Shechem Press, 2010.

Contributors

Trey Allen serves as Director of Spiritual Formation at Sugar Land First United Methodist Church. Though neither an artist nor an academic, he attempts to be both through preaching, his ultimate passion. He currently resides in Houston, TX, with his wife, Erin, and his Walter Brueggemann books.

Julie Clawson is a writer, mother, and former church planting pastor who lives with her family in Austin, TX. She is involved in the Emergent church conversation where she has found the opportunity to explore how theology impacts everyday living. She is the author of *Everyday Justice* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009) and blogs at www.julieclawson.com.

Jeffrey Dueck serves as Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Mount Ida College in Newton, MA, where he teaches courses in Ethics, Epistemology, and Aesthetics, among others. His interest in Christian studies has been inspired not only by his work in academia but his service in ministry positions involving worship, teaching, and the arts.

Cassandra Falke is an Assistant Professor of English at East Texas Baptist University in Marshall, Texas. She is the editor of *Intersections in*

Christianity and Critical Theory (Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, forthcoming), the author of *A Mote in the Eye of Literature: Working-Class Autobiography in the Early Nineteenth Century*, and a committed teacher.

Damon Falke is the author of *Broken Cycles* (Tyler: Shechem Press, 2007) and two plays produced by Square Top Repertory Theatre, *Canaan* and *The Sun is in the West*. His work has appeared widely in journals, including *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *The Auroean*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, and others. He lives in Marshall, Texas.

Dena Davis Freed is a theatre scholar, artist, and educator currently working in youth theatre, religious education, performance studies, and performing arts education. Her interests include theatre pedagogy and practice, the construction of childhood, theatre for social change, and relationships between religious education/practice and the arts.

Joseph Frost is a playwright, director, and actor living in Jackson, Mississippi. Frost has won awards for his writing for both stage (*The Great Play*) and screen (*The Heart of Saturday Night*). His play *Anathema* was selected as a part of Square Top Repertory Theatre's New Works Festival in 2009, and his plays were the feature of the 2005 Malone College Playwright's Showcase. He is the Chair of Theatre at Belhaven College and the founding artistic director of the Floodlight Theatre Company.

Warren Langford currently serves as minister of youth at First United Methodist Church in New Iberia, Louisiana. His primary interest is the connection of art and text in ancient New Testament Greek manuscripts. He was one of the designers of the CNTTS Greek New Testament Textual Apparatus as well as a continual contributor to the publication. He has spent the last 4 years working with post-Katrina/Rita churches in south Louisiana.

Bill Mallonee has been called "one of the top 100 living songwriters" by *Paste Magazine*. Mallonee, the lyrical and musical source behind the Americana indie band Vigilantes of Love, started playing music in the late 80's. His early work was inspired by the post-punk-pop of XTC, Joy Division, the Clash, and Echo and the Bunnymen. Still, his deeper love for Dylan, Neil Young and other artists and writers of the "American experience" left an indelible mark on his writing and vocal delivery. (www.billmallonee.net)

Justin McBrayer is a philosopher from Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. He works in a wide variety of areas including philosophy of religion, epistemology, and both applied and meta ethics. His published work has been featured in a number of journals including *Philosophical Studies*, *Faith & Philosophy*, and *Bioethics*.

Kevin Meaux teaches at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. His writing has received numerous awards, including a Ruth Lilly Fellowship and a Louisiana Division of the Arts Artist Fellowship. His

poems have appeared in such journals as *The Southern Review*, *Poetry*, and *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*. He won the 2004 Robert Phillips Poetry Chapbook Prize for his collection of poetry *Myths of Electricity* (Huntsville: Texas Review Press, 2005).

Charles M Pepiton is the producing artistic director at Square Top Repertory Theatre. He has directed for Idaho Repertory Theatre, Idaho Repertory Theatre for Youth, and with Idaho's The Other Place Theatre Cooperative. As a theatre educator, he has taught at East Texas Baptist University in Marshall, TX; Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, ID; and the University of Idaho in Moscow, ID. Charlie serves on the board at Shechem Ministries.

Matt Recla is a Ph.D. candidate in Religious Studies at the University of California - Santa Barbara. He studies the Roman Empire and Early Christianity. His areas of interest are in questions of Christian identity, particularly in relation to martyrdom and violence.

Peter Rollins is a sought-after writer, philosopher, lecturer, and coordinator of the experimental faith collective Ikon in Belfast, Northern Ireland. His primary philosophical interests are in the area of continental philosophy of religion, phenomenology, and post-modernism. He is the author of *How (Not) to Speak of God* (2006), *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (2008), and *The Orthodox Heretic: and Other Impossible Tales* (2009) (Brewster: Paraclete Press). (www.peterrollins.net)

Thomas Turner is the Literary Arts Editor of GENERATE Magazine, blogs at EverydayLiturgy.com, and is the cohort leader of EmergentNJ. He lives in New Jersey with his wife Sarah. He studied English and Bible at Philadelphia Biblical University and has an MA in English from Rutgers University.

David Versluis has been teaching graphic design and art at Dordt College in Sioux Center, IA, since 2001. He studied art at Calvin College and earned an MFA at Western Michigan University. He is a member of the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA).

VOID is an experimental faith collective that utilizes a live mix of music, art, spoken word, personal reflections, and ritual to creatively engage questions of faith and doubt. A provocative and experiential event, VOID is marked by the religious question but remains radically open and non-confessional. VOID finds its home at Treff's Bar in Waco, Texas. (www.voidcollective.com)

Rebekah Wilkins-Pepiton is a visual artist, a designer, and an arts educator. Her book, *Broken Cycles* (Tyler: Shechem Press, 2007), is a collaboration between poetry and the photographic image. Beka's work has been shown at galleries in Durango, CO; Pagosa Springs, CO; Moscow, ID; Plainview, TX; and Marshall, TX, and online at www.bekawp.com.

