WOMEN AND THE WORD 2001

Incarnating Resurrection: Living Life More Abundantly

Vivian Ruth Waltz

Blue skies are everywhere, But not so blue here as there...

While dark clouds blocked the sun in Boston, a window in our souls was opened wide, flooding us with resurrection light at Boston University School of Theology’s 17th annual “Women and the Word” conference sponsored by the Anna Howard Shaw Center. Held from March 21–23 this year, the conference leaders included a womanist poet, a pastoral therapist, and a feminist dancer—all academic theologians who envisioned resurrection through the frame of their rich experience, enlightening the conference participants with the diversity of their perspectives.

The Reverend Karen Baker-Fletcher, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Theology and Culture at Claremont (California) School of Theology, began her plenary presentation “Can These Dry Bones Live?: From Survival to Abundant Life” with her poem “Black Migration, from which the above lines are excerpted. She wrote the poem for a girl named Cheri Hawkins, who was killed at the age of 15 while walking to the Indianapolis Children’s Museum, and also “for all the anonymous children of resurrection faith.” In the wake of the high school shooting in nearby Santee, California, and distressed by a recent experience in which her daughter intervened to stop threats of violence in her own school, Baker-Fletcher acknowledged the difficulty of speaking about resurrection faith. “Our children, being the most vulnerable in this national family, bear the symptoms of a dysfunctional, violent, adult society... How do we talk about resurrection faith in a world where children are killing children?”

Baker-Fletcher stressed that resurrection faith takes on new depth and meaning in the face of real life events. “Beyond all the academic controversies about the person of Jesus and the work of Jesus, the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, the literal resurrection and the figurative resurrection, are we willing to stand up for the life of another?”

In a culture infested with violence, Baker-Fletcher exhorted that resurrection faith demands courage, reminding us that Jesus charged his followers to “Take heart” and “Be of good courage.”

But courage requires vulnerability, a heart open to the Spirit of the living God, according to Baker-Fletcher. “Biblically, without the sacramental Spirit of God we are mere dust. The child who kills, and the children who are killed,

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In the opening lines of her sermon in Marsh Chapel on Thursday afternoon, the Reverend Kathleen J. Greider, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at Claremont School of Theology, acknowledged that most of us come to worship feeling less than resurrected. Choosing Jeremiah 17:5-10 and John 15:1-6 as her scriptural texts, she sought to illuminate the unpopular but biblical pathways to “Abundance by Curse, Drought, and Pruning.”

Heeding the prophet Jeremiah’s warning in verse 5: “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord,” Greider maintained that our capacity for resurrection and abundance depends on our determination not to romanticize human relationships. It depends on our commitment to wrestle with, in her words, “the agony of love.” For the prophet admonishes that the human heart is, according to alternate translations of verse 9: “deep,” “fickle,” “deceitful,” “devious,” “desperately sick,” “desperately corrupt,” “ perverse,” and “beyond cure.”

If our ultimate trust is not in the Holy of Holies, Jeremiah pronounces the curse in verse 6. “They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness.” But Greider also preached a message of hope, saying that human beings, like desert plants, are “drought tolerant.” Speaking to our context as pastors, she proclaimed that God’s...
Retention Study is available complete with charts and statistics. We will be adding more details about the November 1 (All Saint's Day) celebration when we present the Anna Howard Shaw Award to Yolanda Pupo-Ortiz. It is a privilege and a pleasure to tell the story of some of God's people at work and play. We welcome your comments and suggestions about our Web site, newsletter, and programming. Please let us hear from you.

Women and the Word

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grace continues to flow in periods of drought in ministry and life and that there is ultimately no substitute for "the water of life." Jeremiah agrees that even "in the year of drought... [a tree planted by water] does not cease to bear fruit."

But fruit-bearing requires pruning, according to the gospel of John. "I am the true vine and my Father is the vintner... Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." (John 15:5) This is what Greider calls pruning for abundance: "Wise pruners cut back even fruit-bearing branches." She concluded her sermon by observing that, in the end, the gospel of John and the prophecy of Jeremiah offer very similar words of abundance: "In the disparity of deserts and riverbanks, in the mysteries of drought and pruning, quite apart from our consciousness or choice there is one constant: Yahweh is with us and we are with God."

