

My Continental Divide: An Experiential Journey

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In late July and early August of 2003, my wife and I, along with our two sons, journeyed to DuBois, Wyoming, for a family gathering. Our location in a remote area of the Wind River Range guaranteed that news would be slow in reaching us, if indeed it reached us at all. During this time the 74th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, in which convocation I am ordained a priest, was being held in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. While I was aware of this, in truth it was not on my radar screen. I spent the week hiking, mountain biking, and enjoying our extended family in an area of stunning natural beauty. Indeed, it was not until our arrival at the airport in Salt Lake City, en route home to Atlanta, that I realized the nature of the events unfolding in Minnesota. The Sunday *New York Times* was full of news about the convention, especially the selection of Gene Robinson by the Diocese of New Hampshire as Bishop, a vote the delegates of the convention would soon be called upon to ratify. As Priest Assistant at a small mountain parish, whose turn in the preaching rotation was a week away, I realized that it had fallen to me to respond—or not, to the decisions already made, and to the upcoming vote of the delegates. As the events of the next few weeks and months unfolded, I learned that many of my colleagues indeed chose not to preach on the topic—at least not in such a way as to tell the congregation where *they* stood. What follows is not, however, primarily about the homily. Rather, these are the reflections of a neophyte priest, who is also a pastoral theology educator and pastoral therapist, upon the *gestalt* of this experience—and the events set in motion by my decision to take a particular course of action. I should add here that I am a relative newcomer to parish ministry. Trained as a pastoral theologian, I worked for many years as a pastoral psychotherapist, only gradually shifting to teaching, first at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, and then full-time at Columbia Theological Seminary. During these years I made my way through the formidable discernment process in the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta, and was ordained to the priesthood in November of 2002. The anxiety I felt during the week of 9 Pentecost was due then, in part, to my relatively new status in the parish, and my insecurity about my homiletic skills. Oh, I knew a lot about our parish as a “system.” After all, hadn’t I led an adult education course on the pastoral care ministry of the laity, recognizing that, developmentally, this congregation was ready to move from a “clergy focused” paradigm to one with more active lay involvement? As a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist I was an astute observer of the “family dynamics” of our congregation. I believed myself to be an able pastoral care provider, a faithful colleague, and one who was gradually growing into the priesthood. Truth told, however, I was scared.

As the plane bearing us home drew me closer to the tasks of the weeks ahead, I found myself pondering different options. Was it absolutely necessary for me to address the issue from the pulpit? I considered waiting to see how the process unfolded, both in the denomination, and in our own diocese and parish. I thought of holding off for a statement or “pastoral letter” from our Bishop, and some word from the other

delegates representing the Diocese of Atlanta. I even had the fleeting thought of returning to Wyoming...and extending the vacation a week or two! After talking with my wife about my fear and anxiety, I resolved to schedule an earlier meeting with a trusted mentor/supervisor. This proved quite helpful. In typical fashion, however, while he provided a context for my reflections, he did not tell me what to do: "What does your heart tell you?" he asked. "Listen to that, and leave some space for the play of the Holy Spirit." This language proved prophetic. He encouraged me to pray, and to continue to be in relationship with colleagues as I prepared the homily. I also paid close attention to the lectionary texts appointed for the day—9 Pentecost 2003—and I resolved to spend as much time as I could reflecting on the text in relation to the events at General Convention. I thought about other "mentors" as well. In what remains for me a most remarkable book on the nature and function of ministry, *The Priest in Community*, Urban T. "Terry" Holmes wrote the following about the need for what he called the "bimodal consciousness" of the priest:

...The priest still has an observable function within the white darkness of the numinous experience, populated with its symbols and diabolos, root metaphors, myths and seminal plots and stories. It is my conviction...that the priest does serve both the community and the God who speaks from across the fathomless ocean to our consciousness. The priest stands with one foot in the receptive mode and one in the action mode, a liminal or "threshold" figure, called to symbolize what he cannot on his own even imagine: that inner word of God, providing humankind with the light to see God's intention for creation.¹

