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for Alive Communications Authors and Industry Executives
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WHAT ARE WRITERS GOOD FOR?

“Land of the living” is a frequently occurring phrase in the Psalms that I like very much. It is the land that we live in. And the land has a language. If we live in France it is important that we learn French if we are going to live well, participating in all the details of that land. It is the same with the land of the living into which we are baptized in the name of the Trinity. One of the characteristics of language in the land of the living is that it is personal. When we use language that depersonalizes God into an abstraction or an idea or a project, the life leaks out of what we say and write, teach and pray. We are left with nothing but godtalk. It isn’t long before the depersonalized, non-relational language used with or about God affects the language we use with the people in our company and reduces them also into impersonal causes, or projects, or problems. Godtalk is human speech in which God is depersonalized into a language of information, manipulation, propaganda, and gossip.

The glories of language are under constant threat of being debased to clichés and reduced to verbal technology. Language at its core creates and reveals, brings us into personal relationships, establishes intimacies. We live what we speak. And if we don’t live the words, the words die and our spirits die. The salvation life is to be lived, not just talked about or written about. If the

life goes out of our words, if the Holy Spirit is no longer praying in and through us as we speak and listen and write, we will most certainly betray the God who “speaks and it comes to be” with the dreaded godtalk.

Language – given to us by God to glorify God, to receive his revelation of God, to witness to the truth of God, to offer praise to God – is constantly at risk. Too often the living Word is desiccated into propositional cadavers, then sorted into exegetical specimens in bottles of formaldehyde. We end up with godtalk, in T.S. Eliot’s indictment,

Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
 Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word...
 Where is the Life we have lost in living?
 Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
 Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
 (Choruses from *The Rock*” *Poems and Plays*, 96)

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Writers have a special responsibility to weed out inauthenticities in our language, to detect and guard against godtalk, to defend us against the language-deadening and speech-flattening effects of disconnecting God from actual life.

We do our work in the company of and under the authority of Jesus. Jesus, the Word made flesh. Jesus who “spoke and it came to be” (Ps. 33:9) even “since the foundation of the world” (Mt. 13:35). Jesus telling stories on the roads and around the supper tables in Galilee while traveling through Samaria and gathering with his followers in Jerusalem.

Writers

So with T.S. Eliot's warning against godtalk and Jesus before us as the word made flesh, I want to ask the question, "What are writers good for?" As an aside, I must say that I have a strong aversion to using the term Christian as an adjective, so I will not use the phrase "Christian writers." I know you are Christians. But most of what I say is as true of non-Christian writers as it is of Christians. So – writers. What are writers good for? What is the place of writers in this world that was created by God's word?

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You would think that the community that is convinced that its origin is in the Word made flesh, that finds its text for living in the written word, that constantly uses words in preaching and teaching, would hold writers in high esteem. But all of you know, to your chagrin, that with very few exceptions, it doesn't happen. A few writers, yes. But for the most part, whatever people say about you – and sometimes it is very generous – they are not willing to pay you a living wage for the work.

And so the first thing that we all have to face is the economic reality that whatever writers are good for it is not in making a living wage. Most of us who write, support ourselves with day jobs.

I made a suggestion in a lecture at the Christy Awards three years ago that the church should ordain writers along with pastors and professors and missionaries, bishops and elders and deacons. We have a long tradition of

setting apart and blessing – ordaining – men and women to serve the church and the world in ways that are essential for the full and complete representation of the gospel. Why aren't writers ordained? Why doesn't someone do something about it? At the time, my proposal was met with considerable approval.

Unfortunately, my altar call was weak. Not just weak, but ineffective. Nobody has done anything about it.

So I am back on my stump, clarifying and giving dignity to the work of writers in this world in which we are marginalized--an interesting group of people, perhaps, but not essential in any economic or professional way.

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I begin with Jesus. It is a huge irony that Jesus, whose words create and form our lives, never wrote a word. At least not a word that was ever preserved. Those words he wrote in Jerusalem dirt using his finger for a pencil disappeared in the next rain shower. Notwithstanding, we know Jesus as a man of words. He is, after all, the Word made flesh.