In the plenary session on Thursday afternoon, "Roots Reaching for Water: Vitality Amid Limits and Suffering," Kathleen Greider described her pastoral theology and practice as a "search for words that resurrect the dead." She drew attention to the enormous amount of hidden emotional suffering in our society and referred to studies which reveal that up to one in four families have a member with a diagnosable psychiatric disorder. In her experience as a pastoral counselor, Greider has found that the prevalence of mental disease means that "vitality is a precious and threatened commodity."

Using findings from her award-winning research project, "Meaning and Ministry in Narratives of Mental Illness: Persons with Emotional Disabilities Discuss Soul-Sickness, the Sacred, and Healing," Greider focused her presentation on the question, "What does it look like to heal according to those who have suffered?" What enables vitality for those who have experienced profound psycho-spiritual anguish?

Interweaving video clips of her study participants, Greider classified her conclusions into four categories.

The first category of healing was admitting life's mystery and accepting the paradoxes which mental illness brings. Those who fared best in her study didn't fight the ambiguity inherent in the struggle of living with an emotional disability. Hardening back to the words of Karen Baker-Fletcher: "What makes sense may not actually be true. And what is true may not make sense."

The second of Greider's findings was that ministry presence renews vitality. Here ministers need to remember the words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Watch with me awhile." Sitting in silence and being present with someone in severe emotional turmoil is a challenge for pastors because, Greider points out, "Sometimes hell has no words." It requires courage, a willingness to be vulnerable, and a heart open to the Spirit of the living God, all echoes of Karen Baker-Fletcher's understanding of resurrection faith.

Religious practices, religious community, and spirituality—often in the absence of the institutional church—was the third category enabling vitality amidst suffering. Drawing a distinction between empty ritual and life-giving faith, Greider claimed that, "Religion is for people afraid of going to hell. Spirituality is for those who've already been there." She found that spirituality increases endurance and vitality, and that wrestling with God through the slings and arrows of human existence brings a "connection to aliveness and power beyond oneself."

Finally, holistic care is crucial in fostering vitality for the emotionally disabled. Physical exercise and other forms of body movement such as dance can be a powerful healing force. Aesthetic pursuits, including visual and performing arts, encourage creativity in facing what Greider called "the trial and error of living." One man in a video clip testified to the healing power of his artistic expression. After years of anger at God, he finally asked himself if he would choose to have a life free of his mental illness. His answer was no. He would not give up the intimate knowledge of life in all its fragile beauty for anything in the world.

Thursdays evening's entertainment was provided by the Reverend Linda Bandeler, a minister of the ancient art of storytelling from the Methodist Church of Scotland. Lively music and humor punctuated her stories and provided a refreshing break from the intellectual rigor of the conference.

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The Reverend Dr. Prathia Hall—Passionate about Justice.
(Associate Professor and Martin Luther King Jr.
Chair in Social Ethics)

The Boston University School of Theology community greeted the announcement that The Reverend Dr. Prathia Hall had accepted the position of Associate Professor and the Martin Luther King Junior Chair in Social Ethics at the Boston University School of Theology with a great deal of rejoicing and relief. This was an appropriate reaction because finally, after a three-year search involving scores of candidates, interviews, and decisions, a person had been found who met the approval of all the invested constituencies.

Women and African Americans were especially pleased about her appointment. How does Dr. Hall feel about this fuss? She was just as excited about her appointment, and for similar reasons. To her, the appointment had a sense of “right fit,” and she was excited because there were “some things about the Boston University heritage that were honorable and meaningful, not the least of which was Martin Luther King’s experience here,” and further, that Boston University was the “place where Howard Thurman served as only he could.”

“Then,” said Dr. Hall, “there is also the Anna Howard Shaw history. This School has a history of being deliberate about inclusion. As a former colleague said, the polar opposite of exclusion is not inclusion, but integrity.” Dr. Hall sees her appointment as an opportunity to test the University’s continued faith to keep with its heritage and movement towards integrity. As she conversed and visited with the BUSTH community, she sensed an affirmation of her journey that pleased her. This intentional journey towards the faith and struggle for humanity and freedom for African Americans, women, and all oppressed peoples which started many years ago would be respected, encouraged, and continued in this place.

