



American Gothic, by Grant Wood, revised

**Religion and art stand beside each other like two friendly souls
whose inner relationship...is still unknown to them.**

- FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER, controversial theologian

THIS IMPOSSIBLE LIFE: THE ARTIST AS INTERCESSOR

by Lauralee Farrer



THIS IMPOSSIBLE LIFE: THE ARTIST AS INTERCESSOR

by Lauralee Farrer

MY MOTHER HAD THE GIFT OF INTERCESSORY PRAYER. For hours every day, she prayed for anti-slavery workers in Thailand, for imprisoned Sunday School teachers in Indonesia, for AIDS orphans in Nairobi’s Kibera slum. She prayed for every U.S congressperson, every senator. She prayed for a worship center at Fuller Seminary and for my film projects. She prayed for a missing child named Mike whose photo on a milk carton once caught her attention, and she couldn’t get him out of her mind. Not once, mind you—she prayed for Mike every day until she learned that he was returned home safe. Once I asked her to pray for a work colleague whose marriage was in trouble. Two years later, she asked me how he was doing—that’s when I first realized that her prayer life was different than mine. She prayed for him every day, even though she’d never met him. I ran into him shortly after that, and when I told him, he started to cry. At least ten years later, he contacted me out of the blue. “Any chance your mother still prays for me?” he asked. I thought—do the math, no way—but politely said I’d ask. “Oh Paul?” she said. “Yes. The Lord hasn’t released me from him yet.”



Every day. That’s a lot. Yet sometimes she prayed every fifteen minutes. Improbably, she called that the “short list.” Pressing matters were moved to the short list where, every fifteen minutes, my 82-year-old mother got down on her knees and prayed for God’s spirit to intercede. Not long before she died, I asked her what that looked like, and my very matter-of-fact, undramatic mother said: “like holding back a black wave.” She was holding back a black wave on the day she sat in a courtroom and prayed without ceasing for a family member in the midst of a bitter child custody battle. She was engaged in this unceasing prayer on the day that she left this life. Suddenly, her head fell over, and she col-

lapsed, and never revived. It was not only fitting that death would find her as she was praying, the odds were in favor of it—she spent that much time in prayer.

I MEAN TO FRIGHTEN THEM.

ALL CHRISTIANS ARE SUPPOSED TO PRAY, but this unique gift of intercessory prayer was my mother’s calling. I think it is a helpful analogy for artists who are also Christians. All people are made in the image of God, so all are, naturally creative. But some artists seem called to something different, all-consuming, very much like my mother felt called to pray. So, I’m going to call this the gift of *intercessory art*.



Intercessory art gives voice to the spirit in the dark places of suffering, to—as Sting put it—light a candle in the darkness that is brighter than the sun. If required, it is even powerful enough to rebuke what my mother described as the dark tsunami offshore, and what Walter Brueggemann calls “the Empire” in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*.

We know about the Empire. For the last 15 years or so it has been relentlessly investigated, in detail. You are not paying attention if you think that “edgy” is any longer the sordid, the shocking, the jaw-droppingly vain, the vapid or the ironic and self-loathing. The dark underbelly of pretty much anything is, quite frankly, cliché. What’s really maverick, the truly uncharted territory of our time, is a radical artistic exploration into God. Into whatsoever things are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy. Against such things there is no law, except the law of commerce—that whatsoever things make money are the things to be thought upon.

Because Brueggemann’s Empire rejects anything that sounds like certainty, intercessory art must exist in a tension between the known and the unknown. Intercessory art knows there is a God. It knows this God to be our Intimate, by his design and sacrifice. It knows that this God is love. That’s a lot of surety for the Empire to swallow. Unfortunately the church finds intercessory art troublesome for precisely the opposite reason—because anything that sounds like questioning threatens her. Too unsophisticated for the Empire and traitorous to the church. Revolutionary for both. Welcome to the calling of artist as intercessor.

Ingmar Bergman tells of an artist painting images of danger on a cave wall:

A friend, observing, says,
“you ought not paint those pictures.
You will frighten people.”
And the artist replies,
“I mean to frighten them.”

This is a bad career choice. If you are committed to your own master plan of success, how it may elevate you in the eyes of family and friends, and even turn the slow head of the Empire and command its affection, you might want to ignore all but the funny parts of what I am about to say. But if the artist as intercessor describes you—the bad news is that you will not be able to survive any other way of life, anymore than Jonah could escape Ninevah. Christopher Frye, in his play *After the Fall*, articulates the good news:

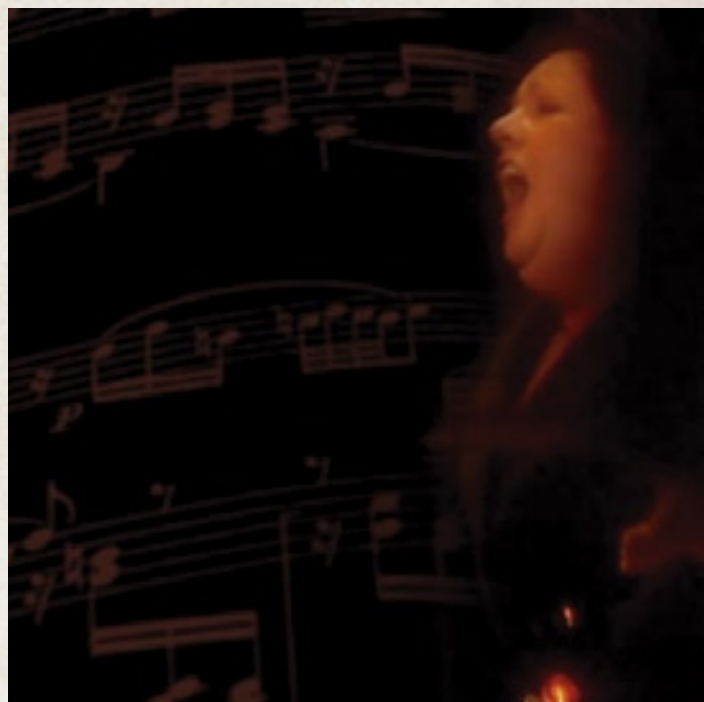
Thank God our time is now,
when wrong comes up
to meet us everywhere,
never to leave us until we take
the longest stride man ever took.
Affairs are now soul size, and
the enterprise is into God.

