

The Beloved, Ambivalent Community: Mennonite Poets and the Postmodern Church

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“Let’s be honest instead of good.”

–Jeff Gundy, “Crow”¹

“[I]t might be a help to have some magic or some poetry we could trust, a cosmos beyond our managing. Gandhi and King had that.”

– John Howard Yoder²

“Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.”

–Ecclesiastes 9:9-10 (NIV)

Abstract: Contemporary theologians have been carrying on not-so-secret love affairs with the Anabaptist tradition, wistfully embracing the non-violent, discipleship centered, community emphasizing, and non-Constantinian narrative of Anabaptism. However, work by a generation of imaginative Mennonite writers challenges easy appropriations of the tradition. Specifically, Jeff Gundy’s and Julia Kasdorf’s poetry provide rich interrogations of Mennonite identity in a postmodern context, work that takes on a vital public role that can only be played by art. Gundy’s and Kasdorf’s essays provide “authorization” for reading their poetry as documents of ambivalence, defined not as mere ambiguity but as the strength to be equivocal. Readings of recent poems from each writer demonstrate how they gesture with sobering love and unsettled ambivalence toward the Mennonite community. Those inside the Anabaptist tradition and those at an appropriate and wistful distance could do well to hear the strong ambivalence of these poets as we seek to be believers in a thoroughly post-Christian world.

I first conceived of this essay as a critique of contemporary theologians who have fetishized Anabaptists, in general, and Mennonites, in particular. For the last fifteen years or so a number of theologians have

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1. Jeff Gundy, *Rhapsody with Dark Matter* (Huron, OH: Bottom Dog Press), 76-77.

2. John Howard Yoder, “The Power Equation, Jesus, and the Politics of King,” in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 125-47.

been carrying on not-so-secret love affairs with the Anabaptist tradition, wistfully admiring and frequently appropriating the nonviolent, discipleship-centered, community-emphasizing and non-Constantinian narratives of Anabaptism. I hoped to show those postmodern-Anabaptist-wannabes how they might benefit from reading more poetry by Mennonites and less Mennonite theology. I still think such an argument can and should be made.³

A number of such theologians were important in my own adult journey towards becoming a Mennonite. Stanley Hauerwas and Rodney Clapp, in particular, effectively began my seduction away from both a stilted and narrow evangelicalism (the tradition within which I was converted) and a broad and incomprehensible mainstream liberalism (a tradition to which I became attracted as a graduate student studying literature and critical theory). Hauerwas and Clapp helped me identify my longing for, in Clapp's words, "a Christian tradition . . . more prone to dig in the gritty soil of history than to take flight on the wings of philosophical speculation."⁴ I was attracted to, as Hauerwas put it, a church that has learned "that its task is not to *make* the world the kingdom, but to be faithful to the kingdom by showing the world what it means to be a community of peace."⁵ I had never encountered such a church, but I wanted to. So I set off searching for this gritty "community of peace." Like many Anabaptist wannabes I first found John Howard Yoder's writings and then I found First Mennonite Church in Urbana, Illinois, where I eventually became an "official" Mennonite.

But I don't want to give theologians that much credit, especially a confessed "camp follower" such as Hauerwas, who describes himself this way:

so I whore after what I think is faithful to the gospel. I cannot pretend that such a position can be made ecclesially intelligible. My only defense is that God in our time seems to have led many of us to that point. We live in a time when the theological battles of the past that

3. The October 2000 issue of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* collects reflections from twelve such admirers, each asked by editor John D. Roth to take stock of how their "theological or ethical understandings have been shaped by an engagement with the Anabaptist tradition."—"In This Issue," *MQR* 74 (Oct. 2000), 501. The resulting essays offer ample evidence that Mennonites have had, and may continue to have, much to offer the rest of the Western Christian church, especially as, in Richard Hays' words, that church "comes to grips with its new situation as a disenfranchised minority in a post-Constantinian world."—"Embodying the Gospel in Community," *MQR* 74 (Oct. 2000), 577-85.

4. Rodney Clapp, "Anabaptism and the Obstacles That Make for Vocation," *MQR* 74 (Oct. 2000), 587-91.

5. Stanley, Hauerwas, . *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame U. Press, 1983), 103.

seemed so important and justified Christian divisions simply no longer matter. . . . That God has made some ecclesially homeless we can only pray will be the beginning of a unity, as John [Howard Yoder] would put it, from the bottom up.⁶

For in the end, I did not become a Mennonite for primarily theological or ethical reasons. I became a Mennonite for aesthetic and practical reasons. It's the fault of Mennonite poets, and it's their fault that I stick around. In the work of writers like Jeff Gundy and Julia Kasdorf, among others, I have discovered a way to persist as a Christian and a poet in a postmodern, post-Christian world.

But this essay will leave postmodern conceptions of the Mennonite church in wiser hands⁷ and turn instead to an argument about poetry. In particular, I want to argue in the vein of Martha Nussbaum, Elaine Scarry and Dana Gioia, all of whom insist that, contrary to public perceptions, art in general, and poetry in particular, can and must play an integral role in shaping the character of individuals and communities. I want to ask, along with Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?"⁸ and answer with a resounding, "Sure!"

All three of these writers argue for the utility of the literary or aesthetic imagination as a vehicle by which we, in Nussbaum's words, "concern ourselves with the good of other people" by "entering imaginatively into the lives of distant others" and having "emotions related to that participation."⁹ Scarry makes her case similarly, contending that cultivating a people's imaginative ability to keep the world "sensorily present" is "the basic impulse underlying education." This impulse, in Scarry's argument, helps an individual become willing "continually to revise one's own location in order to place oneself in the path of beauty," a practice that "actually assists us in the work of addressing injustice."¹⁰

What Julia Kasdorf and Jeff Gundy accomplish in their work, however, is more than merely providing imaginative ways into the lives of others—although they indeed do that. Their poetry and prose also demonstrate how contemporary poets might live in a rich and vexing

6. Stanley Hauerwas, "Confessions of a Mennonite Camp Follower," *MQR* 74 (Oct. 2000), 511-22.

7. See the many fine, challenging essays in Susan and Gerald Biesecker-Mast's *Anabaptists and Postmodernity* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000) as well as J. Denny Weaver's *Anabaptist Theology in the Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2001).

8. Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1992).

9. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), xvi.

10. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1999), 6-7, 62.

relationship with a particular community, one that, while beloved, evokes ambivalence as often as it does passion. Their poems do the public work called for by Gioia, Scarry and Nussbaum. Nussbaum says that this public, artistic endeavor teaches us “the relationship between moral attention and attention to a work of art”—as well as, I would add, attention to our own mingled lives.¹¹ In their poetry Kasdorf and Gundy do not simply oppose the artist and the community, nor do they idealize their own tradition. Instead, they offer a way of loving a flawed community by being honestly ambivalent about it, while at the same time providing “some magic and some poetry” in a necessary way.

First, I will examine how both writers identify this vexing yet beloved community in their work. Second, I will look at how they authorize ambivalence, especially in their prose, as a way of standing in relation to that community, as well as toward the world. Finally, I will look at a brief example of ambivalence in recent work by each writer.

“OH TO VEX ME”: THE BELOVED COMMUNITY¹²

In contemporary political and theological discourse, community has been a rhetorically elastic term. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams describes this flexibility when he points out how “community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps . . . it seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.”¹³ Williams points out that society, nation and state often have multiple negative or oppressive connotations attached to them, but community refers to smaller, more localized and, nearly always, more friendly experiences.

In literary texts, this idealized sense of community often comes under scrutiny—sometimes scathing, sometimes loving—not by means of theorizing but by descriptive recollection and representation of a community in all its particularity. Often this takes the form of pitting the

11. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 161.

12. This section title borrows from two diverse sources, the first from the opening line of John Donne's Holy Sonnet 16: “Oh to vex me, contraries meet in one.” The poem explores the power and difficulty of a simultaneously conflicting spiritual condition. The second term is, of course, Martin Luther King's concept of the “beloved community,” a utopian vision that, while used in a fairly complex way by King, has been often simplified by people across the political spectrum. For a dated but useful study of this term see Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974).

13. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1985), 76.

individual against his or her immediate social context, showing a community's excesses and weaknesses as they work themselves out in the experience and psyche of a particular oppressed or marginalized individual with Huck Finn being the paradigmatic version of such a character.¹⁴ These writers, and Mennonite writers in particular, have been guilty of what Hildi Froese Tiessen describes as the perpetuation of "the limiting, inherently hierarchical binary paradigms of center and margin, inside and outsider," leaving themselves either on the margins or as a fractured self that "simply takes the place of the community in subsuming and embodying all contradictions."¹⁵ In a postmodern context, argues Tiessen, when both the self and the social sphere are so intensely permeable, this kind of center-margin binary is futile, crippling both the writer and the community.

However, Froese Tiessen herself acknowledges that, in the connotative play and particularity of their poetic work, writers such as Kasdorf and Gundy become prepared to "trust to fragments."¹⁶ In trusting to the particular, though, the writer still must contend with the "warmly persuasive" versions of community that have been previously inscribed, and both Kasdorf and Gundy so with more or less vexation. Of the two, Kasdorf's portrayal of her Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage seems the most volatile and vexed. In *The Body and the Book* she describes in detail her relationship with this tradition, saying of her first poetry collection, *Sleeping Preacher*:

I dreaded my book's reception in the Mennonite community, although it turned out to be warmer than I ever imagined. Given my context, perhaps I needed to imagine punishment in order to cast myself in the position of author. . . . Terror of punishment for Mennonite writers—whether real or imagined—seems to invigorate creativity as persecution and trauma engendered Mennonite literature long ago.¹⁷

I can't imagine a more paradoxical—or ambivalent—relationship for a writer to posit between herself and her community. Here is a problematic connection, to be sure with consequences Kasdorf spins out at some length. She focuses on the history of martyrs and the connection between writers and violence, especially as those relationships work themselves out in the community and in the writer's own body. In the end, Kasdorf

14. For a useful commentary on this trend in American literature, see Wendell Berry's "Writer and Region," in *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point, 1990), 71-87.

