



Marginal Notes

Original music for worthy causes

Susie listened patiently to my religious discourse. You, however, may prefer to skip over it. If so, here's a summary in the form of a dialogue.

A short dialogue on “Why bother?”

—Most of the *Marginal Notes Project* is devoted to the reinterpretation of five religious myths through narrative music. These are the myths of transience (Noah), wisdom (Daniel), compassion (Samaritan), duty (Agamemnon), and “in-groups” or “inclusion” (Tories v. Patriots in de Crèvecoeur's *Landscapes.*).

—[But if you consider them myths why bother to save them?](#)

—I don't consider religious myths to be lies. A myth is a story that may never have happened, but is nonetheless reliable for religious and ethical reasons. You may recall the passage by Willa Cather in *O Pioneers!* where

she is listening to the birds singing on the prairie. She reflects that they have been singing these songs for ages. Myths are just such ancient and archetypal stories. Sallust said that a myth was a story that never happened but always *is*. I have a lot more to say about this in the musical, *The Books of Daniel*—probably too much.

—Why not cut through the myths and simply speak? If religion is mistaken, should we not simply move on?

—I think of this as the iconoclast's fallacy. It's Cromwell bashing out church windows, the imams screaming about nudes, atheists reforming the dictionary, and the Taliban exploding statues of Buddha. Like wild macrophages, the iconoclasts destroy everything. They never pause for reflection. Yet some aspects of religion deserve attention: its ability to recruit aspiration and commitment, its potential for nourishing arts, its central human concerns, *viz.* compassion, transience, inclusion of strangers, duty to and relationships with others, and the wisdom, or skillful practices, of the divine life. Elwyn Tilden, my religion professor, put it this way:

“The turn from collecting of facts to interpreting the whole of life, this evaluating and self dedicating operation is faith rather than science at work. Men align themselves with the truth they accept. This act of self direction or self dedication is more clearly included in the meaning of “faith” than of philosophy. (In his 1956 book on Jesus)

Religion speaks to the prefrontal region of our brains' hidden lands “summoning us to action that ties and reties us to the given” and beckoning us to life-fostering relationships with others (*Finding a Purchase*). As Professor Michael Gazzaniga, a cognitive scientist, has said, if we started with a clean slate, we would reinvent religion in half an hour. We want the interpretive narrative that religion provides. The Interpreter, or personal story-teller, is apparently built into our brains. He is the great synthesizer of meanings—so much so that he leaps to conclusions and continually must be forced to check the facts. In *Twelve Ensembles*, the Interpreter is even one of the characters on stage. Religion deserves our attention because it is part of us. Of course, myths can guide or mislead us, so we must always check and reinterpret them before accepting them uncritically.

At their best, myths are like bridges. Over them, our native curiosity can cross to wisdom, and our native empathy can cross to compassion.



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Our sons, Bill and Rob, helped me to continue learning even when I was depressed after Susie's death. Rob invested in the stage of the project when I needed help with new equipment and a last push. Bill gave invaluable help by setting up the website. I hope to make good on my sons' investment by making the website useful to others.

Dr. Edward Brown provided gentle criticism of early drafts in the late 1960's. Some of those who helped with workshop productions over the years were: Larry Clarke, director of *The Good Samaritan*, and the Samuels family at Kleber Kaserne; David Barker, who introduced me to compositional software and directed *The Books of Daniel*; Barbara Stinson, teacher and director of the *Missa Brevis*, and Isabel Jones, teacher and accompanist; Martin Berkofsky, virtuoso, teacher and mentor; Barbara Wilkinson, friend and advocate, superb musician, director, teacher and accompanist for *Amber* and *The People's Voice*; Chris and Brooke Hatfield of Fairlington Presbyterian Church, and the cast members of all the workshop productions of *Marginal Notes*.

Thanks to all.