Over the course of the next week I found myself wondering often about this "liminal" space.² As a student and practitioner of psychoanalytic psychotherapy whose dissertation focused, in part, on Donald Winnicott's notion of transitional, "potential space," I found myself asking how this concept might apply to this context—this pastoral challenge.³ Winnicott referred to potential space as, initially, the developing space between the infant and mother, as the infant develops a sense of being separate from her. He then expands upon this clinical observation in a fascinating way: "The potential space between baby and mother, between child and the family, between individual and society or the world, depends on experience which leads to trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living."⁴ In my own work I had suggested that this dialogical, intersubjective space is the context of compassion in human relationships. There, we are "summoned" by the "face" of the other, as Emmanuel Levinas put it, to a disposition of what Ed Farley refers to as compassionate obligation—in short, to care for the other by, among other things, risking engagement in the creative process of potentially transformative "meaning making."⁵ I was now faced with putting my own scholarly considerations into practice in this setting. How might they inform my actions in this case? What would it mean to lead my congregation into the liminal, transitional space in response to this issue? Would I be willing to engage what Ed Farley has called the "co-discerned vulnerability" of that space?⁶ Could I knowingly put myself in the midst of a messy, uncomfortable, indeed potentially risky place? How might I serve

both community and God? What would a synthesis of Holmes' "action" and "receptive" modes—this "bimodal consciousness," look like? How might I pay attention to the "systems" issues of the congregation, Diocese, and church, while recognizing that some in my congregation would be deeply hurt and betrayed by the Consecration of Bishop Robinson, while others would be elated?⁷ I sensed that the events unfolding at General Convention were highly significant, both in the life of the Episcopal Church, and more broadly in *Ecclesia*.⁸ In short, the "ripples on the pond" would be far-reaching. I wondered whether these events might portend a liminal time and space, and call upon us to do—and be—likewise, liminal persons, liminal priests. I thought about the inscription, *Schola Prophetarum*, on the cornerstone at my Alma Mater, Vanderbilt Divinity School. What might it mean in this transitional time, as a liminal priest, to be prophetic? I thought about the history of the Episcopal Church in this country, going back to the nineteenth century when we avoided schism over issues of slavery. When secession was threatened over the changes in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and the ordination of women priests, the Episcopal Church found a way to stay together. I recalled my courses in Anglican Studies in which we discussed the "three-legged stool" of faith, reason, and tradition, and the distinctive manifestations of this in the Episcopal Church. I wondered, hopefully, whether the living tradition of the Church—the ongoing, creative activity of the Holy Spirit—might be at work among those in Minnesota, and what this might mean in relation to the triune understanding of authority. And what of my own character, values, and theological understanding of the issues extant—how to be faithful to these? Moreover, how to balance these with the "needs" of the congregation—and, if I was honest, with my own need to be liked, well perceived? Earlier in the year, in a sermon critical of our entry into Iraq, I quoted Nelson Mandela, who had called upon President Bush to use discernment. Several of the more conservative members of the congregation expressed anger towards me—some privately, some publicly. One member threatened to leave, and told me that I was being "disrespectful and unpatriotic," to our president, and that "the pulpit is no place for politics." The memory of this still stung, even as I recognized the truth of William Willimon's observations:

As Richard Neuhaus says in the opening of his classic book on ministry, "there is a necessary awkwardness about Christian ministry because we are ambassadors of a 'disputed sovereignty.' That "necessary awkwardness," that persistent sense that we are representatives of a sovereign, who is in contention with the reigning principalities and powers, is a major source of all ethics worthy of the name Christian. The gospel is inherently countercultural and conflictual with all cultures, including the very first culture in which it made its way, and including the culture called the church that seeks to domesticate the gospel.⁹

Were my reflections on the events of the General Convention and my convictions in support of the ordination of gay and lesbian priests true to the gospel, and true to my calling as a priest? Were these in conflict with one another in this case? Was this what it might mean to be a "liminal" priest? Would I tell the truth about my convictions, knowing full well that some would be angry with me, perhaps even hurt by my

position? Indeed, might some choose to leave the church? Willimon, quoting John Chrysostom, writes: "In toiling long and hard on his sermons, the priest must at the same time be utterly indifferent to the praise of his hearers."¹⁰ Did this indifference extend to their criticism as well? Willimon warns against the perverse tendency in pastoral ministry today to be "nice." "Pastors can be preserved from this perversion only by cultivating the awareness that ministry receives its significance from what needs to happen in the church, that its power proceeds, not from the pleasing personality of the pastor, but from the authorization of God from the church."¹¹

I thought about my own journey into the priesthood, and I recalled the wise words of the psychologist hired to do the psychological assessments for those of us in discernment. He told me that I needed to be mindful of transferences, both positive and negative—in relation to those who perceived me as warm, friendly, and "nice," reminding me that the etymology of the latter includes such origins as *strange, lazy, foolish, ignorant, and stupid*. My challenge, then, included my discernment, in the midst of this liminal space and time, of the "authorization of God through the church," being mindful of these many considerations. I include here a portion of the homily delivered on 9 Pentecost, 10 August 2003.