But he didn't write. He spoke. He never had a publisher, never gave a book signing, never dipped pen in an ink bottle. Language for Jesus was exclusively a matter of voice: "he spoke and it came to be" (Ps. 33:9)

His words, of course, did get written. And published. Probably no single person's words have been reproduced in print in as many handwritten pages and printed books as the words of Jesus. Still, it is important to keep that

original oral quality in mind, the living voice of Jesus, the *spoken* words that came from his mouth and entered the lives of men and women through listening ears and believing hearts. Written words, important as they are, are a giant step removed from the speaking voice. A determined effort must be made to hear the speaking voice and listen to it, not just look at and study the written word. (I expand considerably on this “determined effort” in *Eat This Book: A Conversation in Spiritual Reading*).

Language is primarily a means of revelation, both for God and for us. Using words, God reveals himself to us. Using words we reveal ourselves to God and to one another. By means of language, the cycle of speaking and listening, both God and his Word-created men and women are able to reveal vast interiors otherwise inaccessible to us.

This is important. Important to reflect upon since it is not obvious. And important to continuously reconsider since our vast communications industry treats language primarily as either information or titillation, but not revelation. More often than not, when the word “God” is used in our society, it is reduced to a piece of information, impersonalized into a mere reference, debased into blasphemy, or inflated into a hot air balloon of puffery. George Steiner, one of our most perceptive writers on language, argues powerfully that conveying information is nothing but a marginal and highly specialized function of language (*After Babel*). But the language that we learn in the company of parents and siblings and friends has its origin in the revealing God. All our speaking

and listening takes place in a language world that is sustained by God's speaking and listening. The words that God uses to create and name and heal and bless and command are the same words that we hear Jesus using to create and name and bless and command in the Gospels. Jesus speaks and we hear God speak.

So what are writers good for? It is our vocation to maintain and practice this core, basic, revelational, personal nature of language, living *speech*. In a world in which language has been uprooted from its originating God soil and put to the use of information or propaganda, it is the vocation of writers to represent and practice language as revelation, to re-orient language into the personal world in which men and women actually live – in their families, and neighborhoods and workplaces. Our task is to counter the reduction of language to godtalk – language that is severed from a God-created and God-saved world, language that is depersonalized and functionalized. The dreaded godtalk.

Care for language, of course, is not the sole responsibility of writers. In fact, the most conspicuous users of language in the Christian community are pastors and teachers. But their primary place for using language is in the sanctuary from a pulpit and a classroom from a lectern. They work from settings that are protected and set-aside to deal with words that reveal, words that create. Worshipers and students listen to them, expecting their words to proclaim the gospel or instruct them in Christian belief and practice. And the pastors and

teachers are certified for their work by ordination to the office of “reverend” by ordination or to the status of professor by being awarded a PhD.

But what about the words used when we are not in a sanctuary under the care of a pastor, or not in a classroom under the direction of a professor? Most of the words we listen to and use are spoken in settings and circumstances other than the privileged places of sanctuary and classroom where we are conditioned to observe and respond to language as revelation, to language as inherently holy, to language that enters into our listening and responding in such ways that creation takes place in us, in such ways that salvation is enacted, in such ways that holiness matures. Who makes it their business to care for the revelatory, creative nature of language between Sundays? Which is to say, most of the language used by all of us.

Writers, that’s who. This is what writers are good for. We do it not by telling people what words mean but by awakening their imaginations so that they see and experience words at work.

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Preaching begins with God: God’s word, God’s action, God’s presence. Teaching expands on what is proclaimed, instructing us in the implications of the text, the reverberations of truth in the world, the specific ways in which God’s word shapes in detail the way we live our daily lives between birth and death. But unstructured, informal conversations arise from incidents and encounters with one another that take place in the normal course of our lives in families and

workplaces, on playgrounds and while shopping for groceries, in airport terminals waiting for a flight and walking with binoculars in a field with friends watching birds. Many of the words that Jesus spoke are of this nature. Most of the words we listen to and speak are in the quotidian contexts of eating and drinking, shopping and traveling, quite unaware that we are using the same words God uses to bring creation and salvation and holiness – and *us!* – into being. In a weekly word count of our use of language, this kind of speech far exceeds anything we speak or listen to that might be designated preaching or teaching.