—Dick Rose

Marginal Notes

An extended meditation on myths

“Let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and truth.” –I John 3.18

The project, text and music, that has occupied my imagination since 1967 is a portrayal of central myths in the form of narrative music. To me, this is a work of faith and truth. It is an imaginative reflection on the daily life that I shared with Susie for 42 years—a rendering as faithful as imagination permits, as truthful as storytelling allows. The work comprises poems and musical compositions written over the years 1968-2005, while I was mainly employed as a science teacher and administrator. It is only recently that I have recognized this to be something more than imaginative exercises.

Different kinds of margins.

I called the project *Marginal Notes* because it has for me the tentative quality of comments written in the margins of a book, because the effort was in some ways marginal both economically and conceptually, and because I wish to convey the marginality of human existence, like that of Linda Pastan’s frogs in “On the Marginality of Poets:”

At the margin of the pond,
in the live mud, there are frogs
whose whole bodies pulse,
the way the vein above
my father’s eye pulsed
in thought. There are herons here,
the blue shape of flight, and small fish
whose blind seeking once
delivered all of us to land.

And on the margins of the page
it is all snow, no footfall yet.
Here is a perfect white frame
for anything, a place
where the sudden afterthought
is scrawled, or that brief star
the asterisk. I want to live
in the margins:
those spaces neither here

nor there, like the crack
between my parents' pushed-together beds
where I used to lie; or the verge
of land between the meadow
and the woods, smooth
as the curve where a woman's
thigh and body join—
a path to the cave where life begins;
a place to watch from.

The project was also marginal conceptually because I tried to learn what was needed for the project while Susie and I worked in schools and raised our family. At varied levels of awareness, I tried to assemble understandings in a way that I could comprehend and that could be memorably enacted. Initially, it involved viewing people through their speech, and then heightening speech by setting it to music. Progress was slow. For example, the libretto for *Twelve Ensembles* is based on *The Profit of Doom*, begun 37 years earlier.

A reliable explorer reports truthfully on what he finds. This explorative work, therefore, does not meet any denominational specifications. It is more about the nature of faith itself than it is about any creed. For me, faith is not about acceptance of a creed or belief in certain ideas about God. It is a dutiful attention to the “deeds and truth” that make up the daily practice of the religious community. As I continually returned to the stories I had learned in church, I found them no less moving or

memorable because they were human productions than they were when I had been told to think of them as divine inspirations. My try-out of the idea of a divine being for many years was a long exploration and disputation that ultimately led me away from orthodox teachings, but not from worship.

Faithfulness was supposed to be interpreted by speculative doctrines that were often false to my experience, but I could continue to worship by keeping my own interpretations of texts, hymns, and worship practices. This allowed me to honor the experience of faith without denying obvious findings about human beings and the natural world. What drew me to faith were courageous and faithful people –my parents, others in the church, and historical exemplars. These living embodiments of faith were more important to me than the spiritual messages of texts. In fact, they *were* the spiritual messages. I realized this when I met Susie.



“Spirit,” or “soul,” by the way, refers to a complete human being, not to a special extraction, principle, or wispy remnant. As Winton Marsalis puts it, “soul is the ability to make others glad to be alive, regardless of their condition.” It is the skillful, happy, whole-hearted completeness of life described by Aristotle as the “full exercise of our powers along the lines of excellence.” The *Marginal Notes* project attempted to embody faith in narrative music. In fact, I considered the project to be a prayer.

What kind of prayer can this be?

Prayer is sustained attention and creative engagement, individual or collaborative, that leads to a cognitive procession from fate to will, ignorance to understanding, grasping to acceptance, waste to salvage, fear to hope, opportunism to compassion, exclusion to inclusion, and partial work to soul work.

(See *Twelve Ensembles* and section 200 in both *Swallowing the River* and *Finding a Purchase* for different treatments of this definition.)

The *Marginal Notes* project is a prayer because it is a sustained effort in empathy, imagination, and willingness to shift frames of reference. It is a prayer because of its movement away from a profane way of life toward a divine way of life. Take tree rats, for example.

Some people call them squirrels, but they have much in common with their scaly-tailed rodent relatives. In many communities, they are considered as equally pesky and expendable.