Daily my mother prayed that those of us called to this astonishing life would abandon all other tortured expectations. That we would rise up and take the longest stride that a human has ever taken. You’ve been fighting it, I know you have. For good reason—you are not likely to have success as the world gives. But if you yearn for a soul-sized life and enterprise into God, I hope to strike a gong that will resonate for the rest of your life. The one here and the one hereafter.



“Be calm and orderly
in your life
so that you may be
violent and original
in your work”

– GUSTAV FLAUBERT



Marcia Whitehead in *Laundry and Tosca*

I STUTTER.

WHAT MAKES ONE PERSON AN “ARTIST” and not another is a debate that seems to be as unresolvable as it may be unimportant. Let’s assume everyone’s born with talent—like physical strength or the capacity to sing falsetto. In the case of natural talent, if you have enough of it, you may actually spend your life developing it—pay the mortgage with it, amuse your family and friends, audition for *American Idol*. All acceptable.

But a gift from God comes with a purpose—like a prophet speaks God’s word and not his own. In a recent theological journal on vocation, Professor Jim Street says a gift is not something God has given to an individual but something God has given to the body *through* an individual. If you are an intercessor, the gift is no more about you than the water going from the street to the faucet is about the pipe. Furthermore, when you make it about you, it leads to misery for you and the one for whom you are intended to intercede.

That is why the artist-intercessor is wicked miserable doing anything except following the call. Much like the prophet.

To confuse matters, God does not always choose the one with natural talent to give the gift. Think of Moses. He told God “Choose Aaron to be your mouthpiece. I stutter.” That made God angry. He said:

Okay. Aaron can do it.
But I will tell you
and you will tell Aaron.

God chose Moses. Perhaps Moses had the gift of intercession and Aaron simply had a talent for public speaking. The fact that Moses stuttered was not a problem. It may have even been important.

NEVER HESITATE.

NOT SO LONG AGO, faith and art were so estranged in Western cultures that people did not even think to connect them with one



Pieta, Mel Gibson (2004)

Pieta, Michaelangelo Buonarroti (1499)



another. Historically, in some of the familial branches of our faith, art and the artist have not been anathema to the sacred environment; however, even as far back as the 18th century, German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher said:

Religion and art stand beside each other like two friendly souls whose inner relationship... is still unknown to them.

Many of us grew up in a world with a very narrow definition of what it meant to be a minister: Ministers were men who stood behind podiums and delivered sermons on Sundays. As a woman, I was not invited to be that minister, but I also had to make an artificial decision between being a Christian and being a filmmaker. As recently as my father's youth, a movie theater was as disdained as a brothel, no matter what film was screening. A Christian simply would not enter one. In some ways we have not come far enough, yet more than once I have been invited to speak in church of how God might use film for his glory, show my documentary film on an opera singer, and have that woman sing—opera, no

less. So far, no one's gotten mad.

This standoff between the church and the arts is one of those weird territorial divides that a generation breaks its back over, only for the next generation to wonder what the fuss was all about. Still, it is more than changing times. The problem with relating faith and art as they were meant to be related is that faith is scared to death of what art is going to dream up. That fear has not subsided.

Gustave Flaubert said:

Be calm and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work.

He did not mean to validate one over the other as much as he meant to emphasize the necessary tension between the two. Things get tragically out of balance when the church chooses to be only calm and orderly, and when artists are captivated only by the violent and original. In fact, I think the latter is an inevitable result of the former.

Nearly 30 years ago, I met a man who was the founder of the Washington Arts Group, Jerry Easley. He spoke of an inextricable



kinship between faith and art. An interview with him started what I have come to realize is a lifelong pilgrimage. He introduced me to Frank Mason, a painter whose studio was above an Italian restaurant in Little Italy. He was working on a painting so big he needed a 15 foot ladder just to reach the top. It was epic, he was epic, the space was sacred in a very visceral, contemplative, blood-and-fire sort of way.

He was a big bear of a guy, who told me of how he slipped and plunged an awl through the meat of his hand while he was stretching his canvas. As blood poured down the canvas, his response was “YES!” I was in my 20s for crying out loud, I nearly fainted. I thought, “This guy is talking about it!” I had no idea *what* he was talking about, but I knew intuitively this was it. He was slicing fresh tomatoes for lunch when I asked whether he saw a relationship between faith and art. His response still convicts me, three decades later. He looked right straight through my careful question, like a good artist, and into my yearning for a life devoted to both art and God. He shook that knife, dripping with tomato blood, right in my face. He said:

Never hesitate.

I continued overseas, back when there was still an Eastern Europe and Westerners didn't go there. I went to East Germany, and Yugoslavia and Hungary and Russia. I interviewed artists who were totally confused when I asked about faith and art, some who were angered, some offended, some frightened. It sounds so odd now that everyone talks *ad nauseam* about spirituality and art, but it was like trying to describe the Internet to someone back in the 70s.

I ended with a painter named Ed Knippers. Here was a man, also a grizzly, who had been called by God to do monumental paintings of only biblical themes because he believed that the biblical metaphors were being lost in our culture. He also painted only nudes, as a way of communicating that Jesus, while wholly divine, was also wholly human. The only people who are clothed in Ed's paintings are the devil or whomever he's using for evil.



Edward Knippers

Though his work is in famous collections and museums, he has been told time and again by violent and original museum curators that he would be known around the world and richer than Donald Trump, if it just weren't for the biblical themes. Sadly, he is still told by calm and orderly churches that he would be richer than Solomon and his work would be honored there if it just weren't for the nudity. Thank God Ed cares neither for riches or honor, or we would not have the Word that God has spoken through him. But Ed has been crucified on the crossbeams of those two warring worlds in order to bring us the word of the Lord, whether we want to hear it or not. He stands in the gap between the church and the Empire. That's a definition of intercession, by the way, “standing in the gap.” Very few have the courage to cross over the bridge of him. God bless and strengthen him.

