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Making or Mining Sense?

A Comparison of the Philosophical and Methodological Presuppositions of Secular and Biblical Approaches to Teaching and Practicing Creative Writing

Introduction

At first the task for this tenure paper seemed daunting, couched as it is in terms I know I should know (i.e., philosophical, methodological, and presuppositional), terms that initially evoked, however, only vague memories and anxieties related to the study of literary theory and rhetoric in graduate school at the University of South Carolina twenty years ago. Then I took a deep breath and exhaled. That moment of inspiration (and expiration) occurred in the office of a local auto repair shop in south Jackson, under the elevated roar of I-20, while I waited for my minivan to be serviced for a Thanksgiving trip to see family in Georgia. Something about the nondescript, faded wood paneling in the office; the two-, three-, and four-year old hunting magazines with interchangeable dead bucks on the cover; and the anonymous pictures of someone's teenage daughter playing softball – in other words, the absence of anything even of vague interest to me – allowed me to focus on the tenure questions which the Belhaven College Board of Trustees had to presented to me.

The first moments of work on this paper in that office were the most difficult, but I reminded myself what I tell creative writing students all the time – the hardest part about beginning is beginning. So I wrote down on a yellow legal pad the first words of an idea under the heading “Secular Philosophical Presuppositions”: Construction of Self. At least I had made a start.

Not long into the process, I realized that I needed a methodology for my inquiry into methodology and other such topics. How to get at the presuppositions of writers and teachers of writing? – that became the question. Finally, I settled on the following approach: I would examine the introductions to a number of texts for beginning creative writing courses and for upper-level, genre-specific writing workshops, and I would analyze essays by writers and writing teachers about the subject of writing itself. These kinds of introductions and essays should provide explanations of, and insights into, the authors’ beliefs about what creative writing is, how it happens, and, more importantly, why it happens. These explanations and insights are exactly what I found.

In summary, many secular writers perceive a vast, mysterious, and ultimately inscrutable cosmos as the backdrop for human existence. In the face of this “elusive something” [as Ishmael refers to the “whiteness of the whale” in *Moby-Dick*] (189), humans are left to survive on their wits, to make or construct meaning by their own efforts, to undertake a quest that leads to tentative and temporary “answers” and “meanings” at best. According to this view, the human creative act may be seen as a response to Ishmael’s literal and figurative challenge in *Moby-Dick*: “...how may

unlettered Ishamael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can" (347).

Secular Philosophical Presuppositions

Of course, I have given my hand away somewhat through the summary above, but I can be more specific. After surveying eight or ten creative writing texts, I find the following presuppositions to hold in general:

1. The Cosmos is vast and mysterious, providing a rich field for human creative activity.
2. Certainties are unattainable and probably nonexistent.
3. Clarity and "truth" are always tentative and temporary (though richly satisfying – you take what you can get).

Building on these foundational presuppositions about the Cosmos, secular writers construct a house of beliefs about what creative writing is and what it accomplishes. In fact, with the bricks, 2x4's, and drywall of words, writers attempt the following modern marvels, acting as both the architects and crafters of their own reality (or realities):

1. Construction of Self (Identity)
2. Construction of Society (Community)
3. Construction of Significance (Meaning)

According to this constructivist approach, we no longer "are what we eat"; rather, "we are what we (cre)-ate" (to turn an old phrase slightly).

Following are a few examples of these presuppositions. In his "Introduction" to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate makes a bold claim for the power of creative

nonfiction (often autobiographical, meditative writing like Thoreau's *Walden*): "The self-consciousness and self-reflection that essay writing demands cannot help but have an influence on the personal essayist's life....Thus the writing of personal essays not only monitors the self but helps it gel. The essay is *an enactment of the creation of self*" (xliv) (italics mine). Lopate suggests that we not only learn about our selves as we write (which I can accept from a biblical perspective), but also create our selves as we write (which I cannot accept as a Christian).