I have to agree that squirrels are like tree rats, but this doesn't make them expendable. **No life is expendable.**

Whether we take the life of a rat or a chicken, there is a cost to us. The burden of such costs is felt, considered, and compensated when we live in the divine life—and ignored when we live in the profane life. Of course, we live both kinds of life. The profane life, the life of Esau, is a sensible life—a life of making the most of every situation. It is often a straightforward, brave, and honest life with no concessions given or expected. The divine life, the life of Jacob, however, can often be a wimpy, equivocating, cunning kind of life—just the sort of life you'd expect from a weakling. But in the

weakness and equivocation there is a wish, as W.H. Auden put it, in
“Prime:”

I draw breath
Which is to to wish,
No matter what,
To be wise,
To be different,
To die.
And the cost,
No matter how,
Is Paradise,
Lost, of course,
And myself owing a death.

It’s a marginal kind of wish that leads to risky undertakings and underhanded endeavors like storytelling, singing, myth-making, and taking risks for others. In fact, the trickster may end by deluding himself. So we are drawn sometimes to the proud, profane life and other times to the elusive, divine life, our marginal existence, like that of the squirrel hanging over a highway, in the “middle state,” as Pope called it in his “Essay on Man”, of a being “darkly wise and rudely great:”

With too much knowledge for the skeptic side,
With too much weakness for the stoic’s pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,
In doubt to deem himself a god or beast;
In doubt his mind or body to prefer;
Born but to die, and reasoning but to err. . .

Unless we ultimately gain the wisdom to guide our aspirations, we lose our grip.

The *Marginal Notes* project was also economically marginal because it was not professional but avocational. I worked on it whenever I could, but it came out unevenly and in different forms –verse, a cantata, a mass, more

verse, songs, operas, a ballet. None of these were made on commission, written to the specifications of a grants committee, designed to complete a graduate program, or intended to please church leaders. A few works were informally requested by individuals such as Viola Latham, Brooke Hatfield, Allison Trimble, and Barbara Stinson. The project was simply part of our family life, a kind of folk-art. Our sons heard me pounding away on the music while they were growing up. Susan always encouraged me, even when the work didn't seem to be going anywhere.

From the beginning, this has been a religious rather than commercial practice. Of course, I would like the work to be read and performed, and have tried to arrange this, beginning with *The Good Samaritan* in 1969. The prologue (since deleted) to this work stated that what I was about was not exactly entertainment¹. It had a social and religious purpose. Although I considered it suitable for churches, the productions in churches were infrequent.

In the 1990's I set up the Marginal Notes Production Company as an independent way to develop and present the works. It was to be a charitable venture, beginning with a benefit for Amnesty International. The company also donated proceeds to charities like Computer Core and ALIVE, in Alexandria: PDK Scholarship Fund in Loudoun, Fairlington Presbyterian Church, and the Armed Forces Home, in Washington, D.C.. I paid out-of-pocket for performers and accompanists. This was to be a work of prayer and faith, not a commercial venture.

These one-time performances, however, tended to be workshops rather than memorable events. Most of the productions from 1969 to 2001 went largely unnoticed, unattended and unread. If I was trying to be economically marginal, I was succeeding.

Narrative music

From the beginning, the work has been about both prayer and human voices. I simply called it narrative music. This approach seemed natural to me. The voice raised in prayer can also be raised in anger. The voice that gives thanks can also take away all hope. Narrative music is intended to interpret myths, but how do you find your voice in the divine life? I've always believed that prayer addressed someone but have struggled to say who it was. It is not a celestial being, yet it was a real person visible in the eyes of the faithful, the acts of the humble, and moments of personal grief and personal exaltation and wonder. Because one needs a place holder or referent to address, one says "God," but the community of faith is more important than the object of devotion. The divine voice in music, as in daily life, comes from human beings. In *The Books of Daniel*, Daniel Saperstein hears it in the voice of Miriam Braun, when she sings:

The myth becomes the faith we need
And as we follow it, we lead.
As music moves us, and poetry,
Myth moves us to be what we might be.
Perhaps we've lost this in our art:
We watch, but are not moved.
Never moving to respond,
Our souls are never fed.