And that is what writers are good for, to use metaphor and story and poem to bring our friends and neighbors into participation in the Great Conversation where creation and revelation and salvation take place. Apart from writers, most language between Sundays is used for information, for publicity, for motivation, for entertainment, and diversion, preparing for and passing exams, for selling cars and buying lingerie. These are all useful and legitimate uses of language for getting on with one another and in the world. But there is nothing creative or saving in such language.

It is the writers' vocation to use the language in ways that are closer, more congruent, with its core nature. We do it by writing stories and poems and songs, by writing proverbs and aphorisms, by giving witness. We do it by treating all words as sacred, capable of bringing readers or listeners into a participating relationship with our children, with cloud formations, with

disasters and celebrations, with friends and neighbors, with Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And we have our work cut out for us. For most of the language that we learn in school and neighborhood, on radio and television is not revelational, is not creative, is not sanctifying, is not personal.

Slant

Because most of the language as used in our culture is depersonalized and functionalized, people have a hard time recognizing revelational, soul-creating language when they hear it. And so as writers we learn the art of indirection – not explicitly telling people what is and what is going on by objectifying and isolating it, but hinting at, drawing readers and hearers into participation obliquely.

Emily Dickinson gives us our text:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
 With Explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind –

This is what writers are good for. We tear down the fences that have been erected between language that deals with God and the language that deals with the people and things around us. It is, after all, the same language. The same

God we address in prayer and proclaim in sermons is also deeply, eternally involved in the men and women we engage in conversation, whether casually or intentionally. But not always obviously. It takes time and attentiveness to make connections between the said and the unsaid, the direct and the indirect, the straightforward and the oblique. There are many occasions when the imperious or blunt approach honors neither our God nor our neighbor. Unlike raw facts, truth, especially personal truth, requires the cultivation of unhurried intimacies. (I like Sam Goldwyn's advice to his writers: "If you want to send a message, use Western Union). Dickinson's "slant" and "gradually" are ways of getting past preconceptions, prejudices, defenses, stereotypes, and a fact-dominated literalism that prevents relational receptivity to the language of the other whether that other is neighbor, or child, or spouse, or God.

God does not compartmentalize our lives into religious and secular. Why do we? Language, all of it—every vowel, every consonant—is a gift of God. God uses language to create and command us; we use language to confess our sins and sing praises to God. We use this very same language getting to know one another, buying and selling, writing letters and reading books. We use the same words talking to one another that we use when we are talking to God: same nouns and verbs, same adverbs and adjectives, same conjunctions and interjections, same prepositions and pronouns. There is no "Holy Ghost" language used for matters of God and salvation and then a separate language for buying cabbages and cars. "Give us this day our daily bread" and "pass the

potatoes” come out of the same language pool. Writers insist on a continuity of language between the words we use in Bible studies and the words we use when we are out fishing for rainbow trout. What we are good for is cultivating a sense of continuity between the prayers we offer to God and the conversations we have with the people we speak to and who speak to us. We are here to nurture an awareness of the sanctity of words, the holy gift of language, regardless of whether it is directed vertically or horizontally. Just as Jesus did.

Samaria as Metaphor

We have a wonderful metaphor for this between Sunday's language that writers are given responsibility for using to the glory of God. St Luke gives it to us.

Luke wrote his gospel a number of years after his predecessors in gospel writing wrote theirs. For the most part he followed the story-line set down by Mark and Matthew.. But he did one thing that was very different. The first three years of the story of Jesus' public ministry are located in Galilee, the last week of his ministry is located in Jerusalem. Galilee and Jerusalem provide a binocular view of Jesus public ministry. After the three years in Galilee Jesus walks to Jerusalem where everything gets wrapped up in the Holy Week suffering, crucifixion and resurrection. In order to get from Galilee to Jerusalem, it is necessary to go through Samaria (or in the quaint phrasing of KJV, “must needs go through Samaria,” Jn 4.4). Mark and Matthew get Jesus from Galilee

to Jerusalem for the final scenes as fast as they can, taking a couple of pages to tell the story. But Luke takes ten chapters, over a third of his gospel to tell that part of the story. Luke makes it clear what he is doing: the ten chapters begin with clear references to heading out for Jerusalem; they end with the statement that he is arriving in Jerusalem. Between those references there is no clear itinerary, no references to time or place. Students of Luke, call these ten chapters “the Travel Narrative,” but it is not an entirely satisfactory designation for it is a kind of grab-bag assemblage of seemingly odds and ends almost none of which are provided by Matthew and Mark. But the predominate feature in this section is a gathering of ten parables that don’t occur in the other Gospels, a concentration of parables unique to Luke. The walk through Samaria gives us our most extensive revelation of Jesus as a storyteller. All the gospels present Jesus as a storyteller – “without parables he did not speak to them” – but Luke makes a major theme of it.

