

Word from the Potter's House by Tim Kumfer

February 28, 2016

Third Sunday in Lent

I want to thank you for the invitation to again be with you today and share some of what we are learning and working with at The Potter's House. This Wednesday we celebrate one year of being re-opened in the new space. Preparing for this message has given me an opportunity to reflect on this past year, which I can honestly say has been both the most rewarding and challenging year of my life. This week I took a day away from the shop to catch my breath, to try to catch up to everything that's developed over the past year, and where I believe we are being led as a mission. This small 'a' anniversary has also given me pause to remember and celebrate all those hands that have carried and cared for us. We would not be where we are, would likely no longer be at all, apart from the thick webs of solidarity we are spun in with Seekers Church. So thank you for that ongoing relationality that sustains us as an organization and nurtures me as I attempt to provide leadership to it.

My message today is not going to hew too closely to the lectionary texts. I decided to forgo an extensive exegetical dig in order to do something a little more playful. I want to toss up and turn around this word-image of the Cloud found in 1 Corinthians. And in the process of wrestling with and riffing off the Apostle's words, we just might find ourselves looping back to the Prophet Isaiah and the vision of extravagant welcome across and amongst difference.

Paul's unenviable task in this letter is to reign in and redirect from afar the messianic community at Corinth, which is undergoing internal strife, ideological conflict, and more. The Cloud appears in his argument about turning from immoral acts aligned with the dominant Roman imperial culture. Its logic is one of warning, and it is easy to see why the lectionary planners clipped it for lent – two thousand years later we can hear Paul's fatherly concern and frustration – 'let this be a lesson to you!' But let's take a moment to tease out the Cloud's multivalence, its meanings here beyond the rhetorical.

Our ancestors were all under the cloud, and passed through the sea – the Cloud names a common ancestry and a shared story, an ur-unity flowing underneath folds and fissures. It whispers an earth memory, a dreamtime when divine songlines issued forth unmediated by Temple or Text. Experienced in and through the elements, the divine presence as Pillar of Cloud and Fire pulls the fugitives towards their liberation, propelling them into Exodus flight. *And all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea* – this Cloud names not only an event of liberation or light for passage but an emergent and yet unbounded social formation. The people who were 'no people' / the 'nobody people' who passed through the sea / in process becoming a people for all / all peoples. *And they were struck down in the wilderness* – To trace this origin story does not secure the future for its tellers. For this vaporous inheritance could ensnare as easily as it shelters, the fate of its children serving as a moral lesson for others. And in any event, you can be certain the Cloud will be undergone by each of us as **ordeal**.

In her new book *Cloud of the Impossible*, feminist theologian Catherine Keller traces the chiasmic, or X-shaped, relation between two billowing associations of meaning attributed to the Cloud. The first, arising in ancient and medieval Christian mysticism, is negative theology's Cloud of

Unknowing. The second, growing from contemporary process theology, is the Cloud of collective relations, both cultural and ecological, that she names planetary entanglement. She writes “in the dark theopetics of the cloud, might the very fold between our non-knowing and our nonseparability begin to appear as possibility itself?”

To put it in my own words, how might the unnamable mystery of the divine intersect unexpectedly with our earthly interconnectedness? In what ways does the unfathomable nature of God link up to the infinite demands of our social movements? Would this denial of all attempts to box in God provide contours for how we approach the multiplicity of cultural difference? Delving further into this Cloudy relation of mysticism and movement, could we join in an Exodus flight from political empire and ecological peril?

These are some of the big questions that occupy my mind, and shape how I understand and envision our mission at The Potter’s House. And they are not new questions. Re-reading this past week Elizabeth O’Connor’s chapter on The Marks of Liberating Community, a Cloud appeared. Beginning on the need for a clear, radical commitment to the oppressed, her chapter ends with a quote from the *Cloud of Unknowing* and an invitation to silence. The Cloud, it seems, has been enveloping our community for some time! Here are some of the ways we are seeking to dive further into its unknown depths:

1) We desire to be a space that, in Keller’s words, “practices nonseparable difference” and “greet the unknown with trembling hospitality.” Some examples from this past week might help here. On Wednesday, people across the intellectual ability and mental health spectrums came together for intimate and evangelical community as Jubilee Church. On Friday, we welcomed Art Between Us, an intentionally interfaith open mic for women. On Saturday, two transgender South Asian poets delivered an avant-garde performance deconstructing gender as a western colonial imposition. On Sunday, we welcomed the

Muslim Writer's Collective, where young and progressive Muslims spoke back to media characterizations and shared their stories of hope. For some, bringing all these different perspectives and practices together would be crazy making; for us it is at the core of who we are and how we understand this cultural moment. It is about repenting from a Christian history in which the church enforced conformity on its cultural others, often violently so. Rather than shutting down difference in service to some higher – and typically implicitly white – unity, we want to weave a fabric of relationality across our many cultural differences that enriches our lives and increases our shared resiliency. To borrow a phrase from Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas, we want “A world in which there is room for many worlds.”