In a collection of essays edited by Wendy Bishop entitled *On Writing: A Process Reader*, Scott Russell Sanders argues for the community-building impact of stories (both fictional and nonfictional) in his essay "The Most Human Act: Ten Reasons Why We'll Always Need a Good Story": "...stories create community. They link teller to listeners, and listeners to one another....Through stories, we reach across the rifts not only of gender and age, but also of race and creed, geography and class, even the rifts between species or between enemies" (489). According to Sanders, stories cement communities together by passing along the collective experience, wisdom, and mores of the tribe—the mortar of society and communal identity:

Once again we come upon the tacit morality of stories, for moral judgment relies, as narrative does, on a belief in cause and effect. Stories teach us that every gesture, every act, every choice we make sends ripples of influence into the future....Stories gather experience into shapes we can hold and pass on through time, much the way DNA molecules in our cells record genetic discoveries and pass them on. Until the invention of

writing, the discoveries of the tribe were preserved and transmitted by storytellers, above all by elders. (491)

In this light, storytellers (writers) act as tribal elders, telling people who they are, where they have come from, and how they can live effectively. Such twenty-first century notions send roots back at least as far as the romantic (early 1800s) and modernist (early 1900s) periods in western literature when writers (particularly poets) portrayed themselves as the new prophets and priests of the age. According to Percy Shelley (1792-1822) in *A Defense of Poetry*: “Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration...the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (754).

As “legislators of the world,” writers not only create identity (both individual and collective) and community, they also create meaning – in a sense they imbue human experience and the physical world with significance through the creative act. Many authors, including those who produce creative writing texts, speak with great reverence about the “word magic” of language, the power of words to cast such a spell on human experience that it assumes order and shape. According to Sanders, “the spells and enchantments that figure in so many titles [of stories] remind us of the ambiguous potency in words, for creating or destroying, for binding or setting free” (489). Narrative allows us “to make sense of our lives” (Sanders 489). In *Writing Poems* (the standard text for poetry workshops around the country), Boisseau, Wallace, and Mann say: “Because we use words in our humdrum lives...we sometimes forget what power they wield. As far back as we can look, humanity has tested and sharpened that

power. The oldest poems we have are the spells, prayers, curses, and incantations that accompanied the magical rites of ancient cultures” (4). In one of the most famous modern essays on poetry, “The Figure a Poem Makes,” Robert Frost says that poetry “ends in a clarification of life...a momentary stay against confusion” (11). Frost’s claim is testimony to the potent enchantment and power that secular writers find in words — arranged “correctly,” they can bring order to chaos and clarity to confusion. Even if the clarity comes only for a moment, that moment of meaning is so much more than nothing.

Secular Methodological Presuppositions

Above I have examined the secular assumptions that inform questions like the following: What is creative writing? Who writes? Why do they write? Where does the creative act end (i.e., what are its goals, products, and consequences)? However, I have addressed neither *how* creative writing happens nor the *assumptions* that guide the methodology itself. According to writers’ literal and figurative descriptions of writing, we can understand this process through three metaphors, which also suggest particular actions and assumptions:

1. Writing as Self Expression
2. Writing as Heroic Quest
3. Writing as Enlightened Discovery

Ultimately, all three are existential exercises: the Self that is being expressed is also being created as it is being expressed; the enlightenment found at the end of the heroic journey is that wisdom or insight created by the writer as he or she proceeds

linguistically on the quest for meaning. These processes of expressing Self and exploring Experience are predicated on the assumption that what we make of our selves and experiences is literally what we make of them.

Creative writing texts, authors' introductions, and writers' interviews and essays are replete with examples of metaphorical language describing the activity of writing as a quest, journey, or exploratory sortie. In the "Introduction" to *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*, editors Robert Root, Jr., and Michael Steinberg describe this recently recognized genre of creative writing:

As many writers in this book suggest – either directly or indirectly – [creative nonfiction] encourages self-discovery, self-exploration, and surprise. Often, the writer “is on a journey of discovery, often unasked for and unplanned,” Rosellen Brown writes....This genre grants writers permission to explore without knowing where they'll end up, to be tentative, speculative, reflective....More frequently than not, the subject matter becomes the catalyst or trigger for some personal journey or inquiry or self-interrogation. (xxv)

As Root and Steinberg suggest, the writer's exploration often proceeds along inward and outward routes concurrently, with discoveries about internal self and external reality informing and fueling one another. About storytellers who write fiction, novelist and poet George Garrett says: “[While watching a documentary about tribal hunters], I understood something about our duty and function as storytellers. It is up to us to tell the story of the hunt (event, experience, quest) as honestly and as accurately as

possible..." (6). While the actual blood-and-sweat hunt provides sustenance for our bodies, the linguistic quest (storytelling) provides food for thought and spirit – the meaning of the hunt itself.