Is there a reason for this? I think there is, and it provides a powerful metaphor for what writers are good for.

Luke uses this ten-chapter Samaria transition from Galilee to Jerusalem as a metaphor for the way that Jesus used language “between Sundays.” Galilee was home base for Jesus, a place where he grew up, frequented the synagogues, gathered disciples – a holy land. It was a relaxed place, leisurely, surrounded by family and friends and followers. In Galilee the foundations of the life of Christ and our lives are put in place. But Jerusalem is his destination, the holy city that

centered everything Jewish. Jerusalem is consummation, completion of Jesus' life and our lives in Christ: suffering, crucifixion, resurrection. But in between Galilee and Jerusalem is Samaria, a hostile country, with a bastard religion.

Luke uses Samaria as a metaphor for the way Jesus used language "between Sundays," between the holy synagogues of Galilee and the holy temple in Jerusalem in which language about God and his kingdom are expected. But Samaria wasn't "holy" -wasn't congenial to the Jesus revealed in Galilee and Jerusalem. There had been bad blood between Samaritans and Jews for centuries. They didn't trust one another; they didn't like one another. When Jesus and his followers enter Samaria on this trip the first thing they encounter is rude hostility. It isn't long before the Samaritans are accusing Jesus of being in league with Satan. Going through Samaria is not smooth sailing. Unlike Galilee and Jerusalem, Samaria is not home ground to Jesus and his companions. They are away from their familiar Galilean synagogues and their beloved Jerusalem temple. They don't know these people and have little in common with them, neither synagogue nor temple nor an agreed upon Scripture. They are outsiders to this country and people.

Luke gives us Samaria as a metaphor for the way Jesus uses language with people who have very little or maybe no readiness to listen to the revelation of God, and not infrequently outright hostility. This is the way Jesus uses language when he isn't, as we would say, in church. This is the way he uses words between Sundays.

And here's the thing: the way Jesus uses language in Samaria was primarily in telling stories, parables we call them, imaginative fictions, most of which make no explicit reference to God or the kingdom of God.

Parables

So, why parables?

The parable is a form of speech that has a style all its own. It is a way of saying something that requires the imaginative participation of the listener. Inconspicuously, even surreptitiously, a parable *involves* the hearer. This brief, commonplace, unpretentious story is thrown into a conversation, lands at our feet, compelling notice. A parable is literally "something thrown down alongside of" (*para*, alongside, plus *bole*, thrown) to which our first response is "what is *this* doing here?" We ask questions, we think, we imagine. "Parables appear in quick precise strokes. A parable is feeble; almost all the power is in the one who hears it." (Jean Sullivan, *Morning Light*, 64). We start seeing connections, relations. A parable is not used to tell us something new but to get us to notice something that we have overlooked although it has been right there before us for years. Or it is used to get us to take seriously something we have dismissed as unimportant because we have never seen the point of it. Before we know it, we are involved.

Jesus' parables have another significant feature. The subject matter is usually without apparent religious significance. They are stories about farmers

and judges and victims, coins and sheep and prodigal sons, wedding banquets, building barns and towers and going to war, a friend who wakes you up at midnight to ask for a loaf of bread, the courtesies of hospitality, crooks and beggars and manure. The conversations that Jesus has as he walks on Samaritan roads are with people who have a different idea of God than Jesus is revealing, or maybe not much of an idea at all. If they aren't hostile they are indifferent.

Parables are Jesus' primary language of choice to converse with these people, stories that don't use the name God, stories that don't seem to be "religious." When we are in church, or a religiously defined time and place, we expect to hear about God. But outside such times and place, we don't expect to. In fact, we don't want to.