The Homily

9 Pentecost/Proper 14/Year B

Deuteronomy 8:1-10; Ephesians 4:(25-29) 30-5:2; John 6:37-51; Psalm 34

In the name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen... Good morning, and welcome to Holy Family on this ninth Sunday after Pentecost. It is good to be back home among you after a two-week vacation in Wyoming with our large extended family. The trip was primarily in honor of the fiftieth wedding anniversary of my parents-in-law, and fifteen of us spent a week in Dubois, Wyoming, just south and east of the Tetons and Yellowstone Park. This is an area of distant views, stunningly beautiful and remarkably varied geological terrain, and weather that can change in an instant. Yellowstone was a fascinating, exotic experience for this native Georgian, and the park and its environs struck me as a wonderland of flora and fauna with which I was largely unaccustomed.

Adding to my sense of mystery in this remarkable area is the fact that much of it is contained in a vast, ancient volcanic caldera. Geologists tell us that it is one of a number of geologic "hotspots" around the world—areas, that is, suggestive of high thermal energy beneath the surface. Old Faithful, the area of Mammoth Hot Springs, and many other areas in and around Yellowstone are "outward and visible signs" of this reality. All of this occurred, of course, in the context of our family gathering, and the joys and tensions of a family of fifteen spending a week together in close quarters. Despite the inevitable moments of difficulty that come with life in families, we did just fine, and the trip was a joy and an adventure.

Oddly, one moment in particular stands out for me, and I have thought of it often in light of the events of the past week in the life of the large and diverse family that is our Episcopal Church. Driving east on I-80 out of Salt Lake City into Wyoming, we eventually turned left at Rock Springs, and began to climb toward Lander and the

Wind River Range. Driving north in this dramatic, high desert country, we passed a sign that read “Continental Divide—7, 600 Feet.” Upon seeing the sign, one of my nephews removed his Walkman from its normal, fixed position and asked from the back of the van, “Uncle Bill, what does ‘Continental Divide’ mean?” With utter certainty and absolute authority, I said: “Kevin, it means that all the water—snow or rain, that falls on the east side flows into the Atlantic Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico, and all the water that falls on the west side eventually flows into the Pacific Ocean.” “Wow,” Kevin said. “That’s pretty cool. You know a lot of neat stuff, Uncle Bill.” And he then restored his Walkman to its rightful place, and went back to reading his book.

For a few moments of self-congratulatory bliss, I drove on in complete agreement with my young nephew...such a bright and perceptive lad. “Yes,” I thought to myself, “I am a veritable storehouse of esoteric but essential information about the nature of things, just waiting to expostulate with clarity and certainty bestowing upon worthy recipients the fruits of my knowledge. Yes, that’s me...Uncle Bill, font of wisdom and truth.” And yet...I began to look around, to really see the land through which we sojourners were passing. This high desert country was stunningly beautiful, with the majestic, snow-capped Wind River Range piling up ahead of us to the north and west. But the landscape where we were at that moment was actually rolling hills, with vast open spaces of relatively flat terrain, as if it had been scooped out of the earth by giant hands. Truth told, as I thought about it, I could not really tell in which direction rain falling over this area might eventually flow—which way the melting snows of winter would travel in the warm spring sun. I found this, well, unsettling. I began to feel not so very wise. The old Rhodes College neuroscience major in me began to develop alternative hypotheses, testing each one in my mind as we drove northward. But there was no getting around it. Water falling in this region might end up most anywhere. Either the term “Continental Divide” meant what it said, in the way I had explained it to my nephew, or it meant nothing at all, and should be dispensed with. Heaven help me, I even began to feel a little anxious. “If this term—that sign back there, doesn’t really mean exactly what it says, what does?” Even as I said this to my former science oriented self, however, I knew better. I knew, moreover, that this either/or, all-or-nothing way of thinking was not really my style. I knew there were some places in the Rockies where one could indeed literally stand astride the Continental Divide in a steady rain and watch the water flow toward either side, fully confident of its destination. Other places, like the Great Divide Basin, were more, well, ambiguous—there was more “grey” in the definition, more need for discernment. John McPhee, the remarkable writer who has made geology—and many other topics—come alive for lay folk like me, wrote the following about the very spot through which we were now driving: *“Dark mountains spread low across the horizon, might have been a storm coming—and in a sense they were, or had been. They were the Over-thrust belt, cumulate from the west. Looking north to the even more distant Gros Ventre and Wind Rivers, and south to the Uintas, were encompassing in a wide glance about sixteen thousand square miles of land, much of it so dry, stacked flat like crumbling hardtack, that only a geologist could absorb such a scene and see in it a lake that would rank seventh in the world.... So level is the land there that the term ‘Continental Divide’ is*