On following page:
Gloria in Excelsis Deo,
Frank Mason





Edward Knippers,
Jacob's Ladder

Back when I first met Ed, I asked his opinion about suspicions the church seemed to have that young artists might be tempted to lose their faith if they associated too boldly with their art. He looked at me with his shaggy mane of salt and pepper hair, and his under-trimmed beard and I swear he growled:

They do not love their art too much,
they love their God too little.

Since then I have learned for myself that art is not only not contrary to faith, but is more like a twin separated at birth. I think we do not know who we are without art because the purpose of it is to articulate the unseen—which accounts for the preponderance of the ways in which we are made in God's image.

MICKEY MOUSE IS COMING OUT.

EDITOR ERNEST BATES LONG AGO POINTED OUT that art is the raw material from which archeologists and historians reconstruct the

past. Whether it's pictographs on a cave wall, papyrus texts hidden in earthenware pots, or stories that survive for centuries by word of mouth, art is even the physical evidence of humanity that outlasts all others. Customs and mores, families and dynasties, laws and political movements emerge and disappear, but art endures.

The arts are relied upon to define our present life, because story is what we understand, what we remember, and what we repeat. Twentieth century German playwright Bertolt Brecht correctly insisted that art is not just a mirror to reflect society but a hammer with which to shape it.

Contadoras, storytellers, Indian dancers, Wayang shadow puppets, scapegoats, African tribal elders dressed as evil spirits, music videos—every culture tells its stories, enacts its plays, sings its songs, cultivates its legends, poems, and metaphors. It is how we speak the word into the void, how we create ourselves.



My colleague, Loren Roberts, has a daughter named Gabrielle. He used to stand outside her door at night and listen as she would repeat her day in detail. Yes, she was probably fighting sleep, but something beyond her intention was happening: She was creating her self. “Today I went to school. I spilled my juice. My teacher called my name.” This is the work of the Great Creator—by the word things take shape from the void and come into being.



going to see Mickey Mouse, but it’s going to be me.” The imagination articulates the invisible in order to bring it into the light of the tangible, the real. The artist-intercessor should disappear in the process. In pictures taken on that day, you can see that my niece Annalee is at Disneyland, but her daughter is in the Magic Kingdom.

God himself chose poets, philosophers, dramatists, musicians and prophets to pen the Holy Scriptures. He called upon storytellers to articulate the mysteries beyond reason, called upon artists to design and build the temple that would hold his presence. Maybe it’s possible to know God without art *but we wouldn’t*. King David sang when he was too vile to pray. In dialogue with the suffering Job, God spoke in poetry.



INTERCESSION MEANS TO STAND IN THE GAP.

SO THE CHURCH AND THE ARTS are estranged, yet we do not fully know ourselves or God without art. How do we, who are called to it, intercede in the gap? Intercession means to act on behalf of someone in difficulty or trouble, or to reconcile differences between two people or groups.

My great-niece, Lauralee Ballard Crum, came home from Disneyland the first time and coerced the entire adult family into repeating the day in the living room of my mom’s apartment. “Okay, okay, okay,” she would instruct us (she was 3 at the time):

I am going to go away for three minutes
[which she had no concept of whatsoever],
and when I come back, you say
“Ladies and Gentlemen,
Mickey Mouse is coming out!”
And then you will see Mickey Mouse—
but it’s going to be me.

She added that last part as though she were revealing a great secret—as if our imaginations were still as potent as hers. “You’re

Gareth Icenogle, Pastor of National Presbyterian Church, tells of painters during the late Dutch Reformation who were very articulate about biblical texts. The greatest of these was Rembrandt, who was the original painter of light. To this day “Rembrandt light” is known to photographers and cinematographers as the dramatic interplay between darkness and light, and known to painters as chiaroscuro. Rembrandt painted Moses coming down from the mountain and he’s holding up the tablets and they are black.



Rembrandt's *Moses and the Ten Commandments*

The stone is black and the letters are translucent—as if God’s writing went right through the stone.

It was Rembrandt’s way of saying, “Yes, the word counts, but more important than the word is the Presence who does the writing.”

The artist, Icenogle insists, is required to “stay

in the Presence” or the word fades. Annie Dillard says:

I cannot cause light;
the most I can do
is try to put myself
in the path of its beam.

What Dillard is saying here is like Rembrandt’s painting of the tablets of the law—but in this case she is the stone that is given life when the word shines through her. She puts herself in the gap, and she disappears just as the light is most brilliant. “Ladies and Gentlemen, you’re going to see the God of Creation! (but it’s going to be Annie Dillard).” Again, this is what made prophets prophets and not film critics. They were not conduits of their own opinions, but mouthpieces of God. In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard wrote of watching a candle flame consume a golden female moth. The moth’s abdomen catches in the wet wax and her wings ignite “like tissue paper, enlarging the circle of light in the clearing.” Her antennae crackle, her legs disappear and her body is reduced to a glowing shell. “And then,” relates Dillard, “this moth-essence, this spectacular skeleton, began to act as a wick. ... She burned for two hours, until I blew her out.”

See where this is going? Someplace a little scary, and far, far away from limos and red carpets and extreme makeovers. It’s headed toward the land of “it’s not about you.” Not about you being understood, admired, or known. Not about you as someone with meaningful things to say, as someone who is not just purpose-driven, but *perceived* as purpose-driven. It is taking us to the place



where we truly, madly, deeply realize it is not about us at all. I must decrease in direct proportion for Christ to increase.

HE GAVE US THE GIFT TO PRAISE HIM WITH IT.

Miles Davis said:

It takes a long time
to learn how to play like yourself.