As we take responsibility for the divine life, we become leaders—not because of our position, but because we allow ourselves to be moved.

The community of faith is more important than the object of devotion.

The object of devotion is a place-holder, like “it” in the phrase, “it is cold.” One may wonder what “it” is. Is it “weather,” “temperature,” or the result of measuring temperature? The brevity of the place-holder is desirable when the context makes the meaning clear, but for “God” this is not the case. In the phrase “God loves you,” one might mean “Join our community of faith and you will be loved for who you are, regardless of what you have done.” This translation of the phrase is not speculative or mystical. It is about “deeds and truth,” not “words and speech.”

This kind of translation does not satisfy all believers, however. Despite the fact that the idea of God as something other than a place-holder is speculative, religions provide lists of the properties of God, and explanations, such as the concepts of atonement or reincarnation, for divine behavior—even while saying that God is too holy even to be named or comprehended. But I am less interested in speculating about God than I am in understanding human beings.

Good human behavior and right livelihood (as described by Gotama and John Woolman, for example) can certainly be comprehended. Furthermore, faithfulness to our best ideas about human behavior, and to the support of other humans, is nurtured particularly well in the historical communities of faith. Susie would sometimes say that she wanted our sons to go to church because they could sometimes see people there at their best. Church is made of living and historical examples of faith.

The term “faith,” as I use it, has two meanings. First, it refers to one’s faithfulness to duties and relationships. Second, it refers to the realization of hopes and purposes, as in the phrase, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (*Hebrews 11.1*) That is, when we see the good actions of others in the community, we are seeing the realizations of our aspirations, as in the phrase, “And I by my works will show you my faith.” (*James 2.18*). I do not use “faith” to mean “belief without evidence.”

Messages about God are based on experiences in communities of faith. Through these experiences, the messages change. Unfortunately, some perverse usages, rituals, customs, formulas and texts also become “sanctified,” and therefore resistant to change. A parallel sanctification takes place in politics and business, where, for example, leaders want groups “on message” and “speaking the same language” –even against good judgment. Faith in God is faithfulness to the community that has gone before and to its sanctified expressions of faith, but genuine faithfulness is less concerned with border patrol than with gate repairs.

What the community tries to remember is often best embodied in rituals such as bar mitzvah, baptism, kiva rites, Eucharist, sand paintings, ordeals, weddings, dramas, tea ceremonies, and “entering the stream” (in Buddhism). These rituals are not only in the language of words, but in the cultural language of faith. Such prayers-in-action remind believers that the divine life is one of whole-hearted action with the community in mind, not simply a profane calculation of the main-chance-of-the-moment. We pray together when we move together away from fear to hope, from ignorance to wisdom, from opportunism to compassion, and so on. Prayer is not, simply or even primarily, utterances. It is always a procession of some kind, a movement to more skillful options. It is a movement from partial efforts to

complete, skillful, soul-full efforts. This is the meaning of “loving God with all our heart, and mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves.”

These processions, at their best, can lead us to take action by building shelters for the homeless or hospitals for the sick. At their worst, they can lead us to go on crusades. Self-delusion is always a risk of the divine life. But unlike the minimal spiritual demands of the profane life, the divine life challenges us with works to be resolved through whole-hearted, skillful actions.

In the divine life, we learn conduct that is righteous, moderate, and kindly. We avoid harming other life as much as possible. We restrain our appetites. To live the divine life is to take up a skillful practice of life. The challenges and resolutions are in this life—present tense. While we live, we are always asking, “What is this practice? What do we need to learn?” Death may stop us, but it does not resolve anything.