somewhat moot. Cartographers seem to have difficulty determining where it is. Its location will vary from map to map. Moreover, it frays, separates, and, like an eye in old rope, surrounds a couple of million acres that do not drain either to the Atlantic or the Pacific—adding ambiguity to the word ‘divide.’”¹²

As I thought about this later, I came to see the terrain in a new way. I could see that, rather than rendering the term “continental divide” meaningless, somehow, by virtue of its sharing an ancient, complex story, a previous life as an Eocene lake of tremendous proportions—it seemed to enlarge, deepen, and enrich the term for me. I could take the long view of the geologist and within it, engage this term with imagination, depth and dimension in time and space. I thought a great deal about our complex church family and the ostensible “continental divide” issues down through the years that have threatened to separate us: creedal debates; the Civil War, and especially the issue of slavery; the introduction of the new *Book of Common Prayer*, and saying goodbye to the 1928 *Prayer Book*; issues of civil rights; the intense debates over the ordination of women; and now the ratification and consecration of Bishop Elect Gene Robinson of New Hampshire and related discussions about human sexuality. Each of these has seemed to be, in its time, the “continental divide” that would split the church by means of either/or, all or nothing thinking with regard to how—and if—we come together at table, and who presides there. Each has threatened to give us reason to make choices primarily out of fear—a fear that God’s love will not be enough to overcome the ambiguous divides that threaten to separate us. And let us remember, my brothers and sisters, that making decisions informed primarily by an ethos of fear—amidst what Walter Brueggemann calls a “myth of scarcity,” is almost always dangerous, because such decisions make us more vulnerable to this “all or nothing” thinking.¹³ Rather, perhaps this terrain we have traversed in our Episcopal Church over the past two weeks of General Convention has been more like the Continental Divide in the Great Basin of Wyoming. Perhaps in this liminal, transitional place the winds of the Holy Spirit blow and have space to creatively engage us. Perhaps there are times in the life of our church, just as is sometimes true in our personal sojourns, when “not knowing” with utter certainty can be a blessing. Perhaps during this long green season of Pentecost...this “ordinary time”—we can trust that the Spirit is indeed working among us and among those who represented us in Minneapolis.

I cannot pretend to have a neutral position on this matter of Bishop-Elect Robinson’s selection. To do so would be a disservice both to me and to you. As a leader in this congregation I am called to, among other things, be as transparent as I can about who I am and what I believe—including my theological struggles. I do have questions about the process by which the decision was made, but I agreed with the decision. I know that many of you did not. Many feel hurt, and angry, and betrayed. Others among us agree with the decision and believe it to be long overdue. I ask that over the next few weeks and months, we abide with one another, listen to one another, and that we covenant to agree that it is more important to be in relationship than to be “right.” In order to begin to create a crucible of care and conversation, I am, for now, postponing our Fall Adult Education offerings in the service of an open “forum,” until such time as we have reached some measure of reconciliation and/or created additional, intentional structures within which we might seek just that....

Our reading from Ephesians for today asks that we show abundance with one another. It asks that we be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving—that we follow the love God has shown us by loving those—all those, around us. In the midst of fear, uncertainty, and ambiguity—in a time of an ethos of scarcity—we are called to pattern our relationships on the relationship God has with us, exemplified by the love of Christ demonstrated in his life, offering, and sacrifice...The more we are able to see ourselves and others in the mirror that Jesus provides—especially in the midst of the divides that threaten to separate us—the more likely we will be able to turn to the absolute certainty of his goodness, his inclusiveness, his beauty. We must remember that staying in relationship has the power, with God's help, to heal the brokenness that threatens to divide us.