I like to quote that because he was 60 when he said it, so it makes me feel as if I have a little time yet. In my youth I was tormented by quasi-biblical threats that if I did not use my talent it would be taken from me. At the same time I believed that my gift ought to make a way for itself—by which I assumed that I would be given the chance to direct my feature-length screenplays and paid enough money to live on while I did it. I languished for years between prolific work and melancholy discouragement when I did not experience the success to which I felt myself entitled. So, I waited. With a kind of pinched, self-righteous patience.

I encouraged myself with the idea that God did not give me a gift to mock me with it. Well, of course he didn't. He also didn't give it to me for the purpose of earning a living or giving me something to say at awkward parties. He gave me the gift for the same reason he gives any gift—to praise him with it. Where, where, *where* did we get the idea

that God ever gave any gift with a promise of financial gain or prestige, much less artistic gifts? You can't even find convincing historical examples for such assumptions—art and spirituality may be twins separated at birth, but art and commerce have always been at odds. Always—and for good reason. And yet we become testy when we do not get what we think we so richly deserve as a result of this hard life. We shake our tiny fists at God. We screech, “You owe me!”

Yet if the purpose of our gifts is to praise him, then the benefit is enterprise into God. We fail to claim this great inheritance because we have used art as a means to express the self, rather than the self made in the divine image. Finding it impossible to discern the divine image by such dim lights as we offer, the violent and original attempt an epic misalliance of art and disbelief. And instead of risking ourselves—as the living sacrifices we are called to be—to shed light on increasingly dark conclusions, we criticize, we boycott, we cross our arms and withdraw. We grow powerless and afraid to engage in the conversation for fear that people will see that we, too, suffer. No wonder we have reached a stage in the life of culture where anything that investigates God is virtually leprous. Even among Christians, the repulsion toward anything “art” that incorporates religion has reached a new level of self-loathing. It's reminiscent of Groucho Marx's statement that he would not join a club that would have him as a member.



We live in a time when wrong rises up to face us everywhere, yes. A time that Brueggemann would define as “numbed.” He says that the task of the prophetic imagination in a really numbed situation is, among other things:

to speak metaphorically but concretely about the deathliness... that gnaws within us, and to speak neither in rage nor with cheap grace, but with candor born of anguish and passion.

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said the poet is an unhappy being whose heart is torn by secret sufferings but whose lips are so strangely formed that when the cries escape them, they are beautiful. His fate is like the victims whom the Ancient Sicilian tyrant Phalaris imprisoned in a bronze bull and tortured over a steady fire: the bull's mouth was reeded, so that their cries did not strike terror in his heart; instead, when they reached his ears they sounded like music.

No, no we do not choose that. We have other plans.

WALK YE IN IT.

WHEN I FINISHED MY DOCUMENTARY *Laundry and Tosca* about the opera singer Marcia Whitehead, I got a picture of a medium-sized theater, very grand looking in the old style, filled with people. The movie played. Marcia came out onto the stage and began to sing. The spirit fell. I can't tell you much more detail than that, though I saw the theater very clearly in my imagination. Clearly enough to give me instruction. Isaiah says, “you will hear a whisper behind you saying go



Marcia Whitehead in *Laundry and Tosca*

to the left or go to the right. I will show you the way. Walk ye in it.” I take that very literally because it's happened to me very literally. What I knew was, at least for awhile, when the film screened Marcia was to sing.

We have done a great deal of this since then. In the beginning she would say of these mini-concerts that they were not “real.” It wasn't in costume, on a stage, in a production of *Adrianna LeCouvreur* at the Met. It wasn't “professional.” It wasn't an answer at any party to “have I heard of anything you've done?” That was a real career she was pursuing in New York. Had you said to her then that she might not actually have that career, she'd have ripped your lungs out with her teeth.

And the end of the festival circuit, we were given two prime hours in the center of one festival's big day. When I walked into the theater the first time, I nearly fainted. It was the one from my vision. We showed the film, I spoke, and Marcia sang.

Afterward people mobbed her. One man tried three times to talk when it was his turn, and he was so overcome with emotion that finally he just laid his head on her shoulder and wept. There was a semi-circle of people around them, and many of them just nodded as if to say, “yes, that's what I was going to say.” The movie played, Marcia sang, and the spirit fell. At a film festival. And no one got mad!



ACCEPT UNCONVENTIONAL SUCCESS.

I THINK IT WAS after that event that Marcia said something to me like “I’m ruined.” Somewhere along the line, what she once thought was “real” became less real. And what she thought was biding her time, showed itself as the glory of God. She said, “Lauralee, no one’s likely to wait backstage after *Andrea Chenier* and tell me that they are going to spend eternity with God because I nailed the ‘B’ in ‘La Mamma Morta.’” Please do not misunderstand me—I am not saying that God will not use opera to bring people to a relationship with him. My apologies to Marcia, but remember Balaam’s ass—the donkey God used to tell his recalcitrant prophet something he wouldn’t hear from anyone else? God will use anything in his creation to speak to his people, because a donkey is no more or less worthy than a prophet is, the stone on Mt. Sinai no more or less worthy than digital video, opera no more or less worthy than a flannelgraph. It’s not the words, but the Presence, and if we are not going to risk ourselves to tell the hard truths or sing his praise, then the rocks and the trees will cry out. We lose.

I am saying that anyone with an impossible dream must be prepared to accept unconventional success. Those were words I spoke into the film about Marcia, *Laundry and Tosca*, because God was forcing me to see them, too. It’s the likeliest explanation for why he chose me to tell that story. Neither prophets nor artists spring forth fully formed. We are shaped by the word of God that passes through us.

I, too, was struggling with things not turning out the way I thought they were

going to. I thought God promised me a future in film when suddenly he gave me a 9-to-5 desk job that seemed mercilessly irrelevant. I had glimpsed the horizon of my dream life when God shows up at my apartment, throws me in a cold shower with all my clothes on, and says, “you’re going to work at a seminary.” Really? I asked: “is there no other way for you to get me dental?”

