

SUSAN HOWE AND ELIJAH: A SENSE OF HISTORY

1 KINGS 19:1-18

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We are in week two of a three week sermon series on American poets and the Bible. Last week we talked about Charles Olson and Job, today Susan Howe and Elijah.

We said last week there is a deep spiritual hunger today. It comes from the unrelenting organization of our lives into spread sheets and power points, from getting slotted into preference categories for slick marketing strategies. The wonder and mystery of our humanity is lost.

What does it mean to be a human being? What does it look and feel like? The poets we are considering and the biblical voices that resonate with them offer insights that go beyond our demographic consumer profiles.

My thesis is that you and I, people of faith, share the life of the spirit with poets and painters. Artists take us beyond our sometimes limited perspectives and help us see and hear the larger truth and meaning of life.

Perhaps you read the excerpt in today's bulletin from Susan Howe's poem "Thorow." Before we go any further, I want to say a word about 'free verse' poetry and the difficulty of understanding much of modern poetry from Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams to today's poets.^[i]

A hundred years ago avant-garde poets and artists defined themselves by breaking down the old forms of art, literature and architecture. What used to be standard poetic form of iambic pentameter was thrown out. They felt the profundity of a poem should not be formed according to an arbitrary rhyme scheme but find its form in content. So free verse poetry was born.

Today's avant-garde poets, and Susan Howe is one of them, continue this tradition of breaking down old forms by challenging the next obvious form in the poem – the line.

You can see in some of Howe's poetry a jumble of lines. One I love is a page in her work, *The Non-Conformist's Manual* that describes Mary Magdelene at the empty tomb. As a painter Howe makes use of the visual formatting of her poetry.

The mass of poetic phrases and words reflects the power, confusion and fear that Mary experienced on that first day of Resurrection. Free verse poetry has increasingly become a visual experience. The layout of the poem is as important as the variable sounds and music of the free verse.

What about difficulty? At the start of his epic poem *Paterson*, William Carlos Williams said, "I wanted to write a poem, but a poem that you would have to work to understand."

Why should we have to work to understand a poem? Why should a poem not be crystal clear upon the first reading?

Perhaps the best answer is that life is rarely crystal clear. Life is ambiguous; has shades of grey and ambivalence; life involves the changing of our minds, saying one

thing, meaning another. Not to mention language – which like any living thing is constantly undergoing change.

I love George Steiner's way of talking about the difficulty of poetry. "Poetry is knit of words compacted with every conceivable mode of operative force. These words are, as Coleridge said, 'hooked atoms,' so construed as to mesh and cross-mesh with the greatest possible cluster of other words in the reticulations of the total body of language.

The poet attempts to anchor the particular word in the dynamic mould of its own history, enriching the core of its present definition with the echo and alloy of its previous use.

The poet is an etymologist, often violent and arbitrary, who seeks to break open the eroded or frozen shell of speech in order to compel to daylight and release the dynamics, the primal crystallizations of perception that lie at the roots [of words].^[iii]

Susan Howe is such a poet. Her work *Singularities*, from which today's excerpt from "Thorow" was taken, uses history and language to probe the human experience. She is at times violent and arbitrary as she attempts to break the 'frozen shell of speech.'

It was on the life cycle at the Jewish Center that the meaning of Howe's poem finally emerged for me. I had read the poem fifteen or twenty times before but still felt that what I was perceiving were isolated portions of something much larger that I had not yet discerned.

There's something about peddling on a life cycle or a bicycle that suspends your brain from its normal rational/analytical activity and opens you to new ways of seeing. Suddenly the poem started making sense.

As you can see on your insert, Howe begins "Thorow" with a prose introduction. She talks about living in Lake George, New York. She describes the rural poverty and commercialism that surrounded her there and cheapened the natural beauty of the place.

Then she goes deeper. She talks about the fall of light and snow as she traced and searched the land for its stories. She says the Adirondacks *occupied* her. She hears voices in the sky, water, and land. Voices of those who invaded and inhabited the region hundreds of years ago: European adventurers, native Indians, the clashing of white and native cultures, the silenced suffering of Indian ancestors.

In one line she says the boundaries of official history were erased for her: "fence blown down in a winter storm; darkened by outstripped possession; field stretching out of the world; this book is as old as the people; there are traces of blood in a fairy tale."

Howe's embracing of the land is reminiscent of Charles Olson's "locating himself" in the land – which we talked about last week. Both are New England poets, both echo the Transcendental tradition of Emerson and Thoreau. Both delve deeply into history.

But whereas Olson peels back the onion layers of history, Susan Howe's imagination fills up with the voices and stories of history, of human ancestors privileged and oppressed. At one point she is not clear where her identity ends and that of the other begins. She becomes our history. She is our story.

What is so striking about Susan Howe's poetry for you and me is her willingness to risk her own identity tracing, searching for her spiritual roots in the human activity that precedes her in her native northeast.