"I am the bread of life," he says. Good food is available, and there is plenty to go around for all of God's children. Come now, and let us celebrate the feast that is the memorial of our redemption, at the banquet table God has prepared for us all. Amen.

After the service, the reactions ranged from anger ("You can remove our names from the list of ushers...we won't be coming back"), to "neutral" ("I'm not sure where you're taking us, but I appreciate your willingness to be in dialogue") and supportive ("Thank you for your courage and forthrightness"). Some of my colleagues had me warned against this approach, fearing that it would, as one colleague suggested, "open Pandora's box," and only cause additional pain, confusion, and enmity. Moreover, some said that "it wouldn't resolve anything" to be disclosive about my position in this way. Resolution, however, was not my intent. I knew, instinctively, that I was inviting a wide range of possible responses. My primary goal was that of engaging in a creative, imaginative, and I would suggest sacred process of entering liminal, transitional space, in community. My goal was that of creating space for, and movement toward reconciliation, rather than resolution. The first two weeks were difficult. Participation in the Sunday Adult Ed forums was, at times, excruciatingly painful and anxiety producing. I found my "Marriage and Family Therapist self" reminding my "priest self" to remain "non-anxious," even as my priest self reminded the other to remember the baptismal covenant to which we bore testimony. This was indeed an opportunity to put into practice what I taught, in theory, as a pastoral theologian. If Winnicott is correct in saying that the "play of the imagination" is sacred, what might this mean in this context? I found myself beginning to imagine a way of being in relationship that invited the congregation into the ecclesial, theological equivalent of play. Some would not engage this, of course, but most did. As a leader of the congregation, I suspected that the task—a task—would be that of risking my own vulnerability in the service of creatively, imaginatively engaging this intersubjective task. It required a willingness to model vulnerability, as Chrysostom, Willimon, and Farley suggested, and to acknowledge that I may not be utterly certain of the theological (or systemic!) terrain. In so risking, I had to trust that in co-creating this space, the activity of the Holy Spirit would join us. The homily is perhaps as notable for what it did not do, as for what it attempted. I did not seek to defend or justify my theological position. Rather it was, more than anything else, an *invitation* into the sacred, imaginative, liminal space of our collective ecclesial imagination. The more structured, "boundaried" manifestation of this took the form of the Adult Education Forums. There is an old saying that in good psychotherapy much—perhaps most—of

the work takes place outside the therapeutic hour. I found this to be true in this instance, as well. By not defending the position I had taken in either/or, all or nothing terms, I was asking the congregation to enter this liminal space with me—to tolerate a measure of ambiguity—to endure some measure of discomfort in the midst of this continental divide.

For Winnicott, the crucial aspect of liminal space is the sacred use of the imagination. There, one discovers one's own voice, or "true self," as he puts it, not so much by "digging deeper," as it were, like peeling back the layers of an onion. Rather, this true self emerges in the context of *relationships of difference*, over time. One ventures forth new, imaginative understandings of oneself in relation to God's ongoing, disclosive, creative activity in the world. In this instance, I found myself struggling to live in this potential, liminal space, the "in between," and to be a "symbol bearer" not so much of a theological position, but of the very interhuman, intersubjective space I sought to empower, enable, and sustain. Farley suggests that we must be willing to risk this vulnerability such that we not foreclose the possibilities of the "ultimate horizon," and thereby "mundanize" it.¹⁴ We do this in part by remaining faithful to the "three-legged stool," (a feature of many Reformed traditions) while recognizing that it holds us, by definition, in a disclosive, dynamic tension. In a fascinating way, I found the complex roles of therapist, professor, and priest giving way primarily to my priestly role—especially as Holmes understood it—as symbol bearer and liminal figure. Holmes' term "antistructure" began to take on new meaning for me. There was something both frightening and liberating about this for me, as the process unfolded.

So, what is my perspective now, from the vantage point of a year, on my new Continental Divide? The Adult Education forums were challenging indeed. By opening up the space for dialogue I could not proscribe what form this might take.¹⁵ The first week was especially difficult. We opened each session with prayer, and the reminder that we were gathered to speak what was on our hearts. We reminded parishioners that while clergy would help structure the time, we were not there to dictate content. Adult Education opportunities around issues of scripture in relation to human sexuality were being planned for later, a collaborative effort between laity and clergy. Such was not, however, the immediate task of these forums. Attendance was high, and remained so.

