

Three rooms: God's Story and my story

Jean Janzen

My husband and I live in an old, rambling Tudor house. We moved in with three children in 1970, then were blessed with another child. Together we filled most of the capacious rooms for the first ten years. Gradually our children left home, so that now we have over our heads on the second floor a metaphor of the promised house with many dwelling places.

When I was five years old, my family of nine made a major move. My father chose to answer a call to be the first paid pastor in the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren church in Mountain Lake, Minnesota. We would leave Saskatchewan, my mother's home for virtually all her life, her family, and my father's vocation as a schoolteacher. We rented a lovely Victorian home that first year.

I offer three rooms which exemplify for me how the intersection of the Story and my story has grown during my lifetime.

The church gave us a cow and some garden seeds. It was a dramatic and memorable year.

My sisters and I shared a bedroom above the living room. In the floor was a vent which we could open to allow warmth to rise from the coal-burning stove. This vent was also a source of adult conversation. We would press our ears against the metal grate and hear the

laughter; the stories not meant for children; and the lowered voices that carried concern about the wayward, about the war in Europe (this was 1939), about the world that would one day be ours. And we heard prayers, hymns, and the reading of scripture rise from that room, the assurance that we were held in faith.

I offer three rooms which exemplify for me how this intersection of the Story and my story has grown during my lifetime.

The first is the room of childhood with its walls of language and discovery and play. As I recall those first years in my memory, and particularly my perception of scripture, I begin with part one of my poem "Postcards to My Sister."¹

The room upstairs

*Touring the cathedral today
I thought of how often
I lay beside you trying in vain
to fall asleep, chanting
scriptures in alphabetical order:
All we like sheep have gone astray,
how I stayed awake through Z,
my nerves zinging with Seek ye the Lord
while he may be found—the terror
of losing him, that he might hide
from a searching child, and if I found him,
that I would die in the glory.
Child of the Dark Ages,
chipping away at my block of stone.*

Here I am, the sensitive child, taking the scriptures seriously, making them mine. As I review these verses in my memory, I hear the basic tenets of Christianity: “All we like sheep,” our sinfulness; “Be ye kind one to another,” our ethics; “Come unto me all ye that labor, and I will give you rest,” a promise and a mystery; “Do unto others,” the Golden Rule; “Enter into his gates with thanks-

Children can withstand the shock and dislocation that stories entail. The master-narrative of our heritage offers that space which no room can hold, which allows the child to anticipate a larger room.

giving,” direction for worship; “For God so loved the world,” my salvation; “Go ye into all the world,” my mission; and “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my Word shall not pass away,” the centrality of scripture. In fact the “H verse” was carved into a huge arc of wood at the front of our church sanctuary. When nothing else stands or exists, the Word will remain—all the way to Z.

This was serious stuff. This was the definition of life even for an eight-year-old. This could keep me awake. I would have carved stones all my life to be worthy of this God of glory, and to feel safe. Scripture as authority? You bet.

In spite of terror, this upstairs room held a measure of safety. It rested on that downstairs room where the adults gathered, the ones who fed me, held me, and taught me the Story. The upstairs

windows looked out over green lawns, red tulips, or brilliant banks of snow, and into the amazing skies which offered both the beauty of stars and the warmth of morning sun. Awe was mellowing the fear. Beauty was comfort. Scripture as authority was not only about morals and character and virtue; the Bible stories opened to the imaginative play and wonder which are a central part of faith.

Josef Pieper writes in his classic book *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, that to wonder is “not to know fully,” to be aware that truth is hidden, shrouded in mystery, that we are on the way toward the meaning at the heart of mystery. Gregory Wolfe, who quotes Pieper in an essay, “Playing with God,” asserts that children can withstand the shock and dislocation that myths and stories entail: “They need such multi-dimensional wonder as much as they need food and drink, light and love.”² The master-narrative of our heritage offers that space which no room can hold, which allows the child to anticipate a larger room. This second room takes us to part three of “Postcards to My Sister.”

The room downstairs

*If you had been with me in the art gallery
you would have felt it, too, what we missed,
barren as we were of Turners and Rembrandts,
only calendars from the First National Bank
and a motto, Keep Looking Up. And yet,
as I gazed, I recognized our rare possession,
the harmony of our singing, all ten of us
around the piano, the balance of it, radiant
skies of “Crown Him with Many Crowns,”
“He Leadeth Me” with its pastoral greens
and its fetid valleys of death, the rising
clouds, the shafts of light.*

The living room under my bedroom was the place where the family gathered for the joy of singing around the piano—hymns and gospel songs. The authority of scripture translated into music was a secondhand authority, familiar interpretation of the Text, and powerful in the way the melodies and rhythms made the Word memorable. This was the room where members of the

community would join us and become part of us. It was an emblem of the church at home.

Childhood collapses into that room of experience and learning to live in harmony. The call of maturation to love the other is learned in such a room which grows larger as we grow. This is the room for the rituals of marriage and birthdays and baptismal commitment, an extension of the church. It is the space, I realized later, in which I learned about the unity of body and spirit, of the erotic and sexual desire. Here is the place for fellowship around tables of food, connecting the living and dining spaces for celebration and for sustenance, echoing the centrality of the table in the scriptures.

One of my collections of poetry, *Snake in the Parsonage*, explores desire as a part of spiritual growth.³ Writing poems about

Childhood collapses into that room of experience and learning to live in harmony. The call of maturation to love the other is learned in such a room which grows larger as we grow.

my sexuality and my experience with giving birth and raising children allowed me to see this body life as present and evident in the Story. As a result, the Bible became for me a truer guide and allowed me to honor my physical life rather than feel guilty about it.