At the same time I started attending Ecclesia—a church in Hollywood. It’s nowhere near me, in location or in demographic, but my niece and nephew were going there and my mother wanted to worship with family. After awhile, she began to pray daily for the pastors, and the staff and the elders and the deacons of that church. You know how she was.



Ecclesia lead elder David

So there we were, my mother in her matching shoes and purse worshipping alongside Lead Elder David with his tattoo-sleeves. Meanwhile, I was so exhausted from 40 hours a week at work and another 40-plus for Burning Heart Productions that a Sabbath where I leave at nine and return at four seemed like anything but restful. I was losing my ability to be elegant. I had just turned 50, was in a job I didn’t understand, and was attending a church where I felt so out of place that I wondered if I was actually creepy. One Sunday morning, my prayers to God were sounding less like “you are good”



Ecclesia pastors
Joseph [above],
and Brandon
[top].

and more like “but you promised,” and God asked me: are you willing to go the rest of your life without success and still not give up? And naturally, since I walk in constant, lightning-fast obedience, I asked, “is this hypothetical?”

Here’s what I got: “if you do not give up, then these 300 young people may say, ‘I want to not give up just like that.’ And if 300 people wait for me to show them the way and then walk in it, that’s a revolution.” So he asked if I was willing to stand for that, and I said, “Yes, I am willing.” I thought, “I am not afraid to die, what is this to me? Yes. I will do that if you ask me to.” And he told me to stand up.

STAND UP.

I AM NOT KIDDING. Lead Pastor Brandon Dickerson was in the middle of his sermon. And I said, “you mean now? Like stand up?” And right away I found my boundary. I was willing to die. I was willing to be a living sacrifice. But embarrass myself? Not so much. Each second

moved like molasses. I knew this would be a moment to regret for the rest of my life if I did not obey. Finally, that fear overwhelmed my fear of being embarrassed. My mother looked at me like the RCA Victor dog but I stood up and I stayed standing until the sermon was over and everyone else stood, too.

A little over a year later, the leadership of the same church asked me to be an elder. There was a series of conversations and e-mails posted to the Elder Google group and some interviews. In the final interview, among other things, they asked me to describe any vision God had given me for the church. So among the stories I told was that quirky standing-up thing. Brandon, who is also a film director, was floored. “Did you do it?” he asked. And when I said “yes,” he said he can’t believe he didn’t notice. Neither did anyone else. Music Pastor Joseph King Barkley, with the shaved head and the pierced ears, says to me “Dude. That is awesome.”

At the end of the interview someone asked, “Well, does anyone have anything else to say?” And Brandon and David stood up. They were so surprised they both had the same idea that they fell out laughing, but what I saw, Lord have mercy, was here it is, it’s happening: I stood, they did not see me. They stood—they were saying “us, too. We don’t want what the Empire considers success. We want to follow Jesus.” Ladies and Gentlemen—*Jesus Christ is coming out.*



SUFFER OUTSIDE THE GATE.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED THAT THE WORLD IS SO SUSPICIOUS of artists who are Christians, and we have become so ashamed of ourselves? We are offering the greatest and brightest gift we have to those who have not heard the Good News—why is it that anything that smacks of our faith is off-putting? We are not after their money. We are not trying to steal anything from them, on the contrary—we are trying to give them the most precious thing we have. If we found a home recipe for relieving arthritis, or getting red wine stains out of linen we wouldn't hesitate to shout about it, and people wouldn't hesitate to blog about it. So why has spreading the Good News become such bad taste?

At least some of the answer lies in the damning thought that we have lost our true purpose, and that we have, therefore, lost our trustworthiness. We portray the gospel we love and that saved us not as the undeserved grace that it is but rather as a sophisticated form of denial. Not the gospel which is a genuine attempt to call all men brothers and all women sisters and made in the image of God, but rather to prove ourselves superior. We are not trusted because we have not been telling the truth. People know it. So do we.

But we also rejoice in our sufferings,
because we know that
suffering produces perseverance;
perseverance, character;
and character, hope.

—Romans 5:3–5

Look at that: suffering = perseverance = character = hope. It's instructions for intercession, blueprints for bridging the gap! Our own

Holy Scriptures tell us that suffering bears fruit and is inevitable—that we must start there in order to find hope. But we don't like suffering. Deeper yet, we are afraid of it.

It's not surprising that the Empire avoids suffering at all costs. Why shouldn't it? But here the church has followed right in line behind the Empire, to our great shame. We know better. We don't use all the psalms in our worship or our liturgies. We avoid the violent, grief-filled ones and stick to the uplifting ones (which aren't so uplifting to people who are in pain or whose lives have been fractured by grief, by the way). You don't go out and make suffering abound so that hope can abound, of course not. But you suffer just like everyone else does—because the rain falls on the just and the unjust. Then should come the difference. Then comes the foolishness that confounds the wise—that we rejoice in our sufferings so that we may communicate to the world hope of a true alternative. But



we don't do that. So no wonder people don't trust us. The world has turned its back on hope because the church has turned its back on suffering. Let me say that again:

The world denies hope
because the church
denies suffering.

This gives new meaning to “bad faith.” And the ignominious result of this bad faith is the bad art practiced throughout Christendom. I mean more than sloppy or sappy craftsmanship. The church has a deserved reputation for fearfully restricting artists from the exploration that is their divine calling. Consequently, the extreme borders of the soul—from torment to ecstasy—are without adventurers of faith. What kind of art do you expect this to produce? Once upon a time the historical church relied on its artists to lead into invisible realms, where reason could not go. She *protected* them while they did it. How long does it take before a society loses track completely of the biblical story when artist intercessors refuse, like Jonah, their divine calling?