During the third week both the content and the affective component of the dialogue underwent a subtle, but profound shift. This began when one couple, in their early seventies, rose to share a personal narrative. Long-time and deeply committed members of the congregation, they shared the story of coming to terms with a daughter, a lesbian in a partnered relationship, and their journey, over time, of embracing this dyad, the grandchildren it produced, and the personal shift such an embrace required. Deeply conflicted at first, they told of opening themselves up to the power such relationships have to heal and transform—as indeed these had—and of the importance of being in relationship, rather than being "right," a term in my homily they found especially compelling. They described the existential and theological moments of their journey—in far more compelling ways than I could have—as they moved from anger, sadness and fear, to ambivalence, and finally to acceptance and love. They described the relief of giving up the need to "control the situation," and letting go of their old, entrenched beliefs. This disclosive, deeply moving testimony somehow shifted

both the tone of the conversation and the felt experience of the liminal, transitional space we all shared. Soon, similar narratives were shared. These stories did not “resolve” the conflict, and indeed such was not the intent.¹⁶ But they did make possible, in this “potential space,” some imaginative, interpretive meaning making—a participatory engagement with the issues in this new terrain. Indeed, they made possible some movement toward reconciliation. I would suggest, however, that this required liminal, transitional space within which to occur. bell hooks has written:

I am located at the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility... We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle to be that which pleasures, delights, and fulfills desire. We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world.¹⁷

It was necessary that I, as a leader of the congregation, make the *choice* to locate myself at the margin—and thereby endeavor to co-create the space to which hooks refers. In this new “terrain,” a new articulation of possibilities for community and relationship began to emerge. We began to hear one another’s deep concerns, narrative stories, and theological struggles as children of God, rather than as persons defined by and relegated to sexual orientation and our positions *vis-à-vis* the issues swirling around us. This seemed to me to speak to Farley’s concern that we not “mundanize the eternal horizon” amidst the interhuman sphere of relations. I found this transitional, potential space to be disclosive of a new understanding of the Paschal mystery—radically incarnational at heart. Rowan William has written:

I have argued... that the relations of human beings in the Body of Christ, relations dependent simply on a shared commitment to and a promise to be with the risen Jesus, provide the context and critique for other systems, the irritant that can prevent the human world from simply settling down with mutually exclusive and competing tribalisms. This is the conviction on which the confession of Jesus as God-with-us initially rests; and I believe that the doctrine of the Incarnation is recovered and revitalized so often as we recover our authority as a *Christian* community to challenge and resist what holds back *human* community—and that the doctrine looks redundant or impenetrable only when we have lost that vision. We owe so much to the great figures of the ‘consensus’, not least the plain sense of the theological weight of social issues: But I wonder if their doctrine would have been clearer if they had been able to re-imagine the church in a more prophetic mould—and if their constructive engagement in society would have been deeper and harder if they had let themselves be more *surprised* at the incarnate God. Christology, after all, like thought itself, should begin (and end) in wonder.¹⁸

This element of surprise, this hermeneutic of wonder, requires the liminal, transitional space of the imagination, the prophetic engagement with that which threatens human community. It asks of us, as congregational leaders that on occasion, we, too be willing to venture forth into the unknown, with “vitality and wonder” and in this sense, be symbol bearers of this sacred potential space. From my perspective now, the continental divide seems a rich, expansive, if sometimes uncertain space. It invites me to use my imagination. It evokes wonder. It asks that I be willing to be “Uncle Bill,” perhaps not so sure of myself, open to surprise, with the wide open spaces ahead inviting relationship with God, church, and other.

Notes

1. Urban T. Holmes, *The Priest in Community* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 34.
2. The word “liminal” comes from the Latin *limines*, meaning “threshold.” Of particular interest is the use of “liminal” to describe the point where one perception or condition blends or crosses over into the other. Terry Holmes cites the folklorist Arnold van Genep, who used the word to describe rites of passage, in which the participants stand poised between two roles in a society. According to Holmes, the Anthropologist Victor Turner describes it as “a state of being ‘betwixt and between,’ or ‘living on the edge of antistructure.’” Holmes, *The Priest in Community*, 113.
3. Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic, 1971, 1979).
4. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 108.
5. John William Harkins, *The Context of Compassion: A View from the Perspective of Pastoral Theology, Object Relations Theory, and Dialogical Intersubjectivity*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, UMI Number 3005311, Vanderbilt University, Copyright 2001. In this potentially transformative, liminal space, we have the option of choosing compassion, and obligation, and risk venturing forth in the midst of ambiguity with what Farley refers to as “vitality, wonder, courage, and hope,” 74.
6. Edward Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990). Drawing upon the rich traditions of dialogical Intersubjectivity (Buber, Levinas, Marcel) Farley suggests that the “Interhuman” is the sphere of the face—of emotional participation and discernment of the “other.” In the experience of the fragility and vulnerability of the other, we are summoned to compassionate obligation. “Genuine compassion,” Farley writes, “is directed past or through the suffering that calls forth pity...it is an invitation to transcend self-preoccupation.”
7. In a CBS *60 Minutes* interview televised 7 March 2004, Bishop Robinson stated, “Let’s be clear, we’ve always had gay bishops. All I’m doing is being honest about it. It’s not all going to go back to being nice and pretty again. It’s going to be messy for a while.” V. Gene Robinson, Interview with Ed Bradley, *60 Minutes*, CBS, 7 March 2004.
8. In an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, published on 12 August 2003, Harvard theologian Harvey Cox wrote, “Once again the Episcopal Church has diffused a major crisis in—there’s only one way to put it—a very *Episcopalian* way. By confirming Bishop Gene Robinson, a gay man, the Episcopal Church has done other denominations a great favor. It has boldly stood up to a difficult issue, and the signs are good that it will avoid a major schism—and not for the first time.”
9. William H. Willimon, *Calling and Character*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 32.
10. Willimon, *Calling and Character*, 20.
11. Willimon, *Calling and Character*, 32.
12. John McPhee, *Annals of The Former World, Book 3: Rising from the Plains* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 386.
13. Walter Brueggemann, “The Liturgy of Abundance, and the Myth of Scarcity,” *The Christian Century* (March 24—31, 1999): 342-47.
14. Edward Farley, *Good and Evil*, 144. Farley describes “Being-Founded” as an alternative to “acquittal” in response to agential freedom. Being-founded, then, occurs in “the presencing of the sacred, that is, the creative ground of things.” When we seek to ask of the “goods at hand” that they ground us in sacred, ultimate ways, we risk this “mundanization” of the sacred ground of being. Being-founded is thus the “primordial event of human freedom.” It is, Farley suggests, a way of existing as fragile and

vulnerable in an uncertain world, yet paradoxically both realistically accepts and resists chaos and vulnerability. It is, Farley suggests, a “complex posture in which three attitudes converge: relativizing, consent, and the risk of being.”

15. I did provide “guidelines” for being in relation to one another during times of conflict. I asked that we be respectful of one another, as required of us in our Baptismal Covenant—that we “respect the dignity of every human being.” I also referred to a very helpful document provided by the PCUSA entitled “Seeking to be faithful in times of conflict.” Nevertheless, I want to emphasize here that to have too rigorously defined the parameters of these conversations would have been counter-productive to the task at hand. This meant, of course, that the potential for conflict, and my own concomitant feelings of anxiety, were higher. To try to “control” the course of the conversation would have been both an inappropriate use of my pastoral authority, and an example, to use Farley’s language, of a rendering “mundane” of the eternal horizon—the sacred possibilities. I had to try, again in Farley’s words, to “venture forth into the unknown with vitality and wonder.” Once I opened up the possibility of a new understanding of the “continental divide,” I had to be willing to venture into that understanding—and space.

16. For a fascinating and rich perspective on organizational behavior research on conflict, using this homily and subsequent events at Holy Family as a case study, see “*Five Loaves for Five Thousand: Practices of Abundance for Religious Leaders in Situations of Conflict*,” a paper delivered to The Academy of Religious Leadership, Pittsburgh, Pa., May 2004, by David G. Forney, Ph.D., Associate Dean of the Faculty, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Ga. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Forney for his willingness to be a conversation partner around this challenging set of issues, and to help me understand more clearly the issues—both theological and organizational—at stake in the work we do.

17. hooks, bell, *Yearning, Race, and Gender* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 153.

18. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 237-238.