Another way to say it is that she identifies with the larger human family in her poetry rather than her WASP ancestry alone. She challenges the official record of human events, handed down by white historians and biographers. She rewrites a history closer to the ground of being from which all of us emerge. This poetic imagination, rewriting history is a practiced form of poetry used for the past century by other great American poets.

Willing to suspend her white European heritage and reflecting her New England tradition of Calvinist-angst and repentance she mourns the tragedy and slaughter of native Indian culture and ritual. "The German Flatts;" she says, "their women old men and children; numerous than I imagined; singing their War song; I am; part of their encroachment."

Then the remarkable paragraph in your excerpt today. It comes close to the end of the poem, preceding a three page chaos of words and lines, that eventually straightens out into a page of twelve made-up words comprised of partially recognizable syllables. Together they restate, you sense, some deep truth her exploration and experimentation has uncovered – a final expiation for the sins of European greed and conquest.

Elegiac western Imagination;

Mysterious confined enigma;
a possible field of work;

The expanse of unconcealment;
so different from all maps;

Spiritual typography of elegy;

Nature in us as a Nature;
the actual one the ideal self;

tent tree sere leaf spectre;
Unconscious demarkations range;

I pick my compass to pieces;

Dark here in the driftings;
in the spaces of drifting;

Complicity battling redemption."

What is going on here with Howe? She discovers herself undergoing a transformation from the received tradition and history of the west into a mysterious, spiritual amalgam of human compassion, complicity and reconciliation. A closer representation of humanity – a truer reflection of the forces of civilization that have clashed and shaped our world.

Susan Howe's willingness to allow herself to be filled up and give voice to the stories of the human family is not dissimilar from Elijah's experience in today's reading from 1 Kings. The prophet in this account has just upstaged the spiritual advisors of Queen Jezebel. In fact, Elijah has demonstrated the power of his God over the gods of Jezebel's ministers by inviting Yaweh to scorch them in a show of divine power and revenge. Jezebel puts a bounty on Elijah's head. Everyone is looking for him. In despair he wanders into the wilderness where angels minister to him and guide him to Mt. Horeb where Moses received the Ten Commandments. There on Horeb – the southern kingdom name for Sinai – Elijah, standing perhaps on the very ground Moses did when God wrote the commandments on tablets of stone, finds refuge in a cave.

Through the night a fierce storm blows through the hills; then an earthquake shakes the mountain, still Elijah has no perception of God. Then at dawn in the silence of a lonely mountain passage just before sunrise Elijah hears God's voice – in the silence!

Whereas Moses sees God face to face, hears God's voice, and carries God's written text, Elijah only hears the silence, sees God's backside, has no text or 'word' from God. Elijah discerns God's presence in what begins as God's absence.

What is happening to Elijah? The stillness fills him with the voice of creation. He is reminded that he, Elijah, is but a small player in the scheme of holy history. But that he is also a vessel to be filled with God's presence. From here Elijah goes back to civilization to take his place in God's history to finish his mission as spokesperson for God's justice.

Just as Susan Howe allows herself to be filled with the larger forces of life that inhabit the Adirondacks, Elijah allows himself to be filled with God's presence on what was Sinai, the most famous location of God's verbal and written revelation, but is now renamed, for Elijah, Horeb the place of God's revelation in silence.

Elijah and Howe become vehicles, messengers, prophets of divine truth otherwise unavailable to us.

It is striking that in such lonely and barren places Howe and Elijah find their deepest communion with God, with the holy life force.

This is the key that unlocks the mysteries of revelation in our own lives. We often confine ourselves to understanding and defining the world in traditional manners and old behaviors that inhibit daily life and force conformity.

But Elijah and Susan Howe explore the whole realm of truth, meaning and knowledge come what may, following where it leads. Theirs are singular acts of courage and faith, charting new territory, discovering new 'texts' of holy writ, shaping a new spirituality, receiving new identities.

I wonder if we gave ourselves permission, if we opened our ears to the silence of some barren wilderness if we might not hear the voices of that place cry out to us for an audience. Cry out to us as the very voice of God that whispers into our hearts.

That wilderness for you and me could be just about any lone and barren place – a chronic illness, a broken relationship, a dashed dream.

Listening with the ear of a poet, the ear of faith means complete surrender, not knowing the outcome in advance, giving ourselves into the pain and suffering of others as

much as to our own dreams of glory and victory. Giving ourselves into the stillness and even the terror of what appears at first to be God's absence – but then breaks open into new holy awareness. Amen.

^[i] Marjorie Perloff "After Free Verse the New Non-Linear Poetries," from Poetry On and Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998) 141. A very helpful essay on the evolution of free verse poetry that claims that there are so many variations of free verse poetry it is almost impossible to define.

^[iii] George Steiner, On Difficulty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) 21.