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Preface

The Heart of Longing

In an Advent sermon called “Holy Longing,” Cindy Lee, a leader in my church, encouraged the congregation to pay attention to the Bible’s emphasis on barren women. In her old age, Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist, Christ’s forerunner and about whom he said, “among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater.”¹ Many often look at her life and say, “What an honor!” but really, what a long time to live in shame and disappointment. In the eighth season of Advent since my husband, Duwayne’s, Stage IV Colon Cancer diagnosis, it suddenly dawned on me that we may not have endured long enough, that we still have a long way to go before we see God help us the way we’ve wanted. (I write this with gratitude.)

As was the case for Elizabeth, Sarah, Hannah and others, the distress of unanswered prayer is daily renewed for us. We keep returning to the Lord with our request because God is the only one who can give us what we most want and need. Advancements in medicine I believe are mercy and blessing from God. Yet, the added suffering of good healthcare in an already painful life often truncates any fulfillment we try to gain from it. It is frustrating—to no end, and on both ends of the spectrum. Powerlessness over the human body still plagues our deepest, age-old desires for bearing children and being free of diseases like cancer. There is an apparent gap between what we try to do ourselves and the results we seek. Fertility drugs, IUIs and IVFs are still far from conception, which is far from birth, which is only the beginning of a life filled with many more chasms. These gaps are God’s domain alone. It’s how I’ve come to see things.

So, we return day after day, season after season with the hope of bypassing good efforts in eating well, doing chemo, trusting surgeons, and growing our family (against medical advice) to finally getting into the gap of healing Christ demonstrated and promised. This is our holy

¹ Matthew 11:11 (NIV).

longing. Barrenness to childbirth, cancer to health requires God to respond to the longing of our hearts for what only God can give (through medicine or an otherly power).

This pursuit has brought me to the bottom of all my reservoirs. Over the years, I have had many questions, complaints and a lot of heartache to process. Writing this long poem has not only been a big help, but oftentimes, is the only way I've been able to express the deepest, darkest places I find myself—in the gaps.

The Writing

My first identity as a writer was as a creative nonfiction writer. Influences for my essays came from medieval mystical writers like Julian of Norwich and contemporary contemplative writers like Henri Nouwen. Although my genre of preference has changed to poetry, certain influences have not changed; and I still reflect deeply upon God, life and death, and my close relationships. I've just found that poetry is much better suited to the way I process memory, pain and other life experiences.

After taking my first poetry course with Dr. Johnny Payne, Director of the MFA Creative Writing program, a world of possibility opened up for how I could voice thoughts and feelings that would otherwise remain muted. Freedom of expression has been my biggest ally these past two years, even while taking a deep dive into the history of poetic tradition from *The Odyssey* to *The California Poem*.

My goals in writing *Longing* have been

- i. For survival

So far, I have found that when writing poetry, there is no room for hiding. Whatever I care about will come out, somehow, no matter the image or argument I originally set out to work with. I have used this poem, all its assignments, suggestions, experiments as a means of releasing the pressure I am under on a daily basis. As a wife of a man who has been fighting for his life for nine years, and a mother of one, and one on the way, this poem has been a way around my silences.

- ii. To start a conversation (even if only with myself)

As a person who has practiced the Christian faith since childhood, I have observed that many people with a similar background don't think it proper to ask (to ask God) particular

questions, to express doubt, to complain—to be honest about what we can't reconcile with who we profess God and humanity to be. I gave myself permission to be an unfaithful faithful, not to be controversial, but because it was where I found myself on a daily basis anyway.

The poem is not an attempt to provide answers. I would rather it be viewed as some kind of ongoing prayer, or lament, over my life.

iii. To memorialize

As expected, *Longing* is deeply personal. It began and will end as only a parenthetical in this whole ordeal. Yet, many parts of it connect memories and hopes that may not seem to have anything to with each other. The kind of planning that went into weaving these ideas together had more to do with the continuity of the poem than trying to make ordered, logical sense of life, God and other themes throughout. I'm not sure that would be possible, anyway.

Obstacles and Solutions

i. Lament and knowing when to stop

A wise person advised (ordered, really), “No more lamentation.” And although everything in me wanted to, and still wants to lament, the advice proved beneficial. As a poem with several connected segments that go on for pages and pages (about two-thirds of the poem), it became difficult to separate from a mode of expression that fed on daily detritus.