The curious creed of a Christian agnostic:

For me, the community of faith points to the object of devotion and says,

“Here is the practice of faith: Become part of the community. To be linked to us, currently and historically, is to live compassionately, humbly and productively. It is to be truly civilized, and to avoid separation from the life-stream of faith by reprisal, exaggeration, violence or addiction.

Reprisal and other sins of rights are self-destructive. Exaggeration and other sins of pride are self-delusive. Cruelty and other sins of violence destroy community. Addiction and other sins of escape betray our imaginations, making us smaller and more limited.

Sins are results of poor decisions. They are separations from the understandings and skillful practice of the community.

In the lives of the skillful founders who embodied those understandings, we identify the duties to be faithful to our community. While it is true that complete resolution is beyond us in both understanding and in time, and that the past is lost, and the future to be worked out, we nonetheless accept a common mission to practice our faith.

We enter the stream of faith when we accept it in baptism or other initiations to faithful adulthood. We all live and move and have our being in this stream and, in time, and with help, we learn to embody our faith. The stream of any faith is part of the larger stream of other faiths and of life itself, which is a region of localized energy gain, organization, meaning, complexity and structure in an otherwise entropic universe where energy is dissipated and disintegration rules.

We are, in fact, processes within the larger process of life. Our faiths help us to find proper practices of human life. Our faiths are in broad agreement about those life-practices, although their ritual-practices, explanations, and rationales may differ.”²

For me, this is a useful summary of my understanding of a community of faith, but it is not really a creed to be repeated.

* * *

For all my comments about “community,” I would have to say that my experiences with actual communities of faith have been mixed and often disappointing. They are typically only partially engaged in their practice.

Their members come and go. They have a way of neutralizing the radical teachings of their founders. Their care for the organization and maintenance of its place in society may displace their practice of faith. Doctrines and church business monopolize time.

What is recognized as serious commitment seems always to entail doctrinaire positions that often shun logic, art, and imagination. Sanctified speech and ideas are accepted even when they are speculative, exaggerated and pseudoscientific. The tentative nature of truth and speculative nature of theological opinions are denied. Despite these shortcomings, however, one can always find exemplars in communities of faith. As Marianne Moore said about poetry,

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine.

Genuine religion is made of people who build community by quietly embodying their faith. The Priest and Levite are easy targets for my work, in *The Good Samaritan*. It is more difficult to portray faithful people, such as Margie, in *Twelve Ensembles*. It is often easier to say what faith is not—as when I contrast Daniel with Vinny in *The Books of Daniel*. Indeed, in this musical, the contrast between faithful and worldly practices takes the form of a continuing disputation or *flyting*, between these and other characters, like Miriam Brown.

Churches and other religious communities are often confused about how to recognize genuine religion. They become exercised about creeds, confessions, and proclamations. Self-definition in creeds and mission statements are considered the **basis** for compassionate behavior, as if human

beings had not in three million years learned the value of compassion without having to compose a mission statement.

The strengths of humility, compassion, moderation and self-restraint are treasured and taught in many religions. It is because they are treasured that creeds and practices are written down. Vested interests in creeds or components of creeds, like the “iota,” obscure the fact that **texts come *after* a long time of practice; they do not provide “the reason” for the practice**, just as grammars are written *after* language has been spoken for generations. Being insiders, however, is sadly often more important than following even the most fundamental “deeds and truths” of faith. This is the message of the stories of *The Good Samaritan*, the faithful centurion, the parables that Nathan told King David, and that Jesus told about two men praying in the temple.

While there can be great comfort in “saying what we believe,” one should approach creeds and other texts prayerfully, cautiously, and tentatively. We really know nothing about “God” and must rely on opinions, speculations and occasional ecstatic experiences. This is not to say that we lack a sense of the holy, but we often do not know what to make of it. Texts tell us what to make of it. They provide elaborate, standardized rationales, but they remain speculative. Indeed, to say that there are “mysteries” of faith is to concede the speculative nature of religious rationales, since, by definition, we are ignorant of mysteries.

Surprisingly, however, the mysteries of faith are offered as *reasons* to accept the rationales. They are described as “too deep” to understand – except, of course, by a few special people.