Dr. Hall comes to Boston University after a year at the International Theological Center in Atlanta where she was one of the first two scholars selected to participate in a program launched in 1999/2000. The program honors national or international womanist scholars and provides a year of opportunity to continue scholarly work, teach a course, and deliver a public lecture.

She describes her experience at Princeton Theological where she did her graduate work in Theology (M.Div., Th.M., and Ph.D.) as “good,” but one which was unexpectedly protracted because of an automobile accident that interrupted her studies. She was fortunate to have several outstanding scholars and mentors there, and recalls especially the assistance, support, and “much encouragement” of Peter Paris, who was her advisor in Social Ethics in the African American Church. “It is this kind of help that women scholars need to help them through the difficult periods,” she said.

Advice for Women Scholars

“Women must first of all believe in ourselves, and know why we want to do what we are doing. We must have an appetite for the work, for the life and work of scholarship, and for the life of teaching and mentoring. We need people in our lives who will pull with us when we need to be pulled, and push us when we need to be pushed. Women often do not have that kind of support system and, especially if we have families and young children, scholarship becomes particularly challenging.”

She emphasized that in order to reach their full potential, women scholars need a good family support system, a friendship system, and a love of the work. She herself experienced enormous obstacles that had nothing to do with the academic program. During that period, she was fortunate to have a good mentor. “A good mentor is essential especially when your own faith fails.” Finally, but just as importantly, women scholars need to understand the particular school and the politics of the program in which they are enrolled.

Her own faith has sustained her in the tough times. “I could not have done it [completed the doctoral program] if I hadn’t believed that is what God wanted me to do. I was trying to be faithful to my call, and therefore I was confident that God would see me through and give me the strength when I needed it.”

A Passion for Justice

She has sustained that passion for the rights of all people ever since her involvement with the Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement. She still believes that was a righteous and just cause, and maintains that it was for this reason that she and her colleagues were willing to take the risks they did. “The movement was about people,” she said. “We helped them. They helped us. Our goal was human dignity and rights for all people. We were encouraged by the dignity of the people we found in segregated cities, who had lived with injustice for generations, yet managed to maintain their integrity and had a deep-seated longing for freedom. We brought infrastructure and support. They gave us what they had—wisdom and faith.”

Prathia Hall felt a strong call to ministry “from the beginning.” Born to parents who were both involved in ministry in North Philadelphia, it was to that church community that Dr. Hall returned after seminary and where she still continues to minister today. She developed an “expanding sense of call and ministry while in seminary.” She proceeded to integrate the parochial life of the parish with the academy, something she describes as, “not an easy row to hoe.” Her church became a kind of laboratory in a community where people hurt the most. Here, she was able to study and
integrate social ethics, moral issues, and justice concerns in an environment where they “belonged together.”

Marks in Her Life

The most profound impact in her life came from her parents who, according to Prathia, conducted a “very faithful ministry,” which she has been privileged to continue. “It was about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and fighting for issues of justice.” Her parents raised her to be passionate about justice, and to believe that she could do anything worthwhile thing that she wanted to do. “That put before us a tall order as to what kind of people we would become, so their gifts, skills, and wisdom had a most profound impact on me. There were many others—the churchwomen and mothers in our community for example. As a teenager, I heard Nanny Holmes Burroughs preach, and I heard many giants of the race fighting for valiant causes—like Howard Thurman. Those experiences marked my life.”

Other experiences marked her life as well, making her life no straight line, no crystal stair. There was, for example, the white high school teacher who insisted that she “had no right to want to go to law school,” a desire Prathia had expressed to her. She attempted to put a ceiling on young Prathia’s aspirations. However, her Dad told her to wipe her tears away and “go back and make a liar” out of the teacher. This episode made her “determined to do my best to be the best.”

Excited about the Future

Now, so many years after that unhappy but defining time in her life, Prathia Hall is one of the best-known, respected, and sought-after preacher-scholars in the United States, and she is “excited about the future,” looking forward to good things here at Boston University. “That I came to the King Chair is, I hope, significant. I hope to continue research to put on record the work of church women and women in the Civil Rights Movement.” She is teaching about those things and students have been “wonderfully” receiving material in Social Ethics. She looks forward to continuing her teaching and writing.