The second and third movements of the poem would not have been possible if I didn’t allow room for a shift in thought. This shift not only allowed the poem to have more breathing room, but at times had a similar effect on my actual life.

ii. Form and content

When I first began writing poetry in this program, I was concerned that I didn’t know much about poetic form, and so would not be able to generate any kind of respectable content. In other words, master form, master content and I would not be able to do that in such a short timeframe. After a few attempts, though, I found that the process of writing poetry doesn’t have to lend itself to a set method to be successful.

Longing utilizes found texts from other poets and authors, from medical terminology, music and even interpretation of dance. Much of the content produced followed the repurposing of various forms of expression. Although this is not what is traditionally meant as poetic form, the principle still applies. If I respect the strictures that come with a certain kind of church tradition in prayer, for example, then those limits tease out even more creative content than I originally thought possible.

iii. Memory and imagination

There were times while writing when I grappled with authenticity, not because I felt I was lying or being deceptive, but because I conflated certain memories with current feelings and experiences. I allowed myself to write in this way at times because this is exactly how my thoughts felt when trying to parse life's issues. I asked myself whether there's anything off the table. Are the general expectations for poetry the same as for memoir? There are many levels at which a poem may be understood. If the way I've written something doesn't allow readers to even come close to what I meant, have I misled?

The short answer I've come up with is, "no." For me (so far, anyway), if it's true at the level at which I meant it and wrote it, then it passes muster.

iv. Experimentation

There was one occasion where an experiment failed. I attempted an erasure poem using dialogue from some interviews I did of my husband for a documentary course. The poem fell flat, and did not live up to my expectations. This is not to say that the use of dialogue is off the table, or that I could not have used portions of the dialogue in later segments. My main lesson here is that if I feel that some portion of my work is unclear or subpar, then there is high likelihood that others will, too.

Another form of experimentation in *Longing* is the use of hyperlinks. On paper, the poem does not lose anything without the hyperlinks. I have found that reading it online and going to the sites broadens the experience of the poem beyond the topic at hand and even beyond the experience of the speaker.

Influential Authors, Readings and Art Forms

Some of these authors, readings and art forms take a more prominent role than others in *Longing*, but the following list is not prioritized in this way. Since *Longing* has been in the works for so long, (taking first the form of creative nonfiction) some authors and readings have become such an important part of my general writing process and life that I cannot say where they begin and end in their influence.

Julian of Norwich

Longing opens with a quote from Julian of Norwich, setting the larger question and tension throughout the poem. Not much is known about Julian, except her writings and the person we come to know through her writings. Generally accepted by scholars, give or take one or two years, is that she was born in Norwich, England around 1342 and died around 1420. According to her great work, *Revelations of Divine Love*, at age thirty and a half she fell gravely ill. This illness she attributed to her childhood prayer for three specific graces from God: to be with Christ on the Cross, that is, to have a “mind of the Passion”; to experience sickness unto death; and three wounds: to know contrition, compassion and longing for God.² It is during this illness that she receives her sixteen visions from God and is subsequently miraculously healed.³ Julian was in this way compelled to put her encounters in writing which accounts for over twenty years of contemplation and seeking God for understanding.

This is an excerpt from *Revelations of Divine Love*:

Then came suddenly to my mind that I should desire the second wound of our Lord's gracious gift: that my body might be fulfilled with mind and feeling of His blessed Passion. For I would that His pains were my pains, with compassion and afterward longing to

² Gosselin, *Learning from the Christian Mystics*, <http://www.vimeo.com/79503274>.

³ Katharina M. Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers* (1984), 270.

God. But in this I desired never bodily sight nor shewing of God, but compassion such as a kind soul might have with our Lord Jesus, that for love would be a mortal man: and therefore I desired to suffer with Him. —Chapter III, “I Desired to Suffer with Him”⁴

With regard to mystical space, her writings have much substance to be explored. Medieval Christian concepts of space did not separate “body-space” from “soul-space;” in that there is both a “literal and metaphorical” understanding of space.⁵ This understanding translates into God’s presence within and outside of our physical bodies and our souls, as well as His care for their wellbeing.⁶ This overlap between body and soul is apparent in the way she lived as a anchoress—confined to a small space from which she would never leave. All her physical interactions and experiences were tightly connected to the spiritual nature of her commitment and prayers.