Samaritans then, and Americans now, have centuries of well-developed indifference, if not outright aversion, to God-language – at least the kind used by synagogue and church people. They have their own ideas on God and how to run their lives, and cool and thinly veiled contempt for outsiders. Samaritans are well-defended against the intrusions of God-language into their affairs, particularly when it comes from Jewish (or Christian) lips. So as Jesus goes through Samaria he is very restrained in his use of explicit God-language. Preaching and teaching are not eliminated but they do recede to the margins. Jesus circles around their defenses. He tells parables. A parable keeps the message at a distance, in the shadows, slows down comprehension, blocks automatic prejudicial reactions, dismantles stereotypes. A parable comes up on a

listener obliquely, on the “slant.” The Samaritan listens, unsuspecting. And then, without warning, without the word being used: God! John Dominac Crossan says that the parable is an earthquake opening up the ground at your feet. (*The Dark Interval* 57).

Manure

One of the parables that Jesus tells on his walk through Samaria strikes me as having a lot to do with writers and the way we write. I mentioned that Samaria was pretty hostile country. On the very first day into Samaria they encountered a rude unwelcome and the hotheaded Zebedee brothers, James and John, wanted to call down fire from heaven to burn them at the stake. Jesus rebuked them and they went on their way. But things didn’t get much better. So what do you do when nobody has any interest in what you are doing. Buy a billboard? Install an amplifying system? Devise a strategy that guarantees some results?

Jesus tells the Manure story. A farmer finds that for three years a fig tree has produced no fruit. He orders his gardener to cut it down. The gardener says, in a quiet voice, “Hold on, not so fast. Wait a minute. Give me some more time. Let me put some manure on this tree.”

Manure?

The farmer wants to solve the problem of this non-responsive tree direct and violent action, "Cut it down!" The gardener wants a chance to dig some manure into the soil, "Let it alone."

In the context of the Samaria metaphor, I see that gardener as a writer. Our culture wants to get things done as quickly as possible: action, efficiency, immediacy. Solve the problem in the quickest, which is also the most impersonal, way. Writers interrupt and say, "Give me some time. Let me write a novel, let me write a poem, give me chance to get this soil, these words that aren't doing their work, restored, revitalized, let me dig some manure into the imagination of my community." Manure. A story, a poem, a novel. Writing that invites a participating imagination.

Manure is not a quick fix. It has no immediate results – it is going to take a long time to see if it makes any difference. If it is results that we are after, chopping down a tree is just the thing: we clear the ground and make it ready for a fresh start. We love beginnings in America: birthing a baby, christening a ship, the first day on a new job, starting another war. But spreading manure carries none of that exhilaration. It is not dramatic work, not work that gets anyone's admiring attention. Manure is a slow solution. Still, when it comes to doing something about what is wrong with the world, Jesus is best known for his fondness for the minute, the invisible, the quiet, the slow – yeast, salt, seeds, light. And manure.

Manure does not rank high in the world's economy. It is refuse. Garbage. We organize efficient and sometimes elaborate systems to collect it, haul it away, get it out of sight and smell. Or, the dread "remainder it." But the observant and wise know that this apparently dead and despised waste is teeming with life — enzymes, zygotes, microorganisms. It's the stuff of resurrection.

Manure. God is not in a hurry. We are repeatedly told to "wait for the Lord." But that is not counsel that is readily accepted by followers of Jesus who are conditioned by promises of American instant gratification.

In the way of words that Jesus practiced on the road through Samaria, parables are manure: not the impetuous fire and brimstone solution of the Zebedee brothers, not the impatient "cut it down" of the farmer, but manure — this parable of indirection that is slipped into the uncomprehending, unbelieving imagination and then slowly, silently goes to work. Like the novels and stories you write. Like the poems you write. Slow work. Quiet work. Manure. Jesus' work.

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It interests me greatly that throughout these several days that Jesus is walking with his disciples, parables are his primary language of choice. We know that the end is coming: crucifixion and resurrection. We know that there is not much time left before Jesus leaves his disciples and they are going to be left to carry on in his place. Every step they take through Samaria increases the urgency. This is the last time the Samaritans are going to see him, listen to him.