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Friday morning’s plenary was titled “Water for These Bones: Abundant Living Through the Ministry of Dance” by Kathryn A. Breazeale, Ph.D., currently Visiting Instructor in Religion and Peace Studies at Prescott College in Prescott, Arizona. Picking up on Kathleen Greider’s references to depression, Breazeale talked about the times in her own life when she felt like she was “losing the ribbon to [her] dancing shoes” and was in desperate need of resurrection. She explained that dancing is so integral to her identity and spiritual formation that she is “being created by the process of dancing.”

But dance is not just a means of personal transformation for Breazeale. Her presentation centered on dance as a vehicle of social transformation, as a form of resistance and empowerment for oppressed peoples across times and cultures. Specifically, she focused on the history of dance and resistance to dance in the Christian tradition. She used photographic slides of art to illuminate the movement from dance as an aesthetic pursuit and entertainment to dance as a sign of leadership, authority, and political power.

The Hebrew Bible has an abundance of references to dance. The psalms of David include words for “skip,” “whirl,” “rotate,” “leap,” “dance in a circle,” and “dance in a playful manner.” Like the psalms, there were dances of joy and dances of lament. Breazeale holds a conviction that dance is the proper response to the commandment to love God with all your heart, soul, and strength. In the New Testament, the Aramaic word for dance is translated “rejoice.” The early Christian church was enlivened by speculation on who was dancing the “ring dance” in heaven, the dance of the angels around God.

But by the early medieval period, the Christian Church began to legislate against dance. Later dance gave way to sacred drama. The people were no longer participants, but became spectators of the drama, which was used as a tool for religious education.

According to Breazeale, dance always challenges existing power structures; those attracted to dance are often those denied power.

Toward the end of her presentation, Breazeale explored some of the reasons that dance has been resisted in the Christian tradition. She named six properties of dance—body, power, sexuality, mortality, relationships, and identity—which stir up the depth of human experience. Returning to the conference theme that incarnating resurrection takes courage and a willingness to be vulnerable, Breazeale advised pastors to honor resistance to dance in our own congregations while encouraging us to provide opportunities for those whose worship experience would be enriched and transformed by the power of dance.

After a lively panel discussion where the three presenters answered questions and made some profound connections between their diverse vocations and experiences, we gathered around the labyrinth in the ballroom to dance “Joy to the World” in a ring. Our closing worship service included singing while receiving communion beautifully arrayed on a circular altar (see photo, above), which had been slowly transformed throughout the conference from a pile of dry bones, to include earth and grass spouting from the bones, baby daffodil bulbs in full bloom around the table, bowls of water for parched hands and faces, flickering scented candles, glass plates of creamy milk and sweet honey, loaves of crusty bread in all shapes and shades of brown, and glittering ceramic chalices filled with deep red wine and juice. A glimpse, a whiff, a taste, a touch, an echo of living life more abundantly. Incarnating resurrection, indeed.
Dr. Kathi Breazeale began the 2001 “Women and the Word” pre-conference session by demonstrating the interconnectedness of God and Creation as participants made a web together with yards of string. As the string connected all of us in the room, Dr. Breazeale suggested that God is in the energy that connects and sustains our relationships with one another.

About forty people gathered for the pre-conference session, held on Wednesday, March 21, where featured conference speaker Kathryn Breazeale, visiting professor in religion and peace studies at Prescott College (Prescott, AZ), led us through a ninety-minute session on feminist-process theology.

Many participants attended the session looking for a general overview of process theology, since the field was new to them. Others were intrigued by the relationship between feminist theology and process theology.

God is also present in the web of relationships of which we are a part. Instead of acting on the web of relationships from the outside, God is the energy that connects us in life-giving relationships with one another. The nature of the web is such that our actions impact the entire web, including God.

Process theology, developed from the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, who drew heavily on Darwin’s thought, holds that life is composed of a series of occasions. In each individual occasion, we face a number of options in how we might respond. Among those options is God luring us with the best possibility for the particular context. After we make a choice of how to respond, we move into the next occasion. Once again, we are faced with many possibilities including God’s—the best possibility.

