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Ann Boaden

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ANN BOADEN

Well, Well...Plumbing Our Depths, Telling Our Stories

[Jesus said], "The water that I give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said, "Sir, give me this water..." (John 4: 14-15)

They're crowded into my small office: a mother and son on a college visit. They've done this before—he's a straight-A student—so they know the drill. I explain our Creative Writing program, they ask questions. Give them my e-mail address, shake hands, wish them luck.

But today something different happens.

The conversation's winding down, and I ask casually how many children the family includes.

The tone changes. As if the ground had suddenly shifted.

First, there's silence. We hear the chatter and call of students going to class, the slap of their flip-flops because it's spring. Then the mother says, "Well, I did have three. But our daughter passed away."

Recently?

"Two years ago."

I'm sorry, I say. So sorry.

Her eyes rim slowly with shining. The son doesn't say anything, puts a hand on her jeaned knee. He's told me he's interested in music, plays a little guitar, and I see in his fingers, the strong and certain touch, the way he shapes music.

He's not hushing her with that touch, as many seventeen-year-olds would. He's joining her. She was a Down Syndrome

child, the mother explains. Had been in the hospital, on life support, comatose. "But then all of a sudden she sat up and held out her arms and then she died. I know she was seeing the Blessed Virgin," the mother says. "I know she was."

A little leery of visions so explicit, especially when they're blessed virgins, I nod.

"She couldn't speak much," the son says. "My sister. But she loved birds, always loved birds. She'd make them with her hands—like this—" Briefly he takes his hand off his mother's knee to illustrate, spreading both hands apart, the fingers winging out. "And I think," he says to her, "that she was making a bird for you—to make you happy." He looks back at me. "People who don't believe in spiritual things don't know very much, do they?"

This story has stayed with me, played with my imagination. It's got all the elements I like in stories: layers, tone shifts, ambiguity, the wonder and pain and inexplicability of



Ann Boaden has taught literature and creative writing in the English Department of Augustana College (Rock Island) for 44 years. She served on the committee responsible for drafting Augustana's Five Faith Commitments and assisted with the editing of Thomas Tredway's recently released book on Conrad Bergendoff's life and faith. Her book *Light and Leaven* considers the lives and work of women who helped shape Augustana's first one hundred years.

life. And an opening up of that well of water that will never let anyone go away thirsty. A possibility to be contemplated, to be taken seriously.

“Such an identity enhances our ability to educate self and other, strengthens us in our quest to take our place and so to help students take their places in the world with discernment, confidence, and ‘dauntless love.’”

We need to identify, claim, and proclaim our wells of living water, Darrell Jodock insists in his essay “Vocation of the Lutheran College and Religious Diversity” (*Intersections* Spring 2011). Because unless and until we acknowledge those wells that nourish us, we cannot really understand and take seriously the wells from which others draw their nourishment. Blessed Virgins looking down from heaven aren’t my spiritual vocabulary. But they were hers. And I know that, as I claim my own tradition, I not only must but can and want to see more clearly, more respectfully, into the depths of hers. Jodock claims that such reciprocal seeing is essential to the kind of education Lutheran colleges can offer. Without it, we can’t have authentic diversity. For diversity recognizes, respects, and ultimately celebrates the many wells we visit on our spiritual journeys.

And for me as an educator, it’s about more than in-depth interfaith conversations. It’s what such conversations can do to create an institutional vision, a bone-deep (or well-deep) identity, one that substitutes a tolerantly dismissive “whatever” for an intentionally engaged “what.” I believe that such an identity enhances our ability to educate self and other, strengthens us in our quest to take our place and so to help students take their places in the world with discernment, confidence, and “dauntless love.”

Maybe we do this sort of work obliquely—tell the truth but tell it slant, as Emily Dickinson famously said. Certainly for anyone in the arts, this kind of truth-telling is what fills our days and ways. Writers and artists and teachers have given us elegant, eloquent apologia for

their disciplines. As Professor Allison Wee’s luminous essay “Valuing Poetry” (*Intersections* Spring 2013) asserts, “Poetry [she refers to the specific genre; I extend the term to mean any form of literary art] can help us live, and live well, in the face of death....It can offer much comfort. It can remind us of everything good and beautiful in the world. It can remind us that we are not alone in our pain and suffering, even at times when no one else can be present with us. It can give voice to our voiceless longings; it can give shape to our deepest and most complex feelings and give us means to reach out to others when otherwise we might be left mute and isolate.”

And yet, magnificent as is this creedal statement, I find myself wanting more. And I believe that “more” is the water from the wells of my faith tradition. Carla Arnell, English professor at a non-church-related college, suggests in “Don’t Eschew the Pew” (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct. 14, 2013) that to focus on the particulars of a religious tradition, to observe its rhythms and rituals, its seasons and stories, can help us understand and share our humanity on a deeper level even than art can provide. Too often “spiritual” detached from “worship” can lead to making ourselves the center of the experience. How can I find comfort and beauty? How can I find communion in my suffering? How can I find words to reach others in their

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pain? Finally, how can I enrich my life? These are, of course, questions that religion addresses. But the “spiritual but not religious” perspective can make such questions and answers intensely private. It can also shrink our sense of community. We may reach out, but selectively: to those who share our vision and vocabulary. However, if I see myself as a loved child of a God who gives me everything I need, then I can’t help seeing others that way, even those who differ radically from me. And I am enjoined by that seeing to reach out to them where they are.

To drink from the well of our Lutheran faith produces a curiously paradoxical flavor (to perhaps belabor the metaphor): it shapes experience in the formal ways that poetry does, arranging and ordering the chaotic. Yet it also demands that the chaos be fully admitted, that the messiness and aggravation of our lived-out human story be embraced rather than metaphorized: that quirky and precious and exasperating quotidian, where I kneel at the altar and dip bread into the cup just given to the person beside me whose political views I deplore, but whose generosity rebukes my own stinginess. Only then, on my knees, can I really become part of the vast mystery of God's love for my own flawed self as well as for the other, only then can I become one with the other, only then share *shalom*.

A friend and former student joins a couple of his undergraduate professors for a celebratory dinner: he's just released his debut book of poetry. He's 62. For his entire professional life he's been an attorney practicing corporate law in a firm so wealthy and prestigious that they sent a physician to his home to conduct his annual physical exams. In his mid-fifties he found himself thirsting for something other, something more than the commute, the elegant suburban home—even more than the deeply secure marriage and the successful children. Legalities were arid, the canyoned pavements he walked in the city were like stones to his feet. He felt, perhaps, as alien from himself and his world as that very different alien, the woman who came to the well at noonday to draw the water that would not last.

Would reading poetry have been enough to quench his thirst? Frankly, I don't think so. For what turned him to poetry, to studying with patience and persistence, then to writing with breathtaking authority and beauty, was the living water that welled up, week after week, service after service, story after story, as he observed the rituals of his faith tradition. This is the tradition which we can affirm. Perhaps, if it is ours, we are obliged to affirm it, to open students' eyes to the possibilities of this tradition,

not just as an aesthetic or even a generic spiritual experience, but as a power that gives life to art. By doing so, we both strengthen and flex our own understanding of our tradition. And make it more possible to explicate that tradition honestly and helpfully to the people we learn and teach among—however far-flung they may be.

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The two students, past and present, had looked deeply into the wells, dipped deeply, from places of dryness. The water there didn't always necessarily sparkle. Sometimes it was very dark.

But they looked long enough to see the stars at the bottom.

I have no prescriptions for how the sharing and affirming of this vision can occur. That would be presumptuous, I think, and more than a little oxymoronic in a piece about open conversation. Each person who drinks from a well of living water will find her own way of doing so. I like to use stories.

And so here's the final episode in the story I opened with, about the visiting prospective student. As he was leaving my office, he observed, in a kind of wonder, "This is the first time anyone on any of our college visits has talked about faith." And, when he showed up in my class the following year, he reminded me of our conversation. And we shared the story again.

Shared the water from our wells.