I have found the exploration of the body, soul and space, even space on the page, an important backdrop to my thought process, as I have asked many times, “*How* is God present?” In fact, I begin *Longing* with “do you see?”—both a real question and expectation of personal care.

Henri J. M. Nouwen

Nouwen was a priest, professor and author of over 40 books on Christian spirituality. “Nouwen believed that what is most personal is most universal; he wrote, ‘By giving words to these intimate experiences I can make my life available to others.’”⁷

⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI), http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1343-1398,_Julian._of_Norwich,_Revelations_Of_Divine_Love,_EN.pdf.

⁵ Davis, *Mysticism & Space : Space and Spatiality in the Works of Richard Rolle, the Cloud of Unknowing Author, and Julian of Norwich*. 228-29.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Henry Nouwen Society, "About Henri," <http://henrinouwen.org/about-henri/>.

He also offered his own definition of spirituality. He wrote, “Spirituality is attention to the life of the Spirit in us; it is going out to the desert or up to the mountain to pray; it is standing before the Lord with open heart and open mind...”⁸

In *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ*, remembrance is an important theme in this short, but potent book. We ought to ask God questions about His participation in our lives, and this is in large part what I have set out to do in this long poem.

Ann Weems

Ann Weems’ son died at the age of twenty-one. Her preface begins, “This book is not for everyone. It is for those who weep and for those who weep with those who weep.”⁹ Arguably, not much else needs to be known about her, except that she has used lament psalms to mourn her son and has invited her readers to weep.

Of particular importance to this project is Weems’ caustic and deeply sorrowful emotions directed at God. She questions, she petitions, she remembers, she worships. Her faith is one which squarely lays at God’s feet everything that concerns her—good and bad.

The California Poem by Eleni Sikelianos

More than any other poem, *The California Poem* showed me a way forward. A path had already been cleared, and all I needed to do was follow with my own keen eyes.

⁸ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Living Reminder : Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 12.

⁹ Ann Weems, *Psalms of Lament*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 12.

“Psalm” by Paul Celan

Translated by John Felstiner¹⁰

No one kneads us again out of earth and clay,
no one incants our dust.
No one.

Blessèd art thou, No One.
In thy sight would
we bloom.
In thy
spite.

A Nothing
we were, are now, and ever
shall be, blooming:
the Nothing-, the
No-One's-Rose.

With
our pistil soul-bright,
our stamen heaven-waste,
our corona red
from the purpleword we sang
over, O over
the thorn.

This poem resonates at a level I think much lower than any point in my own poem. It is terrifying, yet I have a lot of sympathy in my heart for the speaker of the poem. I tried reading more of his work, but found his poetry too densely weighted with sorrow and cynicism to be a good teacher at this point in my journey. The raw honesty has stayed with me, though, and I don't think the apparent betrayal by God, and the pervasive hopelessness will ever leave me.

¹⁰ “Psalm” by Paul Celan. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57173/psalm-56d23a67be159>

“Dreams” by Langston Hughes

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

My favorite poem, “Dreams,” teaches the power of using simple, accessible, particular language to convey and hold universal truth. The poem transcends the author and its time.

*“Revelations by Alvin Ailey: Fix Me Jesus.”*¹¹

Movement in space. Movement to music. Movement as worship and inquiry. Movement on the page. What is there to learn from our own bodies and their representations in dance? How can we translate the body’s expressions—in dance, sickness, health, death, etc.—into words?

*Fisk Jubilee Quartet. “There Is a Balm in Gilead (Negro Spiritual).” Camden, NJ, 1909.*¹²

Music transports you through time and space to worlds unknown, whether those worlds are past, present or future. The realm of God that is mysterious to us is also mysteriously accessible through music—through worship.

¹¹ “Revelations by Alvin Ailey: Fix Me Jesus. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CXk1mQVCgI>

¹² *Fisk Jubilee Quartet. “There Is a Balm in Gilead.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xa8r2SM035w>

My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer by Christian Wiman

Wiman, in the preface clearly states, “I am a poet.” His meditations have been enriched by his skill in this particular craft, and give the reader an opportunity to mull over his words very carefully. It is personal experience, yet, one is not left out of his theological musings. Before beginning this writing project afresh as a long poem, I had reservations about this work’s usefulness because Wiman’s theological searching seemed to be within such an uncertain framework. But this is exactly where I found myself much of the time.