In "The Figure a Poem Makes," Frost talks first about the end of the poetic journey – the "clarification" and "stay against confusion" mentioned before. These are the enlightened discoveries made by the writer. In the conclusion of the same essay, Frost describes the process that leads to this enlightenment, using language both lyrical and beautiful in its own right:

Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.
A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but may not be worried
into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and
carried away the poet with it. Read it a hundred times: it will forever
keep its freshness as a metal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense
of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went. (12)

The "surprise," or course, is the discovery that the writer makes along the way about some aspect of human experience. Paradoxically, the meaning made along the way is also the reward at the end of the journey.

In essence, the assumptions and methods analyzed above recast the creative act as a spiritual exercise and discipline focused on developing and feeding the spirit of man, enlarging his sense of being and enriching his state of being in the world.

Consequently, this spiritual act (e.g. writing a poem, story, or journal entry) focuses on humanistic and cosmological inquiry: Who are we? What is the cosmos? What is our

place in the cosmos? Ironically, this “spiritual” discipline ignores, denies, doubts, or diminishes the divine Meaning Maker who Himself brought the human spirit (and body) into being and gave it a purpose fashioned on His own image. Secular, humanistic writers can satisfy themselves with little gods made of ink and pixels (as we all can) and remain unaware of the harm caused by false worship of words (instead of true worship of the Word).

Biblical Philosophical and Methodological Presuppositions

The biblical presuppositions related to creativity and composition can best be discussed under the following categories:

1. Image
2. Authority
3. Meaning
4. Mystery

In summary, humans are **Image**-bearing creatures (fashioned in the image of God Himself) who have been given **Authority** by their Creator to subdue creation. This subjugation occurs as humans exercise their creative gifts (often through language particularly) to unravel the divinely appointed **Meaning** of the cosmos and human experience and the divinely inspired **Mystery** of creation.

As Genesis 1:31 declares, the “very good” of creation, the pinnacle of all God made, was man, both male and female. In fact, God (through Moses) composed a type of poem in praise of this favored being: “So God created man in his own image, / in the image of God he created him; / male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27, ESV). As

the editors of *The Reformation Study Bible* point out, “The special dignity of being human is that as men and women we may reflect and reproduce at our own creaturely level the holy ways of God” (9). By the time readers get to Genesis 1:26 – where they are told for the first time that man is made in God’s “likeness” – the primary divine character trait that has been portrayed is God’s creativity: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ ...And God said ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters,’ ...And God said...” (Gen. 1:1-25). Thus, while image-bearing man is rich in “likenesses” to God (e.g., he/she is relational, powerful, communicative, purposeful, orderly, and logical, among other characteristics), the trait most apparent initially is that man shares and reflects God’s creativity. Consequently, the first biblical assumption that guides our understanding of creative writing is that man finitely reflects the creativity of God and that creativity itself is good.

In *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly about the Arts*, Leland Ryken discusses human creativity through the lens of the biblical doctrine of creation, affirming the goodness of the activity and its products:

The fact that God made earthly reality and set the human race over it means that the artist’s and critic’s preoccupation with human experience and culture is God-ordained. Since God made a world that is beautiful as well as functional, we know that the concern of the creative artist and the critic with beauty, form, and artistic delight is legitimate....The fact that humans are created in God’s image provides a sanction for human creativity and a theological explanation of why people create. (14)

In this light, we see that human creativity is not only good and legitimate, but also fundamental to human nature. And Christians do not have to apologize for pursuing artistic work – as Hans Rookmaaker says in the title to his treatise on the state of the arts in the church at the end of the twentieth century, “Art needs no justification.” He goes on to say: “We should remind ourselves that Christ did not come to make us Christians or to save our souls only but that he came to redeem us that we might be human in the full sense of that word....Therefore, if we have artistic talents, they should be used” (20).

A second biblical assumption, closely related to the first, is that, while man exercises his creativity in many ways (e.g., building, planning, managing, teaching, healing, nurturing, etc.), one of the primary ways he does this is through language itself – speaking, conversing, composing, naming, and writing. In fact, the first creative acts of man recorded in the Bible are both language acts. Adam’s first task in the Garden of Eden was the naming of “all cattle ... the birds of the air, and ... every beast of the field” (Gen. 2:20). Through the practical act of naming, Adam brought order to his external world, much as we use language today to categorize, define, explain, and argue in fields as diverse as business, science, education, politics, and industry. In addition, Adam used language in expressive and interpretive ways before the fall. After his deep sleep, during which time God made Eve, Adam awoke and composed man’s first recorded words – a poem in praise of woman, extolling the image and extension of his own self that he saw in Eve (much like the poem God composed in Genesis 1 praising the divine image in humans, male and female):

This is now bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman,
Because she was taken out of Man (Gen. 2:23).

Of course, this statement is literally true in a way (Eve was made from one of Adam's own bones), but mostly the utterance is figuratively true (a statement of how Eve seems to Adam). Implied in Adam's corporeal metaphors are the following ideas:

1. Eve feels like a part of Adam, like the deepest part of him.
2. Adam feels intimately connected to Eve.
3. Eve fits Adam like his own bones and body.
4. Adam loves Eve and desires to care for her like his own body.
5. Eve nurtures and supports Adam like the blood made in the marrow of his own bones.
6. Losing Eve would be like losing a part of Adam's own body.

Through naming (using factual language), Adam brought order to his external world by categorizing the varieties of life around him. Through composing (using imaginative, metaphorical language), Adam brought order to his experiential world by suggesting and unveiling the divinely inspired meaning in his discovery of a bride and the new relationship called marriage.

In *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith*, Susan Gallagher and Roger Lundin argue that creative activities, like reading and writing, train us in the uniquely human act of

interpretation (not making sense out of the world, rather mining sense from the world--the gems of significance that form through the power of God's own creative acts):

The doctrines of Creation and Incarnation affirm that human life is inherently meaningful. God has placed us in a world filled with order and hints of wonder, and through his acts of revelation and redemption he has entered into our history. As a result, although some things are obviously of greater importance than others, everything in our experience has significance, and our attempt to discern that significance – as well as we can – is part of our calling as God's servants. If we are convinced that our world has meaning, then we may see that interpretation is not isolated from the rest of life but is at the very heart of our life. (5)

Humans are the only why-asking creature on earth. We are comforted biblically with the knowledge that the question does not exist without answers and that methods to approach those answers – however difficult to obtain or hidden they remain – are available.

The third important biblical presupposition about creativity and writing is suggested by the words “unveiling,” “mining,” and “interpreting” above. Writers and other artists seek significances and symbols that inhere in creation and experience – not because humans have imagined or implanted these meanings, but because a profound, orderly, infinite, and extravagantly creative God (even gratuitously creative, in the best sense of the word) has imparted significance to all that He has made. Consider for a moment the inherent symbolism found in the physical world. In the sky each day, we

find one, and only one, object so bright and glorious that no person can look directly at it. In proximity to it, we would be overwhelmed and consumed. However, in right relation it (at our appropriate celestial distance), we receive our daily sustenance: light, warmth, and ultimately food itself. It is no wonder that many ancient cultures, such as the Egyptians, worshipped the sun – they were part way to the truth. God has placed a symbolic reminder of Himself in our daily experience – a part of this world that points beyond itself to significances we still cannot fully fathom.

Finally, the fourth biblical presupposition we must consider relates to what we cannot now, and never will, fully fathom – the mystery of God and his creation. We might define mystery in the following way: a being, truth, beauty, or quality that is hidden, but which has the potential to be discovered and progressively known, though never known fully or finally. In addition, we might say that mystery finds its origins in the interaction between finite (man) and infinite (God), between seen (temporal) and unseen (heavenly) realities. Paul exclaims in Romans concerning the inscrutable mystery and wonder of God: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?’” (Rom. 11:33-34). Here, Paul recognizes that the omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God cannot be known fully and finally by man – our “knowing” Him must always be a work in progress, but a wondrous one nonetheless. From a human perspective, mystery has its genesis in the interaction between God and man, between infinite and finite – mystery occurs when we encounter the One “in whom are hidden

all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). And, of course, we know from scripture, that we may encounter this One in the Word written and living [“I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6)] and in the World [“the heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1)].

In her essay “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” Flannery O’Connor acknowledges the importance of mystery for writers and discusses the ways in which temporal and heavenly realities interact. According to O’Connor, the fiction writer will have a deep respect for, and sense of, the concrete world (e.g., people, places, things, actions, manners, and speech) because it opens a portal to mystery – what we do not know about the divine, humanity, and the cosmos:

If the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious...then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself....I would not like to suggest that this kind of writer, because his interest is predominantly in mystery, is able in any sense to slight the concrete.

Fiction begins where human knowledge begins – with the senses – and every fiction writer is bound by this fundamental aspect of his medium.

(41-42)

As O’Connor has so famously characterized the process, “the fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature” (153).

A Comparison & Contrast of Biblical & Secular Presuppositions about Creativity & Composition

Oddly enough, what strikes me first about the presuppositions of secular and biblical writers and teachers is the similarities they share. Both camps appreciate the mystery of the cosmos, both strongly desire that their experiences possess significance and their works profundity, both emphasize the importance of knowing your own self, both value shared community (certainly between readers/writers, writers/writers, and readers/readers), and both prize human culture. However, these similarities, extensive as they are, give way to profound differences beneath of the surface of apparent agreement.

For the secular writer, the cosmos is mysterious, but unknowable, and meaning exists as a momentary, fragile construction set against a vast, inscrutable backdrop. From a biblical perspective, the cosmos is mysterious, but knowable – knowable in the sense that humans can grow in their understanding of a world made with purpose and order, knowable in that they can unfold the mysteries that God has wrapped into creation (stirred not as extra seasoning in the pot, but existing as the very essence of the stew itself). Nicholas Barker, former English professor at Covenant College, defines art as the “unfolding of previously unrealized potentialities in the aesthetic dimension of creation, or ... the exercise on the part of artists of their God-ordained dominion over the aesthetic dimension of creation” (quoted in Gallagher and Lundin 45). As potentialities in creation are unfolded – Usain Bolt running 100 meters in 9.58 seconds; scientists creating a molecular transistor with only 6 carbon atoms; the Hubble Telescope photographing a swarm of stars 28,000 light-years from earth; Johnny Cash

covering “Hurt” by Nine Inch Nails – beauty is made apparent and the glory of God is revealed.

While secular writers value both the self and community, they also see each as a do-it-yourself project. Each is an existential creation, fashioned largely through linguistic acts: I make myself as I write, and I make community as others engage with my text. The writer working from a Christian perspective knows the self to be a gift from God – not something to be created on a blank slate, rather a unique person to be discovered, developed, and appreciated. In Psalm 139, David poetically describes the initial creation of his self by God: “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (13-14). As I know from watching women knit and quilt in rural south Georgia where I grew up, the knitter and quilter pick their threads and swatches of fabric very carefully in order to create a particular and unique pattern – just as God does with each of us. I can understand myself and my life better through writing, but I cannot make me up as I go.

As for community, the secular writer experiences communal connections through shared ideas and shared conceptions of reality, created largely through shared texts and discourse. The Christian experiences community through shared faith and familial relationships based on inclusion in the body of Christ as ordained by God: “God arranged the members of the body, each one of them, as he chose...God has so composed the body...that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another....Now you are the body of Christ and

individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:18-27). As with self, community also is a gift from God, and one too that can be developed and appreciated, mined and explored for all it is worth.

