

Writing Creatively for Congregations

Though billed as a workshop, this all-too-brief introduction to creative writing in congregations whet the appetite more than it satisfied. Julia McCray-Goldsmith charmed the forty-plus participants, and invited us to view the oft-times tedious job of writing for our congregations as a contemplative practice.

Whether one is writing for a church newsletter, the occasional informational bulletin, or online parish updates, she invited participants to enter the process as a practice of *lectio divina*, or prayerful listening to the people, situations, and environments we are writing about.

Handing out a passage from the book of Acts (the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples in the upper room at Pentecost), she asked participants to note which phrases struck them and why. Having modeled traditional *lectio divina* in this way, she then invited us to turn our attention to people in our congregation. She asked us to provide an interior narrative for someone in our congregation we do not know very well.

She suggested that we write best when we write for the person furthest removed from us in our audience. This exercise in inclusivity was well-received, and helped participants view their roles in a new way, offering hospitality rather than simply information.

With time quickly running out, McCray-Goldsmith invited us to “holy reading” of something in our congregational landscape—a pew, a ceiling, a painting, a carpet. Coming to such objects with the expectation that they have something to speak to us of God was a revelation for some, and good practice for all.

Given the popularity of the workshop, Julia McCray-Goldsmith should be encouraged to offer a longer version. The subject matter and interest demand a more contemplative “holy reading” than one hour can possibly afford. ■

—John R. Mabry

EPIPHANY WEST

Birthing the Word with Novelist Laurie King

by John R. Mabry



PHOTO BY SEAN MCCONNELL

Epiphany West’s last full day featured world-acclaimed novelist Laurie King, a graduate of CDSP and author of such mystery best-sellers as *The*

Beekeeper’s Apprentice and *To Play the Fool* (which is even set on Holy Hill where CDSP is located).

There were many King fans amongst the Epiphany West participants, and much excitement in the room when she was introduced. With her gray hair swept up in a bun, King was a dead ringer for a librarian or a wild-west schoolmarm. Her contemporary charm, however, was immediately evident as she apologized for straying from the assigned lecture topic, and launched out on her own trail.

Though her voice was weak from a recent skunk attack (she was vague about details), she was nonetheless audible and energizing. She spoke about her journey as a student, what brought her to study at CDSP, and how that experience had formed her as a writer.

She then presented a bit of contemporary midrash, which she defined as taking, “something that is already in existence—say scripture—and you work with it, to see what else you can tease out of it, to apply it to our lives today. The Talmud is this kind of thing. It’s fun; it’s a scholarly game. Midrash is a sign of a religious tradition that is growing and meeting the changing needs of the people.”

Her chosen text was the death of Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11:1-40), a curious tale in which Jephthah, a military commander, promises God that if he will only be given victory in battle,

he would sacrifice the first creature he sees upon returning home. Of course, that creature turns out to be his daughter, who begs for a two-month reprieve to grieve with her friends before the sacrifice takes place.

King presented a short story based on this passage, which she read aloud to participants. Bringing the story into the present, the listeners were introduced to Mila, who helped American doctors in a recent Eastern European war. Her father, Jephthah, does not think this proper work for a woman, but allows it as nurses are useful in war. Mila assists the doctors, keeps her eyes open, and learns as much as she can. Jephthah, in the heat of battle, makes his fateful pledge to God, promising the life of the first person out of the gates of a nearby village under siege. Unbeknownst to him, Mila has been summoned to this village to help deliver a baby, and as she leaves the gates at first light to return home, a shot rings out, and she falls. All of this is faithfully captured by CNN, and Jephthah’s vow is world news overnight, to great public dismay. King concluded by saying, “In the end, one woman walking out to meet a bullet may wield more power than all the world’s generals.”

After discussing the problems inherent in such a story, King opened up the remaining time for questions from the audience—many of which were devoted to the vagaries of writing mysteries, and of the place of faith in the writing life.

Though she may have strayed from her “assigned” lecture topic, nary a grumble was heard from the participants. Her speech energized the crowd during the difficult mid-afternoon slump, and no doubt won her a few new readers. Laurie King is a hit on Holy Hill. ■