2) We nurture the Exodus movements of the multitude and infuses this work of liberation with love. Over the past year, The Potter's House has really grown again as a grassroots gathering place to raise consciousness and share visions of a radically transformed world. We have become a hub for the Black Lives Matter movement locally and hosted half a dozen black authors sharing their perspectives on how to dismantle structural racism, including poverty and the prison system, and build a society that values black life, and by extension all life. Worker's rights have been highlighted from the field to the table, and workplace democracy and worker ownership have been explored as alternatives to our current economic inequality. We have lifted up local earthkeepers working to end extreme energy extraction and hosted conversation around Pope Francis' incredible encyclical On Care for Our Common Home. The housing crisis in Washington, particularly in gentrifying neighborhoods like Adams Morgan where the displacement of low-income people of color has been rampant, has been a central topic of concern and base-building. Through our events and the resources we offer in our bookstore, we have been privileged to move closer to the swirling center of DC activism. And to be honest we've been a little surprised to

find so much openness to our spiritual roots and faith convictions amongst this more lefty and seemingly skeptical crowd. Something new is emerging, and some of the old divides we have inherited are breaking down. People are hungry for something to give their whole lives to, for a durability of purpose that extends beyond the protest action. As Keller writes, "spirited new solidarities of the secular with a religiously earthbound multiplicity seem to be forming." It has been both humbling and thrilling to join this unexpected political assemblage, daily creating this queer coalition for justice, love, and care for the earth.

3) We experiment with new and yet unknown forms for exploring faith in community. The Potter's House has always lived in this tension – not exactly a church or a business, or even a ministry in the traditional sense. This hybrid identity is a real gift, one that enables us to take risks and try out things that others might not be able to. While the rise of the 'nones,' those who identify with no particular faith tradition, and increased religious diversity can be perceived as a threat by the mainline church, we see it as a real opportunity – and one that aligns with The Potter's House's original purpose. What communal experiences can we create that meet people right where they are yet invite them to this deeper non-knowing, this indeterminate life in and under the Cloud? How might the particular symbols and language systems of our traditions shift from being barriers to entry towards prisms that we pick up and play with, or even put down, in pursuit of this path of mysticism and movement? On this regard, Eighth Day has been a real partner, offering the Wisdom Circle and Sacred Space gatherings out of a desire to greet this shifting reality. We recently launched a group that uses Krista Tippett's On Being program as a shared ground for discussion, and have received tremendous response. We will be working with the Interfaith Conference to develop dinner dialogues and other opportunities. And given all the creative mystics gathered in this space today, I imagine more

possibilities could emerge in the months ahead...

It is an exciting time to be a part of the life of The Potter's House. But I wouldn't be telling the whole truth if I didn't say it can also be tiring and challenging! I've learned a lot this past year about my gifts...and I've learned a lot about areas in which I need to grow or share leadership with others. I want to develop more of a contemplative practice personally and infuse that organizationally, operating out of a deeper center that enables me to express vulnerability alongside a real clarity of purpose. We're really wrestling with how to encourage commitment and accountability at all levels of the organization without relying heavily on the punitive measures found in most workplaces. And we want to find better ways to encourage ownership of the big picture, transformative vision – even if someone's primary duty is making lattes or washing dishes. After the renovation our community has shifted to become a lot younger, and moving forward we want to be more intentional about being intergenerational in both what we offer and how we reach out. We want to find exciting and accessible ways to share the particular wisdom of The Church of the Saviour with the newer members of our community. We are very much in process – and want to be open and listening for how we might change and grow.

I remember about eight years sitting across from Gordon around one of the old trapezoidal tables at The Potter's House. I was fresh off a big break up, deep in vocational discernment, and just generally sort of a mess. I was, perhaps, the 1,000th person in that position that had sat across from Gordon at that same table. And yet his words have stayed with me, like few other conversations have. He said, in essence, recognizing what you don't know, and can't claim to know, is the beginning. I was being invited, I realize now, to indeterminate life in and under the Cloud. May each of us move deeper into that path prepared by the Pillar that goes before

US.