Why in the world is Jesus telling unpretentious stories about crooks and farmers and manure. Why isn't he preaching the clear word of God, calling the Samaritans to repentance, offering them the gift of salvation in plain language? As the end approaches, his language becomes less and less, not more, direct. As the stakes increase, his language becomes even more relaxed and conversational than usual. Instead of high decibel rhetoric, calling for decisions before it is too late, he hardly, if at all, even mentions the name of God, choosing to speak of neighbors and friends, losing a lamb, and the courtesies of hospitality.

I find this interesting because it is in such contrast to what so often occurs among us following Jesus on the road through this American Samaria. It is common among many of us when we become aware of what is involved in following Jesus and the urgencies that this involves, especially when we find ourselves coming up against American indifference, American superficiality, American godtalk, that we become more intense in our language. Because it so much more clear and focused, we use the language learned in sermons and teachings to tell others what is eternally important. But the very intensity of the language can very well reduce our attentiveness to the people to whom we are speaking – he or she is no longer a person but a cause or a problem. Impatient to get our message out we depersonalize what we have to say into rote phrases or a programmatic formula without regard to the person we are meeting. As the urgency to speak God's word increases, listening relationships diminish. We end up with a bone pile of fleshless words – godtalk.

And that is where we come in, writers who immerse our readers in the details of the Samaritan road between Sundays, the subtleties of relationships, the intricate intermeshings of past and present and future, the presence of God when God is not mentioned, the workings of the Spirit when the Spirit is not named. Writers walking with Jesus through Samaria between Sundays writing novels and poems, making observations and recovering memories that rescue our friends from the abstractions and generalities and proclamations of the advertisers and power-brokers and show us what is going on around us right now: the particularities of our emotions, the complexities of our families and neighborhoods--ignite our imaginations to take in the colors of creation and the rhythms of salvation that are flashing and sounding around us. This is what writers are good for.

Our work is not restricted to Samaria. We have something to contribute to Galilee and Jerusalem also. For there is nothing more common than for people who talk about God to lose interest in the people they are talking to. Religious talk is depersonalized into godtalk. Godtalk is used to organize people into causes that no longer involve us, to carry out commands that no longer command us. When the words of Jesus become the stuff of arguments, verbal tools for manipulation, attempts at control, the life drains out of them and there they are, a raked up pile of dead leaves on the ground. Just then a writer drops a story into the sanctuary or classroom. Good Christians stumble over it, no

longer able to cruise along in the familiar word ruts. The story forces attention, participation, involvement.

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Luke's Samaria Metaphor develops an awareness that the Holy Spirit is as present in our spontaneous and casual conversations as in formal preaching and intentional teaching. Luke's Samaria Metaphor saturates our imaginations with possibilities of language to reveal the operations of the Trinity in the inhospitable stretch of road between the Galilean proclamation of the presence of the kingdom and the Jerusalem crucifixion and resurrection that so decisively and dramatically complete the story.

Because our spontaneous and casual conversations on the "between Sundays" road through Samaria have no immediate focus on what we sometimes refer to as "things of God," it is easy to miss the "word of God" implications when we aren't aware that we are talking to or about God. When we are in a sanctuary listening to a sermon on John 3:16 or sitting in a classroom taking notes on Isaiah, it is fairly obvious that we are listening to and speaking language that God uses to reveal himself and that we use to participate in that revelation. But how about when we are telling or listening to another report on the killing in Iraq that we just heard on the radio, or read a letter from a family member rehearsing old family troubles, or talk with a friend about a neighbor down the street who just learned that he has cancer. Can these words also be revelatory, also be ways of participating in God's presence and action in times

and places not clearly signposted “sacred”? Do we witness to Jesus when we do not use the name Jesus? Do we convey trust in God when we are not conscious of doing it? Do we confess sin when we are not in a confessional or on our knees? Do we praise with an exclamation or gesture, unaware that we are in a company of angels singing “Holy, holy, holy”? One night when Nicodemus was puzzled by the unconventional, non-religious way in which Jesus was talking about God’s kingdom, Jesus gave him a metaphor: “The wind blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:8). Nicodemus had no idea what he was talking about. He had no idea what a metaphor was for. A great deal of Spirit-inspired, or Spirit-accompanied language takes place when we do not know it, whether it comes from our own mouths or the mouths of others.