Music was an open door through which I could celebrate that union. Our singing as a family was body joy as we breathed together, found harmonies, and allowed the text to open the vistas of faith. Poetry with its primal

beat and its elevated language was an echo of scripture rich with poetry and song.

Both my husband and I were exposed to visual art and to the symphony in our first years of marriage in Chicago. Learning to look at art has given us larger spaces for our faith journey, a place to move into truth in unexpected ways. The mystery of suffering and the ongoing challenges of war and disease are in this room. Our aging and our brokenness are part of the reality of the Story. Experience of life with its beauty and its ugliness continues to push at the walls of our living room, and we are challenged to live spaciouly and to be generous in our inclusion of others.

During our Chicago years we worshiped in the Woodlawn Mennonite Church, and it was there that we grew in our understanding of the Gospels. The Sermon on the Mount became for

both of us a definitive text for how to live in this world. We learned not to read it primarily as the blueprint for the future heavenly kingdom.

Our present church community has also been a chief source of enlarging our rooms. As charter members since 1963, we are part of a core of Christians seeking to be faithful. Art, literature, ritual, and liturgy are incorporated to enhance the Mennonite Brethren traditions. We challenge each other to evangelize, to support racial integration in our city, to serve the underserved, and to support immigrants, among other missions. We have continued to open the text to read what we are to be and do, and how we are to be a community in this twenty-first century. The room downstairs is ours, and it brings us to part seven of "Postcards to My Sister."

The room of God

*I have decided that the dead are more visible
than the living—these looming memorials,
eternal flames steady even in the rain.
Maybe it is this lion in Lucerne
who has convinced me. Carved out
of a granite wall, he will weep
for generations. Little boys stroke
his paws lightly, and at night they dream
that they have disturbed him. They feel
his breath in their necks, and cry out
at his awful roar.*

*Tomorrow I will light candles
in the cathedral in a drafty corner
by the old stones, one for you, one for me.
Brief flames, sputtering, leaning.
Nothing to show but a pool of melted wax.*

After the six parts of this poem of memories, I come to the inevitability of our deaths. This is after all the task of the poet, to remind her audience that they are terminal. But it was also a natural flow from childhood memories to our aging. The room upstairs and the room downstairs are held within the room of God, which is the cosmos and beyond, an immensity of space

which embraces us. This is the unknown, like a wilderness, waiting for us to enter.

As I explore this wilderness with my life and poems, I become more aware of the great spaces of the Story, from the majestic story of creation to the revelations of John. More and more I sense how little I know, how I only catch glimpses of “the hinterparts.” As one who values heritage and wants to keep the treasured story of following Christ in a life of discipleship, the challenge of wilderness is a necessary move. It runs counter to my natural bent; I like to be safe. I love home, the domestic, and the predictable. Yet more and more I see and hear the biblical call to keep moving into unknown territory. The walls of my room become thinner; they shake and sometimes fall.

Some of these walls have to do with “exclusion and embrace” to use the theme of Miroslav Volf. I hear the moans of the poor, the diseased, and the victims of war. I hear the voices of gays and lesbians calling to be included. I still see women cowering in

The room upstairs and the room downstairs are held within the room of God, which is the cosmos and beyond, an immensity of space which embraces us. This is the unknown, like a wilderness, waiting for us to enter.

corners, afraid to speak or to become leaders. I smell the fragrance of other cultures and races offering their gifts and leadership to the worldwide church. And I taste the fresh air of open windows in biblical interpretation.

God’s room is a room of love and holiness, a huge space where God calls me by name, inviting me to enter what I cannot even imagine. This is the room of Genesis, Job, and the Psalms. But it is also the upper room of intimacy where Jesus invites me to live; he asks to be my life-source, my home. I believe that that paradox is a gift to me: the domestic

and the wild, the ability to know and not know, the great mystery of God lived out in the great mystery of Jesus. Authority of scripture then remains open for greater understanding and for the courage to live by it with joy in the great arms of mercy. It is for me the guide, the call to “keep the commandments,” and the pattern for the transcendent life united to my earthly life. Specifically, as a poet, my task requires what Northrop Frye has called “‘double vision’: the recognition of [my] own limits of understanding, and after that, ‘perhaps the terrifying and welcome voice’ that

‘annihilates everything we thought we knew, and restore[s] everything we never lost.’”⁴

The rooms upstairs in the spacious house in which I live remind me of my own “moving out,” my own death. I rehearse for this dying by daily praise and confession. The alphabet of scriptures remains in its elemental power and expands. It opens into a wider definition of the vowel “O,” incorporating both wonder and sorrow. The Lion of Judah roars with me and weeps with me. I light a candle for the world, another for the church in the world, and another for language. With my poems I hope to honor the Story and to participate in the ongoing discovery of that Story which is alive and changing me.

Notes

¹ The three “postcards” included here are from Jean Janzen, Yorifumi Yaguchi, and David Waltner-Toews, *Three Mennonite Poets* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1995). The poems are reprinted by permission of the publisher (www.goodbks.com). All rights reserved.

² Gregory Wolfe, “Playing with God,” in *Intruding upon the Timeless: Meditations on Art, Faith, and Mystery* (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2003), 121.

³ Jean Janzen, *Snake in the Parsonage* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1995).

⁴ Quoted in Robert Cording, “Poetry: Finding the World’s Fullness,” *Image 42* (Spring 2004): 69.

About the author

Jean Janzen lives in Fresno, California. She has taught poetry writing at Fresno Pacific University and Eastern Mennonite University (Harrisonburg, VA). Her latest publications are a book of poems, *Piano in the Vineyard* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2004), and *Elements of Faithful Writing*, essays based on her 2003 Menno Simons lectures at Bethel College (Newton, KS), published in 2004 by Pandora Press (Kitchener, ON).