

THEOPOETICS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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We open up the hungers and longings of our age. We enter into a conversation with the deepest places of our selves and our audience. To engage in the theo poetic is to tempt the radical nature of ourselves, it is to follow in the footsteps of the God-Speakers that could upset the republic, could speak from the margins of our hungers and unspeakable truths.

Jason Derr, *In Consideration of the Theo poetic*¹

What is the activity of a priestess of the social imagination? What focus shall a theo poetic social change agent take? How can we as social change organizers both “upset the republic,” in Derr’s language, and also awaken the hungers and strengths of the human heart, accessing the power and Presence of imagination and of God-Deity-Divinity-Mystery? This essay is a report from the field, an update about ways that theo poetic intent has informed one set of experiments in social change organizing.

The theo poet argues that, in many cases, like old soda pop, language has gone flat in our religious traditions. We use the same language again and again without examining and refreshing it, and often no one really wants to drink it any longer. Bound up with the flatness of language, our rituals become rote. Instead of actually interacting with Deity-Divinity-Essence-God, rituals and religious conversation become routinized. Rather than paths of power, we tread paths of habit.²

In *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, Amos Wilder asserted that when language gets too encrusted, it fails to produce either new theophanies or Spirit-fed enactments of ancient truth. The conversation in which Wilder participated, with artists, musicians, mystics, and psychologists, was about the integration of soul into spirit, the re-introduction of ecstasy into religion, the renewed embrace of vision/hymn/poem as categories of God-talk.³

There is a risk that theopoetics will remain just a conversation corner in the academy: Yes, the writing may evoke more writing, but these rivers of words deserve to also flow into the sanctuary and toward the streets. If theopoetics is to keep growing toward its real promise of more powerful engagements with Mystery-Absence-God-Presence, then theopoetics will need to find life not only in the pages of journals, but also in worship services that midwife the new/ancient humanity, and in incarnate experiments of struggles for justice/peace. The latter is the focus of this essay.

Theopoetics as a stance promises to deepen and develop social change organizing, by enriching issue-based organizing with a search for an empowerment rooted in Presence and Power. The theopoetic activist wants not just words—but enfleshed initiative. The theopoet change-maker seeks new re-engagements of faith stories. Not only community change, but individual regeneration. And not only individual salvations, but full-bodied wholeness, for the person, the faith community, the neighborhood. The theopoet leader is a change agent who speaks not just in slogan and catchphrase, but from the currents of a deeper Life.

I am concerned that many times, those of us in spiritual social change leadership fall short of the mark. Too often, it is possible to fall into the kinds of patterns that theopoetics train us to be skeptical about—for example, to fall into the rhetorical trap of using the same tired constructions of Us vs. Them, instead of seeking new framings that catalyze the imagination and spirit in the direction of hopeful action. And it is far too easy for faith-based leaders to retell scripture stories only to make moral points about justice or peace, but not to dwell in them with their people, to access power in new/ancient ways. Far too easy to continue to plan the same old vigil, the same kinds of

rote civil disobedience, which become themselves a kind of tired and flat language that no one hears anymore.

I have at times taken these easier roads. But I am hungry, and I think I join many others in my yearning, for faith-rooted social change activism which draws from wells the run from a deeper Source, and achieves fresh and generative political relevance. I want to learn a kind of social change that both organizes around specific initiatives and accompanies people and communities into a new kind of visionary leadership and spiritual/community power.

I am practicing a leadership that bridges toward vision and community-building, and an ever-clearer practice for empowerment of specific communities with which I work. Those particularly in my mind as I write these reflections are other social change organizers and community leaders who are discovering/seeking how we might organize by helping foster dreams and a sense of the possible.

There is a longing for imagination and possibility, sometimes buried under the mountains of facts, failures, realities, and conclusions. For all those interested in social ferment and social change—this *imagination*, rooted in transcendence, issuing forth new glimpses of the Divine Possibility, is the gold for which we mine, the water for which we tremblingly hold a divining rod in our hands.

How is imagination awakened? The smell of a lilac bush wafting on air; a refrain from an old song; the sight of a childhood home. The words of a sermon, the voice of a friend, the touch of a lover. The hint of things not yet ripe, but ripening. Flashes of bright color. Time alone or in community. Silence. Memory.⁴

How is imagination awakened for renewing a community, renewing our world? Much the same way: Hints and curling questions, hopes held out, along with bridges to hopeful action.

My main context for experiments in theopoetics and social change is my congregational peace and justice organizing as part of the staff of On Earth Peace, a US-based ministry rooted in the Church of the Brethren.⁵ This work has included support calls for peace-committed congregations in the months following 9/11; equipping congregational initiatives around the country related to alternatives to the military and counter-recruitment, and undergirding congregational ministries for military returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Because of time I have spent

soaking in the waters of constructive theology and theo-poetics, I bring those perspectives to this congregational work.⁶

I came into my early efforts committed to meet people where they were and explore what was really happening with them. I wanted to connect in a “seedly” or “gardenish” manner with the people I was contacting—connecting in a deeper way, understanding the forces they were up against and the specific situations they encountered.

I wanted to be a theo-poetic social change organizer, not “just” organizing around specific initiatives, but using my efforts as an organizer to create spaces for people’s political and spiritual power to emerge more fully. Not reiterating slogans and statements, but tilling the soil so that new life could emerge.

I will focus on three parts of On Earth Peace’s work that have involved aspects of the theo-poetic: theological reflection with organizers, one-on-one support calls, and our annual campaign surrounding the International Day of Prayer for Peace. In each of these, a theo-poetic sensibility enters in through the awakening of imagination about self, social change work and its possibilities, and Source.

Theological reflection with social change organizers

In the ramping-up period of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, communities we were connected with were experiencing a heightened or more visible pressure and presence from military recruiters seeking to fill their recruitment goals. People across the country began (or continued existing efforts) to speak up—sometimes confronting the recruiters—and sometimes seeking to address the root causes of the situation (such as a lack of opportunity for young people).⁷ In response to a swelling number of requests, On Earth Peace offered bimonthly networking phone calls for congregationally based organizers responding to military recruitment and generating alternatives for youth in their communities.

A typical call connected people from coast to coast in the United States, and included theological reflection, open sharing time, and strategy.⁸ The theological reflections were spacious, poetic homilies, with time for meditation and sharing. They were intended to foster communal reflection on our work in light of the stories of scripture and the

activity of God. Here is one example, on demons, disease, and counter-recruitment organizing.

Luke 9

From Luke 9 (NRSV): *1 When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, 2 and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.*

Jesus sends us out as people in the Way, getting in the Way, to drive out demons and cure diseases, preaching the kingdom of God and healing the sick. Too often, a contemporary hearing of words like “demon” and “disease” can *either* focus only on special powers that the early church had—thereby proving its God-touched uniqueness which is inaccessible to us—or dismiss it as fable.

As we prepare ourselves to be sent out as counter-recruiters in the fullness of God’s power, it matters for us to be empowered by these words, for we are not “just” political agitators. We are not “just” naysayers concerned about specific foreign policy choices.

Our commission is a deeper one than that to grapple with demon and disease, to preach the kingdom, and to heal the sick.

What might demon mean here? For me, personally: despair, isolation, depression, the weight of the world’s broken beauty. Reflect silently: *What demons or diseases do you struggle with?*

I often feel too weak, or too afflicted, by my own demons and diseases to go out and heal others. Sometimes, I am tempted to heal and cast out of others that which is still binding me.

But the strange and silent presence of Jesus liberates us, or promises to, as we draw close. What if we, in preparation for counter-recruitment, drew close to receive our own healing?

What demons and diseases might our communities face? Apathy, materialism, racism, economic blight, an addiction to revenge, a blindness which prevents even seeing the other parts of one’s own community. *What demons or disease might your own community be facing? (Call them out.)*

The path toward the Way, toward a counter-recruitment organizing of *spirit and power*, will involve in a neverending spiral both our own deep spiritual and psychological healing and our stepping forward with spiritual power to cast out demons.

Counter-recruitment can preach about and reach for shalom communities,

where demons of racism and empire and self-hatred are cast out,

where each one is loosed of the bonds that restrain them,

where economic blight is healed to become the flourishing thriving of justice and right,

where blindness is replaced by joyful sight.

God, meet us in our need. Give us vision to see and name the spiritual diseases that are making us sick. Cast out demons that bind us and our communities.

*Give us the wisdom to see and engage the work that is before us, in all its dimensions. AMEN.*⁹

One-on-one support calls for organizers

A main way that On Earth Peace organizers have connected with congregationally based peace and justice organizers around the country is on the phone. These one-on-one calls offer support to different people on different issues, with a continuing intent to awaken imagination and connect to deeper resources.

At their best, three main things happen in each call: coaching, connection to broader movements, and spiritual accompaniment. By coaching, I mean helping people look at their organizing through a lens of strategy and eliciting their thoughts about allies, obstacles, resources, and what victory might look like in concrete terms. Connection to broader movements means providing stories and information from specific relevant movements and providing affirmation for participating in the river of non-violent social change.

Spiritual accompaniment in this context has several aspects:

- Acknowledging and opening to spiritual power
- Praying for the person before the call
- Praying with the person on the call
- Connecting to scripture story, and the story of God's love
- Asking, How is God moving in you through this work? What is happening in your heart and spirit?

- Asking, how is this part of what God is doing in the world?
- Acknowledging the forbidden, the dark side, and harder aspects of the work

The heart of each call is to nurture the individual's leadership as a faith-based peacemaker and their congregation's/community's leadership as an influence for long-term change. The calls are meant to be pastoral in tending to the heart of the organizers, and prophetic in asking questions about next steps.

The main technique is the elicitive question: not *telling*, but asking, inviting their story and their dreams to come out. This elicitive approach reflects the heart of the theo poetic commitment.¹⁰

Organizing for the International Day of Prayer for Peace and beyond

In 2007, On Earth Peace started organizing around the International Day of Prayer for Peace. Each year, September 21 is both the World Council of Churches' International Day of Prayer for Peace and the United Nations' International Day of Peace. On or near September 21, 2009, a total of 148 congregations and community groups who connected with On Earth Peace led events in their community.

In these efforts, we use a questioning and imagination-awakening approach. The core catalyzing question is, "What's the violence that's impacting your community?" We ask congregations to wrestle with that question and to begin taking that question and related questions out into their community. "What do we need to know, if we want to care about what's happening here? What are the ways that people's lives are less than they could be, here in our community? What are the signs of hope? What might God be doing with our community right now?"¹¹

The intention is that these questions, and this engagement, lead congregations into new relationships, and into new understandings of their community, so that when the community is gathered on September 21 for a public prayer event, a new thing will happen—some new coalescence, some new foundation for a next step in creative public action on the community's pressing issues.

To support this, we offer an organizing manual and training calls on topics including (1) how to lead a community listening initiative; (2) principles of non-violence leadership for community change; (3) media

outreach and coverage; and (4) planning a public prayer service that people will turn out for. These training calls supplement a series of about six one-on-one support calls that we offer to congregational organizers leading up to September 21.

In the end, we are not just interested in what happens on September 21. We are interested in people and communities that grow in their leadership, and have informed perspectives, and are rooted in prayer and ready to move their communities toward justice and non-violence. The IDOPP campaign was also about changing notions of peacemaking—from anti-negative, to a positive and proactive peacemaking. We want to form and spiritually accompany people, not just fill their heads with ideas about peacemaking. This is why a question-raising model, in which we walk with the individuals through their struggles with engagement, matters so much. We are interested in the deeper spiritual formation, in the people who emerge from our interactions.

One of the ways that we followed up September 21, 2008, was a training event called “You Can’t Stop the River: Community Change for Congregations.” Ministry teams gathered from congregations from around the country that were ready to take action on a specific issue in their community. About ten congregations came together in Kansas City, Kansas, in April 2009, to work on issues ranging from hungry children in the community, to gun violence, to recruitment of youth by drug dealers.

The retreat incorporated training on effective non-violence leadership along with theology and scripture, prayer and inspiration. We worked to awaken the imagination of the people who were there, and also equip them, so that when they got home, they could develop a process in their own community that would enliven, involve, and accomplish specific goals. The event included prayer time, together and alone; worship and healing services, as well as engagement with scripture and each other and the heritage of non-violent community change.

Growing the seeds is ultimately not our work

Meister Eckhart wrote: “The seed of God is in us. Given an intelligent and hard-working farmer, it will thrive and grow up to God, whose seed it is; and accordingly its fruits will be God-nature. Pear seeds grow into pear trees, nut seeds into nut trees, and God-seed into God.”¹²

As we discussed these matters, my friend Carol Carson responded: “The organizer is the farmer, and if you want to follow Eckhart, God has planted the seed. The seed still has the responsibility to grow. You can’t make it grow. No matter what a farmer does, she cannot make a seed grow. She can do everything possible to create the right environment to allow the seed to reach its potential.”¹³

Theopoetic social change organizing is about nurturing seeds of God—seeds of personality, of justice, of beauty, and of right relationship. This is the work of a Lover, a Beloved, a Gardener, a Builder. The theopoet seeks to support, undergird, and bless the seed within those she organizes, but ultimately the seed itself is what grows, guided and directed by the imprint/image within.

Theopoetic social change seeks the power of deeper making and creativity—and seeks to unleash it from within the communities and individuals where it abides. Theopoetic social change seeks the Word made flesh—the enfleshment of visions and Power within the realities of the people each theopoet loves and relates to. When it moves from page to sanctuary and streets, theopoetics will provoke a creative collision of poem and picket, a fertile pollination of Art and Presence, a restless longing for the Life within and beyond the Absence.

Theopoetic activists are called to tend to the heart and the imagination and the spiritual power of people and communities. This is the heart of theopoetic social change—unlocking personal-power-from-within, engaging myth and theology in new ways, walking with people while they develop the programs and initiatives that are rooted in engagement with God and deeply relevant to their own situations. Elicitive, but not just elicitive for its own sake, a theopoetic of social change carefully moves toward spiritual power, toward initiatives and experiments that are not just theory, but which take concrete form, that take flesh and have body.

Notes

1. Article accessed on August 30, 2009, at <http://www.zimbio.com/Theopoetic/articles/6/Consideration+Theopoetic>.
2. For a summary of the state of the conversation on theopoetics, I commend you to L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, “Theopoetics: Process and Perspective,” *Christianity and Literature*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Summer 2009).
3. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976.

4. Rubem Alves' beautiful meditation on Christology, memory and imagination, *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), begins with memories provoked by the scent of a lilac bush.
5. Please visit <http://www.onearthpeace.org>.
6. My MA thesis was *Re-enchantment: Theology, Poetics, and Social Change* (Richmond, IN: Bethany Theological Seminary, 2003).
7. Find an overview of this movement by visiting the website of the National Network Opposing the Militarization of Youth (<http://www.nnomy.org>) or the Youth and Militarism program of the American Friends Service Committee (<http://www.youth4peace.org>). A strategic treatment of the movement can be found in Matt Guynn, "Notes Toward More Powerful Organizing: Pitfalls and Potentials in Counter-recruitment Organizing," *Nonviolent Social Change: The Bulletin of the Manchester College Peace Studies Institute*, May 2008.
8. This model was developed with the collaboration of Deb Oskin. For a sample agenda, contact me at mguynn@onearthpeace.org.
9. This understanding of the demonic was informed by the work of Walter Wink. See his *Powers* trilogy, particularly *Unmasking the Powers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1986).
10. For more on an elicitive approach to social change, please refer to the work of Training for Change, an international social change training center based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which equips activists in effective facilitation and workshop leadership. I am a member of their training team. See <http://www.trainingforchange.org>.
11. This kind of social action research, and related elements that we brought into our organizing, were especially informed by Kingian nonviolence, and the work of David Jehnsen and Bernard LaFayette Jr., especially *The Leaders Manual—A Structured Guide & Introduction to Kingian Nonviolence: The Philosophy and Methodology*, by Bernard LaFayette Jr., and David C. Jehnsen (Galena, OH: Institute for Human Rights and Responsibilities). See <http://www.kingiannonviolence.info>.
12. Cited in *Original Goodness*, by Eknath Easwaran, founder of the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, copyright 1989, 1996; reprinted by permission of Nilgiri Press, Tomales, CA, p. 11, <http://www.easwaran.org>.
13. Personal conversation, August 21, 2009. Thank you to Carol and conversation partners Karen Fraser Gitlitz, Ann Hunstiger, Tristan Bach and Mary Follen, all fellow students with me at the Grünewald Guild during my 2009 sabbatical. The Guild is an ecumenical Christian community in the mountains near Leavenworth, Washington, with the mission to "promote and encourage creativity within individuals and congregations in response to the mystery of creation through the exploration of art & faith." The Guild offers a variety of art instruction, retreat and travel programs. Visit the Grünewald Guild online at <http://www.artfaith.com>.