A final difference between the two perspectives relates to secular and biblical perceptions of human culture. For the secular writer/artist/philosopher, culture (e.g. books, paintings, music, buildings, sculpture, belief systems, coffee-shops, environmental activism) is something to be worshipped. Cultural artifacts – products of human imagination, thought, and action – are the highest good in the world, the little gods made by the little god-makers. The modernist poet Wallace Stevens expressed a similar sentiment in his aphoristic work *Adagia*: "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (185). For the Christian, culture is not something to be worshipped; rather, it is the product of an act of obedience. Culture is a product of obedience because God commands humans to create culture in Genesis 1:28 (the Cultural Mandate): "And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" Humans "subdue" the creation, bring it under their authority, when they exercise their God-given gifts over creation: writing a poem, teaching a class, repairing a car, dancing in a ballet, and running a football toward the end zone. These actions become acts of informal worship in that they recognize and reveal the glory of God in the world. As Eric Liddell says in *Chariots of Fire*, "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure." Not only does

he feel God's pleasure, but also he reveals God's pleasure (and glory) when he exercises the gifts that God knit into him.

Future Directions for Thinking, Reading, and Research

Several questions plague me at this point in my career as a teacher and writer:

1. Why do non-Christian writers often write with such commitment, profundity, excellence, and purpose compared to Christian writers?
2. Why are Christian bookstores in many ways neither Christian nor bookstores?
3. Why are formulaic and clichéd Christian novels so successful?
4. Why do Christians, who seem to love classic hymnody and contemporary Christian music, read so little poetry?
5. What am I called to write personally?

I do not have good or easy answers to these questions at this point, but I will offer my best guesses.

Sometimes I feel jealous of non-Christian writers because they write as if their lives depend on what they write – and in a sense that is true. What I admire is their zeal for the process of discovery, their joy over any insights they gain. I wonder, however, if ultimately they are writing out of a sense of fear – fear that their lives will not add up to anything without their writing. Because I believe that love is a stronger motivator than fear, I sense the opportunity as a Christian to have an even more dedicated and passionate writing life than the non-believing writers I know. But I'm not there yet. I may be stuck on the very fear that so motivates others – adding up the remaining years of a normal life expectancy and wondering what I can accomplish in that time. In the

years to come, I want to prayerfully consider and obediently practice my personal call to write. As I write more, I hope to pass on the passion to my students more effectively, to work as a part of the workshop myself, to lead by example.

As for poor (but often very successful) writing by Christians, more analysis is required on my part. I am considering both reading and teaching some bad poetry and fiction by Christian writers as a contrast to excellent writing by both Christian and secular writers. I also would like to incorporate more excellent writers who are Christians into the workshop curriculum, writers such as the following: Marilynne Robinson (fiction), Bret Lott (fiction, creative nonfiction), Luci Shaw (poetry), Scott Cairns (poetry), Denise Levertov (poetry), Kate DiCamillo (young adult fiction), Fredrick Buechner (fiction), and Wendell Berry (poetry, personal essay). Even though some of these writers are well known and respected, most are not anthologized or excerpted in creative writing texts. It will take more conscious effort on my part to include works by them in the writing curriculum.

Over time, I would love to be a part of reviving an interest in poetry, especially in the Christian community. Poetry will never be a money maker or a big attraction for readers and buyers. An assistant manager at Lemuria in Jackson told me in the past that even Lemuria, one of the best and most respected independently owned bookstores in the country, keeps a low inventory of poetry books because market demand is so low – poetry collections sit on the shelf month after month. In the nine years that I have been at Belhaven, I have sponsored and hosted around twenty-five public readings (mostly poetry) by students and visiting writers, readings held on campus and in local

coffee shops and restaurants. I am proud of that accomplishment and would like to continue in this role, even bringing more significant writers to campus to read and conduct master workshops with students.

The final question concerns my own writing. I have already talked about motivation (love vs. fear). I believe I am entering a time in my life where consistent writing is more feasible: my wife is out of graduate school and working, my two youngest children are in school for full days now, and my mortgage payment is current. If there are things for me to say, now is the time. I have whole sections of a childhood in south Georgia to explore, the tensions and comforts of marrying relatively late in life, the pleasures and pains of parenthood, the unique experiences of adopting transracially. A part of me feels excited about the process. Like both secular and Christian writers, I believe that writing is a discovery process, a way to explore self and experience. Like the best of Christian writers, I believe that writing is a tool for digging into the beauty and brokenness, the order and disorder, the wonder and woes of my own life and – if I do that well – by extension, into the lives of all.

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