15. [citation needed]

16. Hildi Froese Tiessen, "Beyond the Binary: Reinscribing Cultural Identity in the Literature of the Mennonites," *MQR* 72 (Oct. 1998), 491-502.

17. Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book*, 182.

chooses to “bear life giving witness, to communicate the truth of one’s own vision or insight, to affirm its value with confidence, no matter how arrogant or disturbing it may be” and then she quotes from John’s gospel “and the truth shall make you free (John 8:32).”¹⁸ In a classically nimble and ambivalent move, she uses the community’s own authorizing text to authorize her own violation (she calls it violence) against the habitual practice of silence in the face of persecution.

Similarly, Gundy recognizes that his Mennonite heritage cannot be avoided, even if he would like to do so. In *A Community of Memory* he describes his grandfather George as someone who “saw himself as part of a community, however minor and marginal and fallen it was, and knew that what he did mattered to others, if only a few. And finally he found his confidence, or something like it, and went on with the work.”¹⁹ I have argued elsewhere that Gundy’s own poems give a similar sense of his own matter of fact confidence and need to get “on with the work.”²⁰ In *Scattering Point*, his most recent collection of essays, Gundy extends his authorization of his work on both personal and historical levels. Though less densely theorized than Kasdorf’s observations, Gundy’s essays engage more fully with the contemporary Mennonite church. Kasdorf’s Mennonites seem mostly to exist in the past, while Gundy, though exploring the past, is as concerned with how his religious forbears carry forward along with those of us who wear that heritage today. He maps how his peculiar way of following the commandment to be in the world without being of it is a “version of that equation that is radically different than my father’s, never mind my ancestors two or three more generations back.”²¹ Such an exploration is necessary, for both Gundy and Kasdorf, because “when we talk about tradition and heritage we are talking about a moving target, after all.”²²

In yet another essay Gundy clarifies the writer’s relationship with a fluid, complex community—one comprised as much of memory and hunch, history and uncertainty as anything else—by saying that “in some ways Mennonite communities *are* ‘the world’ Mennonite writers must be ‘in’ but not entirely ‘of’ if they are to write.” He goes on to argue that, somehow, still, those writers will need to “go back and find our mothers and our fathers” in order to “ask their permission to set off with the giants.” And then, he suggests, we should take this journey “whether they

18. *Ibid.*, 187.

19. Gundy, *A Community of Memory*, 138.

20. David Wright, “Community, Theology and Mennonite Poetics in the Work of Jeff Gundy,” *MQR* 72 (Oct. 1998), 625-38.

21. Gundy, *Scattering Point: The World in a Mennonite Eye* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 120.

22. *Ibid.*

say yes or no.”²³ To paraphrase the rock group REM: “You gotta stand in the past where you live” before you can work your way forward, to, as Kasdorf puts it, write “not for revenge . . . nor for redemption” but “simply to remember and to bear witness.”²⁴

AMBIVALENCE?

Let me clarify my use of the term “ambivalence” in a way that will, I hope, open up more of its connotative possibilities rather than shut them down. The *OED* defines ambivalence as a state:

having either or both of two contrary parallel values, qualities or meanings, entertaining contradictory emotions (as love and hatred) towards the same person or thing; acting on or arguing for sometimes one and sometimes the other of two opposites; equivocal²⁵

I like that definition because it also fits paradox, a term which the New Critics loved and which lets poets have everything both ways. But I also want to recuperate two other senses of the term.

First, I want to layer onto this equi-vocal state the more common, current connotation of ambivalence: of being neither hot nor cold, being non-plused and disengaged from the consequences of any given choice, as in the way I typically feel about choosing brands of toilet paper. I could go with the multi-ply Charmin; I could live with the store brand. Either way, they all serve the same purpose. This kind of ambivalence is about acceptance, about recognition that, as the wisdom poet put it, “no one knows whether love or hate awaits them. All share a common destiny” (Eccl. 9: 1-2).

In other words, instead of being “warmly persuasive” or utopian, the truly ambivalent lover of a community simply or complexly tells the truth. Gundy describes a poignant and funny version of such truth-telling in his prose poem “Crow.”²⁶ The poem describes the participants at a church-related academic conference, many of whom are women “Trying to write a bridge between the sides of the split self. Winding up with a volcano.” Besides his parodying and playing with much of the theoretical vocabulary of a conference, Gundy also contrasts his presence at meetings with a morning run through the streets of town, a trek on which he encounters three crows he comes to see, in the poem, “as old men, why did they

23. Jeff Gundy, “(In)visible Cities, (F)acts of Power, (Hum)ility, Fathers and (M)others: Anabaptism, Postmodernity, and Mennonite Writing,” in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, eds. Susan and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000), 183, 189.

24. Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book*, 188-89.

25. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. CD-ROM (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1992).

26. Jeff Gundy, *Rhapsody with Dark Matter* (Huron, OH: Bottom Dog Press), 76-77.