There are implications for God and humans in process theology. First, we create with God. In each occasion, the choices we make and the ways God responds to those choices in presenting the best possibilities results in a co-creation between God and humanity. Second, while the nature of God as all-good stays the same, part of God does change in response to the activity of Creation. Third, there is no essential self in process theology since the self is becoming through relationships. Finally, human choice has great power in the web of Creation, so ethics are critical.

Dr. Breazeale suggested that it was appropriate for us to consider what stifles abundant life from a feminist-process theological view, as a group gathered to explore themes of abundant life over the next few days. From a process perspective, God is not all-powerful. Power is shared among all of Creation and God. “Because we are interconnected,” Dr. Breazeale stated, “the process world is very beautiful and is also very dangerous.” Every aspect of Creation has creativity that can be used to give as well as limit life.

In discussions of sin, the intersections of feminist and process theologies emerge. Drawing on the work of Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki who has written extensively on feminist-process theology, Dr. Breazeale shared three forms in which sin is experienced. Sin can be experienced as the past. Sin is our assent to the influence or power of the past. For instance, Suchocki talks about inherited/original sin as the structures of oppression such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc., into which we are born and that form us as young children before we have the opportunity to make a different choice. Those structures of oppression can be overcome only through efforts such as consciousness raising and social justice in which we join with others to make change.

Sin can be experienced as the future. One may deny life and life’s possibilities by closing the self off to the possibilities of the future. While death is part of the future, fear of death allows death to invade the present. If persons are so afraid of the future they cease to live fully, then death in the form of loss of relationships, crises of faith, and anxiety become part of the present.

Sin can be experienced as present. In the present, we can deny our interconnectedness with all of creation through “absolutizing” the self. We become totally self-centered, focusing only on our own needs regardless of how our actions impact others and God, or we become completely other-centered and lose our selves. To the extent to which we make choices based on the power of sin in past, present, and future, we limit abundant life for ourselves and others in the web of relationships.

Feminist-process theology provides an effective means for understanding God and divine and human activity, especially in situations wrought with limitations. God’s presence in each situation and creativity in responding to life-limiting situations with the best possibility given the limitations of a particular context, provides hope that the life-limiting, or sinful, influences of the past, present, and future are not necessarily permanent. God is continually trying to lure us toward abundant life for all of Creation.
News about STH Women

At the recent Boston Faith and Film Festival (February 9-10, 2001), Carrie Doehring was a discussant on the film *Breaking the Waves*. She also led and coordinated the Scholar's Symposium, in which four scholars presented papers on recent films that spoke to the festival theme: Death and Resurrection.

Deborah L. Luchnik was hired August 1, 2000, as the admissions officer. In this newly created position, she communicates with many prospective students via e-mail and face-to-face meetings. Deborah traveled home to St. Louis in September 2000 for an exciting event—her marriage to Jacob Schloss. In November, along with the director of admissions, Earl Beane, and five current STH students, Deborah attended "Exploration 2000," a United Methodist event for young people considering a call to ordained ministry held in Dallas, Texas. Deborah graduated from the School of Theology in May 2000 with an M.T.S. degree with a concentration in Women in Religion.

Nancy Routke (STM '00), who moved over to Andover Newton Theological School to work in the BTH office last fall, will be moving to Ireland in early fall or late summer this year. She will be starting the theology doctoral program at St. Patrick's College, which is located at the National University in Mararibo (about 30 minutes west of Dublin). According to Nancy, Maynooth is a Catholic school and she will be studying Moral Theology.

Linda Clark gave a speech at Princeton Seminary on February 6 entitled "Church Muse's Mission."

Congratulations to the Women Graduates of

MASTER OF DIVINITY (M.DIV.)
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Laura Rockwell
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Cecilia Robertts
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MANAGING EDITOR
Margaret Wiborg

EDITOR
Laurel Scott

CONTRIBUTORS
Dana Drum Hastings
Vivian Ruth Wales

PHOTOGRAPHS
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School of Theology
745 Commonwealth Avenue
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