So we need reminding. We need guidance. We need friends who are capable of hearing the Holy Spirit’s whispers in what we are saying – and sometimes between the lines of what we are not saying. And we need to be such friends to our friends. This is what writers are good for.

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I am interested in cultivating first an awareness and then the practice of the fundamentally holy nature of all language, including most definitely the casual, spontaneous, unself-conscious, conversational language that occurs while sitting in a rocking chair before a fireplace on a wintry day, strolling on a beach,

having coffee in a diner – conversations and ruminations and observations while walking through Samaria. This is what writers are good for.

Everyone has wide experience in this language. But not everyone is practiced in bringing that experience to awareness, naming what we have heard or said. Sometimes we notice in retrospect. We meet a friend while shopping and stop to talk for awhile – a minute or two at most. A few hours later we realize that something said was revelatory, a realization of grace, a perception of beauty, a sense of presence in which an awareness develop that “God was in this place and I did not know it.” The triggering word or phrase comes offhandedly, sparked by a tone of voice or a gesture. Almost never by intention. The fact is that almost all words are holy and God speaks to and through us by the very nature of language itself.

This is what writers are good for, to trust language to reveal the ways of God among us regardless of the subject matter.

What I want to say is that the Holy Spirit conveys in and through our language words of Jesus’ peace and love and grace and mercy when we are not aware of it – at least not at the time it is taking place. And all of us get in on it simply by virtue of the fact that we talk and listen to a lot of different people, in a lot of different settings, on most days of our lives. Paying attention to Jesus telling stories as he walks through Samaria is as good an orientation in this dimension that I know of. Good supplementary reading is readily available in the novels of Walker Percy and William Faulkner and Wallace Stegner, and

Marilynne Robinson, the poems of George Herbert and Luci Shaw and Denise Levertov, the memoirs of Virginia Stem Owens and Dorothy Day, the journalism of Philip Yancey – and each and every one of you. This is what writers are good for.

Anyone can and many people do *listen* to the undercurrents and resonance of language, the unspoken and the unheard, the silences that undergird so much of the language that we use unthinkingly. Writers have a vocation to cultivate such listening, submitting to the way words create meaning, reveal transcendence, recognize the “word made flesh.” Not just use language to say something but submit to language and let it have its say through us.

Which is another way of saying that the Holy Spirit uses writers to embrace ambiguity, extend a willingness to live through times when there is no discernable “direction.” Gospel writers, Holy Spirit filled writers, use language in such a way that we get used to living a mystery and not demand information to footnote everything that God is doing. Anyone can do this but writers have a vocation, a calling, to participate in the Holy Spirit’s work of bringing to remembrance the words of Jesus (Jn. 14:26) in the conversations and circumstances of men and women who are walking through the supposedly ungodly country of Samaria.

Job descriptions are not strictly drawn in the Christian community in matters of language, but in broad terms pastors and preachers are in charge of making sure the proclamation of Jesus as Savior takes place from pulpits and

housetops; teachers and professors are in charge of making sure that the truth of God and Scripture is accurately and plainly taught, but it is writers who are responsible for using the language spoken on the roads of Samaria and the streets and sidewalks of America not just to convey information or get people to buy something or vote for someone, but to create and to reveal the ways of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit present and at work among us.

Like Jesus in his stories, and especially these Samaria stories. This is what writers are good for, to recover this storying way of words, this signature language of Jesus, parable and poem, for use in our own American Samaria, this country so largely indifferent to Jesus and the language of Jesus.

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Don Marquis, the newspaper poet and journalist, creator of the inimitable Archie the cockroach and Mehitabel the cat so many years ago, once observed that the world is inhabited by only two kinds of people, those who told stories and those who went shopping. The storytellers could walk around the block in the rain and make it sound as if they had gone on a journey to China. The shoppers could buy IBM or Bolivia and make it sound as dull as a Sunday afternoon in a dark room with an old and morose canary." (quoted by Lewis H. Lapham in Balto Sun, 6.1.85).

That is what writers are good for, to walk around the block in the rain in Samaritan America and use words in such a way that men women reading or listening to them recognize that they are, in fact, on their way to Jerusalem.

Amen.