I was with painters Ed Knippers and Bruce Herman when Leningrad had lately become St. Petersburg again. They went to visit the world famous Hermitage museum, and the docents were showing them epic paintings of the old masters which had not been seen outside Russia. Many of them had biblical themes. The young docents—educated in every way but one—had no idea what the paintings were about. Imagine it, Ed and Bruce are standing there while a young student explains the painting process and technique and the life of the painter, but she has no idea why there is a man standing

calmly in a golden pool of heavenly light, surrounded by a pride of drowsy, disinterested lions. Docent after docent joined while Ed and Bruce told the stories of Daniel in the Lion's Den, and the Prodigal Son, David and Goliath, Salome dancing for the head of John the Baptist, and Ezekiel bringing the dry bones to life. Ed, who has been painting these themes all his artistic life and garnering the contempt of the art world for it, told them the stories behind the paintings they loved so much while their good Russian faces were bathed in tears. Those paintings were remnants of the days when the spirit was voiced aloud in their culture without shame or threat of prison. Hidden in them still was the word of life. Ed and Bruce, keepers of those stories, were there to bear witness, to intercede. But their intercession was born from their exile, their suffering.

The bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered outside the gate.

—Hebrews 13:11–13

Suffering outside the gate is a metaphor for the artist-intercessor. Again, start with the suffering—one foot outside the gate—and one foot on the inside, in hope. This may make you hated by both sides. Too bad. Your calling is to intercede. If I may quote Edna Spaulding in *Places in the Heart*, “I don't care if it kills me. I don't care if it kills you. I'm not going to give up. And if you do, you can go





“Survivors look back and see omens,
messages they missed.
They live by symbols.”

—JOAN DIDION

Tamara Johnston and Lauralee Farrer in *The Fair Trade*

straight to hell.” And people, all she wanted was to be the first to get her cotton crop to the cotton gin.

WE LIVE BY SYMBOLS.

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT such a life to look like? You have read Ezekiel. Job. Revelation. Books filled with wild, unpredictable, crazy experiences, and soul-sized lives. Sons and daughters who prophesy, old people who dream dreams, young people who see visions—this is meant to be literal.

The writer Joan Didion has charted some territory that only the very brave dare to explore. In her recent memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* she records a season of skinless anguish over her husband’s sudden death. It morphed into an obsessive—and sometimes hallucinatory—scrutiny of her husband’s last days. She observed: “Survivors look back and see omens, messages they missed. They live by symbols. They read meaning into [everyday events.]”

I would like to borrow this thought and say that I think that prophets—and artist-intercessors—live this way. We read meaning into things. We see omens.

We live by symbols, by vision of things that are not actually there. Over and over in the scriptures we read about people who do not have the ears to hear or the eyes to see. I take very literally the inverse—that

spiritual seeing and hearing and tasting and smelling and feeling can actually be developed. People who work with me get used to me asking “What do you see with your mind’s eye?”—usually when we are trying to make a decision about something for which there is no or little existing criteria.

That’s how my documentaries, *Laundry and Tosca* and *The Fair Trade*, came about. With *Laundry and Tosca*, one night I was at dinner at the home of cinematographer Taggart Lee when his wife, Tanya, said, “You know, you guys should make a documentary about Marcia’s story.” Now, if I had a nickel for every time someone’s given me their idea of what I should make a film about, I’d have the budget for the feature *Praying the Hours* that I’ve been trying for five years to get made. But I got to thinking about Tanya’s suggestion. In fact, I couldn’t get it out of my mind.

That night I got a picture: I saw a car, an SUV. I saw my friend Susana driving it. Marcia was in the passenger’s seat. Taggart was in the back seat with a camera on his lap—I even saw the camera (a Panasonic SDX-900)—and I was next to him. We were driving around New York. Susana would pull over, Taggart and I would get out and race to the back and pull equipment out and set up to film Marcia while Susana would pull away and circle the block while we shot what we needed. I know it sounds strange. But I literally watched the vision unfold before my eyes, and I saw



Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade

that we could do it with just the four of us. I thought, “oh yea. All the equipment can be stored in the back seat. Good idea.” As though the idea was not actually mine.

This is familiar territory to anyone who creates something where nothing was before. It’s called an “inspiration.” Meaning something in-spirited, or something that the spirit was infused into from the outside. The difference between an artist and most anyone else is that we step out on those inspirations as if they are real. Remember that scene in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, when the only thing that stands between him and the Holy Grail is a set of character-testing challenges? One of them, presumably testing his faith, is when he has to cross from one sheer-faced cliff-side to another without a bridge. So he steps out and a bridge appears. In this case, it’s an optical illusion. Point is, there was no bridge. He steps out anyway, and crosses over.

I thought, “well, I can replicate that picture of the SUV.” So I did, just as if it were a blueprint. I just made it come true in ordinary life the way an architect and a builder do. I called Susana, I said:

“I have this idea.”
She said,
“we can do that.”

While in New York shooting, Taggart and I were waiting for Susana, and he said, “you know, something’s been bugging me. Here

we are making a movie about an opera singer, and you didn’t bring a sound guy. Why not?” I hadn’t ever really talked about the process. Taggart did not grow up in a family of faith, so I was afraid this kind of talk would sound like superstition, so I hemhawed around and gave an incomplete answer. But he kept pressing me. I think he might have even said, “why won’t you tell me the truth?” So finally I said, “okay, here it is: because there was no soundman in the SUV.” “In what SUV?” he asked. “The SUV in my head.” And I told him the whole thing, I came clean.

Then he surprised me:

“Do you have any idea what effect that has on my ability to have faith?” he asked.

And he sort of flung his hand around at the obvious as if to say, “here we are in New York with a Panasonic SDX-900 on my shoulder, waiting for Susana to drive around and pick us up in the SUV!” For a moment at least, we were standing on the invisible bridge, and he got a glimpse of how he got there. By faith. The deeper magic of why he is prompted to do that is because he has eternity in his heart, because he was made to resonate God. Something about that crazy revelation hit a place so deep inside him he could not ignore it. (By the way, the first award that film won was in Milan for Best Music. Marcia went up on stage to collect it in front of 2000 people while I leaned over to Tag and said, “pardon me but did we just win an award for best sound?”)



Winning the award for best music in Milan



Tamara Johnston and Matthew Diederich, 2004

THERE WILL BE SUFFERING.

LIVING THE LIFE OF THE ARTIST INTERCESSOR is possible, tangible, real, necessary. But theory is sort of cold gravy without real life examples, so here are a few anecdotes to illustrate a scripture from Luke 21 that tells us quite clearly what to expect.

They will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute.

— Luke 21:12-15

At the beginning of 2008, I completed a feature documentary called *The Fair Trade*. It tells the story of fair trade entrepreneur Tamara Johnston's search for a meaningful life in the wake of a tragic death. That story was born when

Laundry and Tosca had its U.S. premiere at the Santa Fe Film Festival. I had flown Marcia to Santa Fe from New York and I had planned to drive there with Tamara, who was working with me as an assistant producer.

We were late arriving to our own premiere and I apologized for the delay. *The delay*. There was a world of mind-fracturing grief behind that inadequate word. The young man who had been for 20 years the closest thing to a son I ever had—Matthew Winfield Diederich—had been killed in a freak accident. Matt was Tamara's fiancé. She and I had made plans to drive to Santa Fe long before the earth split beneath our feet. We left on the day his body was supposed to be cremated. It was not the trip we originally planned. We took a circuitous route through Joshua Tree National Monument in the middle of the night because it was a special place to them. It was brutal. Tamara hadn't eaten or slept for days, and her grief was so great that I thought she was burning down to ash herself. I actually thought she was dying—she had that



sunken grey expression on her face, and that smell of death—but we couldn't figure out what to do except go forward, so we did.

When we arrived in New Mexico, Tamara went straight to the hotel, and I went to the screening. When I was called up for the Q&A, I was unusually intense, even for me. I said, "Folks—the film is not important. The Met is not important. Whether I shot on DVCPRO 50 or high-def is not important. There is only one audience. This is the audience. There is only one night. This is the night—I think Marcia should sing." Marcia nearly had a heart attack because up to that point I had never actually told her that vision. All she knew was, she

require something powerful enough to bear the weight of their suffering. This is precisely when God uses art to communicate himself to us—in our darkest hour. Not always to say you will not die, but *always* to say that you are not alone. So she sang, whether she knew it or not, very much like my mother used to pray—she held back the dark wave. She gave voice to the spirit.

When I come to die
Oh when I come to die
Oh when I come to die
Give me Jesus.
Give me Jesus.
Give me Jesus!
You can have all this world,
Give Me Jesus.

I sat back by the unsuspecting projectionist and sobbed like a baby. You can imagine. Poor guy. All weekend when he'd see me he'd pat me on the shoulder and nod knowingly. And while Marcia was singing, Tamara, who was at the crossroads of life and death, made the decision to rise up and live. When we returned to the room I had no idea what to expect, but she met us at the door with an empty granola wrapper in her hand that she gave to me. She said, "I ate."

What happened? Marcia interceded for me when she sang, and for Tamara in the Hilton about three blocks away, and also for herself because she, too was grieving Matt's death. I feel like I'm quoting some peculiar *This Is Spinal Tap* logic here, but God even used us to intercede for us.



Tamara Johnston in *The Fair Trade*

can't sing opera without an accompanist. I knew the only song she sings *a cappella* is the old American spiritual "Give Me Jesus." Do you think I cared one bit whether people would think I was a fanatic? When people are standing in the ashes of their lives, they



Tamara Johnston
in *The Fair Trade*

IT WILL LEAD TO AN OPPORTUNITY FOR TESTIMONY.

RECENTLY, I WAS AT a large Episcopal church in South Carolina. The worship leader had called the local CBS affiliate to see if they wanted to do a short interview on the morning show right between *Good Morning America* and *The View*. The show host made it clear in a not-so-neighborly way that if the program was about God, mentioned God, *stank* of God in any way, they were not interested. “We don’t do that sort of thing,” she said. No, the worship leader explained, this is an award-winning film about opera, the opera singer is going to be here, and so is the award-winning filmmaker. The host said, “well, send the e-mail.” And, against expectations, she booked us.

Just before I left for the studio, I felt impressed to go back and get a copy of *The Fair Trade*. “I felt impressed”—that’s the kind of language we use, isn’t it? But it just means that I thought it, in a way that has become familiar to me. The thought sort of floated into my head: “take a copy for the newscaster.” I didn’t question it. I just did it. It wasn’t even the

film I was there to talk about. They booked us right before guests from a dog show. Seriously. “Please do not say anything about your embarrassing God. However, we will have three cameras rolling live as a frantic Sheltie runs through a plastic tube in order to earn the treat its trainer is holding in her mouth.” Because that, people, meets our standards of high-minded journalism.

We sat crammed onto a set so tight the host and I could have used the same contact lenses. We talked for a few minutes about opera and film, and she warms up in a fake newscaster sort of way. Just in closing she says, “Well, what’s next?” And I say, “I just finished a feature documentary called *The Fair Trade*.” Her cohost pops out from behind her and says, “Really? Tell us about that!” They’ve already given us the you’ve-got-five-seconds sign, so I encapsulate: “it’s about a young woman whose fiancé is killed in a tragic car accident. She makes a bargain with God not to kill herself if he will show her a life worth living.” Wow, she says, it sounds like you are doing some really meaningful films! Then back to the camera: “Stay tuned for the dog show, next!”



Page 2, 11, 16, 17, 22:
sketches and storyboards
by Denise Klitsie for
Praying the Hours.

And then it happened. She looked at me, her mask fell from her face and—while we were still hooked up to mics and the whole studio was listening—she said, “My fiancé was killed in a tragic car accident.” And naturally tears sprang to my eyes and I said, “Oh, girl.”

“I got a stab of pain when you said that,” she said. “I thought I was going to cry out right on camera.” She would have leaned closer to me if it had been possible. “Picture me,” she went on, and I promise you, she had never said this in front of any of those people before: “Picture me, driving toward the bridge, calculating how fast I have to be going so that I am not alive by the time I get to the other side. Isn’t that pathetic?”

And I said, “no. It’s not pathetic. It’s very very sad. I am so sorry.” She said, “I have to see this film.” And I said, “funny thing. I brought

one for you.” She didn’t sound like someone who didn’t want to talk about God when she said:

I think that’s the reason you are here this morning. Don’t you?

I might more accurately have said, “That is why I am on this earth, today and every day.”

I WILL PUT THE WORDS IN YOUR MOUTH.

A FEW MONTHS AGO at the Ashland Independent Film Festival where *The Fair Trade* was screening, I was on a panel with about eight other documentary filmmakers in front of a packed audience. We answered a lot of questions, one of which was to provide the one word or phrase that was at the heart of each filmmaker’s work.

I was scrambling because that answer for me is “God” but I didn’t want to appear to be mocking people who may no longer have a reference for that word. So, I prayed. The scripture “God is love” came to me, and it struck me more as a name than a characteristic. I thought, where else does he equate his name with a characteristic so powerfully like that?

So that’s the name I used. You must have *Love*—to see the story, to sustain you through making the film. Then you put *Love* into the film and if it works, the audience has *Love* stirred in them. Then abandon the film—which is just a vehicle anyway—and seize the moment together until it fades. In other words, put yourself in the path of *Love*.



In the audience at that panel was the festival's lifetime achievement award winner and a father of documentary film, Albert Maysles. That afternoon at his own forum and that night when he was giving an acceptance speech, I was told by an ecstatic festival director that Maysles said the core of his 60 years of work had been articulated by a woman in a panel earlier, and he could not say it better himself: That the heart of it was LOVE. Ladies and Gentlemen, you are going to see Albert Maysles. *But it's going to be God.*

Maybe anecdotes like this sound just like natural events born from ideas or daydreams. Okay. Perhaps that is a different way of saying that the invisible may be more familiar than we think. It is certainly more accessible than most people think.

The longer I live, the more vivid and literal the spiritual becomes. Being directed by the unseen down to the minutiae of "turn to the left, turn to the right, stand up in the middle of church"—such extravagant intimacy God desires with us! And here is a supreme irony that God loves: living sacrifice, abandonment of self, nothing to lose, walk in the path that you are shown, listen for the whisper—behold the powerful, visionary,

violent and original work that results! I am reminded of General Lowenhielm's toast at the end of *Babette's Feast*:

What we have chosen is given us,
and what we have refused
is also granted us.
It is poured out upon us
in abundance.

The Japanese poet Hirate Masahide wrote this brief poem:

The barn burned down
Now I can see the moon

The Artist-intercessor is called to stand in the gap between those two lines—in the ashes of "the barn burned down" and point to the moon. One half in suffering and one half in hope. We are expected to live there, in that tension. Not to define the gap or fill it but to bridge it. So people can cross over the bridge of us, artists must live in the tension between being flesh and yet being made in the image of God—made of dust but with eternity in our hearts.



collage using image by Bryce Boyer



BEHAVE MORE LIKE A SPY.

THIS DOES HAVE VERY PRACTICAL applications. Practice recognizing God's voice through all of your senses—the ones that are made from dust and the ones that are made from eternity.

Perfect your craft, and forget about strategies for the life you have envisioned and think is due to you. Stop acting like a corporate executive and behave more like a spy: Know the voices of your contact. Wait for your signal. Obey it whether it makes sense to you or not, trusting that the guy in control knows the big picture and expects you to act on his word alone—as though he were the head of a great body of witnesses around the world.

You cannot possibly know when or where the word will be revealed to you, or the person to whom God has given the ears to hear. It is an heroic challenge, to be sure, but I tend at least on this point to agree with the radical French cleric León Bloy who said:

Any Christian
who is not a hero
is a pig.

What freedom we have to be heroic—we are

Aaron Ballard in *Praying the Hours*



not afraid to die! Not bound by popularity or goals of conventional success, all we have to do is tell the truth. It draws people to itself. Every soul yearns for God because he put the longing in us—it is one of the ways we are made in his image. He yearns to be found. This is an irresistible combination.

If we, as artist-intercessors, are invited by God to serve the divine reconciliation by filming our stories, by singing our arias, by painting our canvases, or by designing sacred spaces, we dare not respond with platitudes or tired clichés, but we better respond and we're pigs if we don't.

We answer with our lives. We give them Jesus.

©2008 Lauralee Farrer, Burning Heart Productions [http://www.burningheartproductions.com]. All rights reserved. Lauralee can be reached via e-mail at lauralee@burningheartproductions.com | designed by Loren A. Roberts/Hearken Creative [http://www.hearkencreative.com]

LAURALEE FARRER

has been writing, producing, and directing for over 30 years. She is founder and principal filmmaker for Burning Heart productions and the award-winning documentary *Laundry and Tosca* (2005), *The Fair Trade* (2008), and the narrative feature *Praying the Hours* (2010). She has produced events combining film screenings, music, social activism awareness, and public speaking at film festivals, conferences, colleges, summits, churches, and professional and private environments in recent years.



PRAYING THE HOURS

Eight characters are impacted at epiphanal moments throughout one day when they are each given chances to glimpse the eternal. A narrative feature (2010)

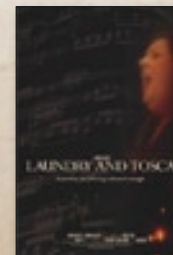
www.prayingthehours.com



THE FAIR TRADE

When a freak accident kills her fiancé, 26-year-old Tamara Johnston charges God to show her "a life worth living—or I'm out of here." A trip to Africa teaches her what is required for a sustainable life. A 60-minute documentary (2008)

www.thefairtrademovie.com



LAUNDRY AND TOSCA

A woman with an improbable dream to sing opera discovers that sometimes, just following the dream can be enough for an abundant life. A 30-minute documentary (2005)

www.laundryandtosca.com