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Jennifer Sears

CUNY New York City College of Technology

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ON WRITING OF FAITH BROKEN OPEN AND OTHER EVIDENCES OF LOVE

Jennifer Sears

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RESPONSES TO JEFF GUNDY'S
SONGS FROM AN EMPTY CAGE
FROM A PASTOR, A TEACHER,
AND A LITERARY CRITIC

In his introduction to *Songs from an Empty Cage: Poetry, Mystery, Anabaptism, and Peace*, Jeff Gundy asks two questions: "How shall we write?" and "How shall we teach?" This inquiry results in his extended outpouring of wonder at the divine in everyday life, an outpouring rooted in a desire to make our foundations and beliefs more relevant, alive and even *wild*. By challenging differences and embracing contrasts within literary and theological practices, texts and approaches, and offering "heretic" possibilities, this book offers readers, specifically readers who write, helpful discourse on writing, teaching, and living the Anabaptist tradition. Driven by Gundy's extended attention, focused concern, and daunting erudition, this book is shot through with love for both its subject and reader.

In *Walker in the Fog*, Gundy offered a manifesto of wonderful directives on writing toward a "surrealist Anabaptism." In this volume, 33 "Notes Toward an Anabaptist Theopoetics" seem to both warn and prepare creative writers for opposition they may face, in addition to demanding more understanding and even trust from those in less creatively driven fields. (Yes, Thoreau was odd, and necessarily so.) In *Walker in the Fog*, Gundy sought "not a quarrel but an inquiry" with revered texts including work by historian and writer John Ruth. Here, he initiates dialog with the ideas of another looming and complex figure – writer, teacher and theologian John Howard Yoder – making a poet's appeal for passion and precision when considering how one might experience and respond to the presence of the divine, and through language, to ignite ideas and history with vitality.

As with any affecting text, I find kinships in these pages, first, among literary mentions obscure and less so: William Stafford, Ann Carson, William Blake, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton, Coleman Barks' Rumi, Hafez, Julia Kasdorf, Jean Janzen, Jack Gilbert, and the American Transcendentalist philosopher-poets, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Aspects of what I know of these two 19th-century "heretics" – their methods of close inquiry, wariness of "Truths" boasting a capital T, their attention to the ways of the mind and their reverence for observed individual experience and particulars of the present – resonate with ideas in *Songs from an Empty Cage*. They too considered deeply and practically how one should live. Despite obvious and humbling erudition, Emerson and Thoreau, Shams of Tabriz and Rumi, and here Jeff Gundy, advocate for knowledge and examined experience lived outside of books, turning toward wisdom – "crossings and openings" – found in the natural world, those subtle intersections and illuminations perhaps more observable, Gundy argues, to the poetic or creative imagination.

Throughout the book are studies of these crossings, often lit by an earthy, engaging humor reminiscent of some channels of Sufi poetry, which Gundy refers to in order to break open the writings of John Howard Yoder in "The Rule of God and the Ruby." Among many calls for more aliveness in the language of theology (including an aside about Rook and high Christology), Gundy analyzes the concluding paragraph of "Armaments and Eschatology" and finds relief in Yoder's lapse into natural metaphor: "[P]eople who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe." Seizing on this glimpse of the organic, Gundy enlarges the image by finding resonances in ideas of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Transcendentalist minister Theodore Parker before bringing the reader – in ambling Thoreauvian or ecstatic Rumi-like fashion – to a reflective, contemporary and tactile real-time experience on a woodworking bench where Yoder's "grain of the universe" gains relevance as the grainy patterning is intensified in Gundy's hands.

This impressive riff exemplifies Gundy's passionate call for more appreciation for imagery and directed metaphor despite our tradition's skepticism toward (even the "dour Anabaptist commitment" against) textual

ornamentation and imagery and toward implications of individual “knowing” or direct experience with the divine. Moments of creative experience can and do feel like flares of reception, of something greater revealing itself in intimate terms. The frequently quoted lines of Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” or “The Oversoul” come to mind, his call for attention to and responsive ownership of such moments. But this sense of the everyday ecstatic certainly challenges – as Gundy has extensively explored – our particular code of humility. So, how do we write?

First by reading, Gundy suggests and demonstrates. To this end, Gundy offers his own texts alongside those illustrating his reverence for sublimity found in the physical everyday world: those wood patterns showing our inclusion in a greater, finer intricacy; Yoder whirling with Rumi; Stafford’s dandelion cavalry; the fear-charged air inside the prison where Raylene Hinz-Penner teaches poetry; Mary Oliver’s abandoned gosling; the plants and seeds igniting Grace Jantzen’s vision of “natality”; and Whitman’s “letters from God dropt into the street,” an image that gains sudden immediacy for me as snow plows drop through the ice on my Brooklyn street while I write through a blizzard named Jonas silencing the city. (*Simplify, simplify!* I hear the “odd” one saying.) Gundy shows again and again how faith, like poetry, and poetry, like faith, enables us to better see into the ordinary.

* * *

Years of teaching in both the academic classroom and the dance studio make Gundy’s second prime inquiry – “[H]ow do we teach, and learn to live in the world with skillful passion, with smart love?” – also a personal one. Gundy asserts that love, an ideal motive in Anabaptist tradition but bold in the typically unsentimental academic environment, is the most effective and practical starting point for instruction. The Brooklyn classrooms where I currently teach include first-generation college students from middle- and lower-class families, young people affected by unjust schooling systems and policing practices now making national news, single moms, recent war vets and survivors of all kinds. Almost half were born outside the country. More than half speak languages other than English in their homes. Each semester brings newness. It’s a great place to teach.

As mine is a public university, we rarely discuss religion in composition classes, but violence we can talk about and do: international and local conflicts; violence within personal relationships; discussions of ethics and modern technology that veer into considerations of violence and personal responsibility. My students’ positions on gun safety laws and policing reveal views that could initially surprise idealistic liberals (like me), and their real international experiences, sometimes harrowing, make discussions of war and definitions of “peace” spectacularly unpredictable.

In “Adding Real Beings to the World: Teaching Peace, Writing, and Human Exchange,” Gundy draws from disparate ideas of the Surrealists, Rilke, Lorca, Bob Dylan and the *Martyrs Mirror* to support his assertion that a “loving human connection” is essential in the classroom. At best, teaching shakes up and reorients perspective in order to offer students possibilities to find “a way forward.” Experienced writing teachers know the generous, creative mindset required to decipher students’ burgeoning and sometimes vulnerable ideas, but when teachers offer this genuine attention, students learn to value and listen to the “echo of their *own* song,” an endangered skill in our social media age of throwaway words. This attention indeed is a conscious act of “loving human connection” as much as it is a job. Additionally, Gundy notes, demonstrating humility in the classroom can show the effectiveness of nonviolence. Deceptively difficult in practice, these observations help me see how my everyday work in my urban outpost both extends and connects my students and me to this larger, longstanding tradition of love.

Finally, passion, commitment and devotion to subject – in his case, writing, texts and “images of a transformed world” – are what a writer/teacher/poet can offer students. Here, Gundy offers his prose poem “Letter to Students Gone for Summer.” A teacher leaving class at semester’s end, stopped by the irrepressible life teeming in a campus lagoon, contemplates the absence of students who briefly shared their hours with his. (If nothing else, teaching is this.) “We will never be in the same room again,” he observes. But ultimately, the shared subject of study holds the ultimate power as “words that will save us” drift ahead. The reader is reminded of our evident but worthwhile smallness in the face of something greater.

* * *

There is much I'm leaving out – deeper discussion of mysteries, that exquisite desire to understand the unknowable, creative voice as responsibility or “deed.” But I'll end with a possibly self-indulgent connection, one that I hope relates to these natural cycles of legacy and language; teaching and learning; experience and reception; responsibility, imagination and transformation; and the work of cultivating a theology that challenges and teaches through love.

In a chapter expressing wariness toward Mennonite writing that relies on carelessly used sentimental markers – think buggies and bonnets – Gundy briefly mentions his rural Illinois Mennonite community where his mother wore a head covering until the church made the practice optional in the 1960s. My father – also an “Illinois farm boy” changed, perhaps, by “thoughts turned toward beauty” – was the young minister who initiated what was then a radical challenge to tradition at Waldo Mennonite Church where Jeff Gundy was a member in the youth group. My father was newly out of seminary and worried that this initiative, along with a switch from the King James Bible to the Revised Standard Version, would cost him his first permanent job. It didn't. This “way forward” was inspired in part by the writings and complicated imagination of one of his teachers, John Howard Yoder.