Understandings may be difficult, but they are not “deep.” One who has learned to repair a watch does not think of this as a *deep* understanding.

One simply understands *more*. The apparently innocent exaggeration of the words “deep” and “mysterious” has led to religious flim-flam from the claims of the Babylonian exorcists, to the funerary practices of Egyptian priests, to the indulgences of pardoners, and to the promises of modern televangelists. Those who claim to have a deep understanding of the mysteries of faith have repeatedly led communities away from simple “deeds and truth,” but they are still readily followed. As with romantic or political infatuation, the emotional rewards and personal relationships derived from delusions may outweigh the findings of a more critical assessment.

I believe that religious communities are about skillful life practices, not mysterious formulations. A church is about relationships between people, not the attempt to find hidden meanings in ancient documents. First look for the plain messages of these documents. Particularly in the *New Testament*, the obvious message of Jesus, and writers like Paul and James, is that the divine life is concerned with people’s deeds—their attempt to make heaven on earth, as Rev. Jan Edmiston likes to say.

Communities of faith can provide strong support for compassionate behavior when they are led to practice or embody their faith. They can help us to recover and remember the portions of our individual and corporate histories that might otherwise be lost. Unfortunately, such communities can also nurture the notion that the life of faith is a matter of accepting and promoting certain reasons for compassionate behavior, such as the inerrancy of the Bible or the Koran, the subjugation of certain groups, the creation of the world in a week, the necessity of atonement, the acceptance of a belief in spirits, or in the illusory nature of the non-spiritual—and therefore, in the desirability of annihilation.

In conclusion, the teaching and music of the community can either support a skillful, divine life, or a life of being on the inside of a mysterious scheme to trick death and win heaven by knowing the deep meanings of certain texts or Kabalistic formulas. The *Marginal Notes* project is a modest attempt to do the former. It interprets five familiar stories about the divine life in regard to central human concerns about:

- human transience,
- human wisdom,
- conflicting responsibilities,
- deciding on them and us, and
- deciding what genuine religion is.

Contents of the Music in the *Marginal Notes* Project:

- ***The Good Samaritan***. This is a small cantata written and first performed in Kaiserslautern at Kleber Kaserne in 1969 and later at Warrenton Presbyterian Church and (solo) at Fairlington Presbyterian Church, usually performed with:
- ***Johanin***, another cantata from 1969, based on the story of the birth of John the Baptist. It is now part of a larger program, entitled *Annunciations*.
- ***Twelve Ensembles***. Libretti and other poems are taken from *The Profit of Doom*, a book-length narrative poem on the meaning of the Flood myth, begun in 1967 and modified many times. (Earlier versions were *Layerings* and *Poems and Passages*. It was privately printed in Warrenton in 1990 with the help of Alan Poe at the *Fauquier Democrat*.) It is the basis for the musical work, *Twelve Ensembles*, begun in 2004.

- ***The Books of Daniel***—a musical presented, after several false starts, in Ashburn, Virginia on November 17, 1997. As might be expected in a re-telling of the story of Daniel, it is about faith, but it is also about wise decision-making in education, management and investment.
- **Amber**—a version of the myth of Electra, set at Thanksgiving time in a military household several decades after World War II. Every character sees his duty clearly. The problem is that their duties conflict—with fatal outcomes.
- **The People’s Voice**—a version of de Crèvecoeur’s story, *Landscapes*, a semiautobiographical story about the plight of Tories during the American Revolution.
- **Other works**, such as the *Missa brevis*—a mass originally written for the Warrenton Chorale in 1982, and presented in 1983, the *Ballad of the Blind Beggar*, *The Sower*, *The Selfish Giant*, and other works.

¹

Prologue

The poet’s song an ornamental glitter, say—
A shiny, a laboriously polished bauble?

² This is well described in Robert Frost’s poem, “*West Running Brook*,” which I have often read to science students as an example of science in verse. Also, see *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence.