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Loving God By Making Poems

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Loving God By Making Poems

Abstract

"When we talk about loving God with our minds, I suspect that most of the time we think of academic work that is rational and analytical. But in making poems, the more mysterious subconscious mind is employed along with the analytical."

Posting about seeing work as an offering to God from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

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Loving God by Making Poems

 allinallthings.org/loving-god-by-making-poems/

Dave Schelhaas

I write poems. Some of my poems might be called love poems to God — though I didn't really think of them that way until I started thinking about this essay. Some of my poems are explicitly Christian, but I believe any poem written by a sincere Christian may manifest the poet loving God with his mind. I make poems using words and images that I have in mind, and because the words and images come from my mind and because the making of a poem is an activity of the mind, I am loving God with my mind as I make it.

When we talk about loving God with our minds, I suspect that most of the time we think of academic work that is rational and analytical. But in making poems, the more mysterious subconscious mind is employed along with the analytical.

I am going to use a poem I have written to illustrate how writing a poem is an activity by and through which I love God with my mind. Here's the poem:

At Peace in the Tumult of the World

After the office, the traffic,
after the news hour and the newspaper,
I change my clothes
and move into the garden, where,
after the late summer rains,
raspberries once again weight
the heads of these rickety canes,
pulling them earthward,
earthward pulling me.

My fingers know
where to grasp the long
bowed necks of the canes.
I tip them up, take and eat
of the fruit, ignoring the stains,
plucking and plucking the lush red
berries that gush when I crush
the soft flesh with my teeth,
every berry made up of many
smaller berries wedded into one,
each berry a round red tongue
singing soundless songs,
each a cup that drank the late summer's rain
so I can drink its wine.

My thirst assuaged, I stand
erect again, hands stained, heart healed,
at peace in the tumult of the world.

The poet William Stafford has a very short essay titled “A Way of Writing” in which he explains his writing process. In a nutshell, it goes like this: the writer sits down with no subject in mind and opens his mind. “We can’t keep from thinking,” Stafford says. So we must simply be receptive and uncritically take what comes. “One thing will lead to another,” he writes, “that’s the way it is with thought.”

I use a variation on this technique when I write. As I begin writing, I think of the pleasure I find in picking raspberries, how it relaxes me after a day’s work. My mind goes to the busyness, noisiness, and newness of the workday world and then to the peace in the world of the garden. Of course, the minute I use the word *garden*, I have created a powerful connotative image that may take me all the way back to Eden.

Then I begin to describe the act of picking raspberries. The raspberry canes are heavy with berries so they are bowed to the ground. The speaker in the poem (“I”) must bend down and lift them up in order to pick the berries. When I revise later, I am struck by the visual power of the phrase “pulling them earthward.” I recognize the power of the word “earthward” and so put it at the beginning of the next phrase, “earthward pulling me.” Thus, I can repeat earthward immediately: “earthward, earthward,” a really strong visual and aural image. Earth pulls both canes and speaker.

So far, my mind has worked more or less logically in the writing process, but in the second stanza, fourth line (“I tip them up, take and eat”), something unexpected happens. As soon as I write “take and eat,” I recognize that the poem has moved in a religious direction. “Take and eat” is a fine phrase to describe picking and eating a raspberry, but of course it immediately draws the mind of any Christian to the celebration of Holy Communion. Suddenly I realize that this might be a poem about the Lord’s Supper. (Later, during revision, I will break the line after “eat,” continuing with “of the fruit” in the next line, thus giving special emphasis to “take and eat.”)

Where did that phrase “take and eat” come from? My mind, of course. Perhaps my subconscious mind. If I had written “pick and eat,” the poem we are looking at would probably not have been written. But somehow, “take and eat” ended up on the page. As Stafford says, “One thing will lead to another.”

Although I won’t get the words all right in my first draft, I rather quickly move through a description of the speaker picking and eating raspberries, influenced by the “take and eat” phrase. Eventually, four different metaphors for the raspberry emerge, all of them in some way suggesting Holy Communion. First, the berry is “flesh,” that is, the body of Christ that the character in the poem takes and eats. Then, the berry, made up of many smaller berries all “wedded into one,” suggests the Church – the body of Christ – made up of many members. Third, the berry is a tongue that sings songs of praise, and fourth, it is a cup with which one can drink the wine. Sometimes I struggle to make the metaphor; sometimes it falls on the page as a gift.

Later, when I look at these four metaphors, I become analytical. I say to myself, “Wait a minute. They appear to be mixed metaphors. How can the berry be the flesh of Christ, the cup for the wine, the church, and a tongue?”

But I believe that even though the metaphors have this inconsistency, they are not mixed metaphors. Each appears so quickly that taken all together they create a convincing picture of the communion meal. So instead of developing a single metaphysical conceit in the style of John Donne or Psalm 23, I use these metaphors to present quick, sharp pictures that contribute to the over-arching communion image.

The last stanza shows that the speaker, who had been bent, is now erect, hands still stained but at peace.

Other things happen in the poem, some flowing from my mind almost unconsciously as I write the original draft, others resulting from careful, intentional choices that have to do with diction, line breaks, imagery, and other poetic conventions. For example, with little forethought, the words “lush,” “gush,” “crush,” and

“flesh” are all used — as if each one suggested the next — within a string of eleven words, creating a sense of fizzing urgency begun with the repetition of “plucking and plucking.”

I could go on, but I will stop here and simply say that as a poet, I am pleased with the final form of the poem and dare to offer it to God, believing it will be acceptable in his sight.