



**Eleventh Annual
Graduate Theological Union
Faculty Lecture**

Clare Benedicks Fischer

**Starr King School for the Ministry
Aurelia Henry Reinhardt Professor of Religion and Culture**

"The Abundant City"

This Lecture is dedicated to

Anne McGrew Bennett

**Friend of the Graduate Theological Union,
Co-founder of Center for Women and Religion,
Feminist theologian, and irrepressible worker for peace.**

Wednesday, November 19, 1986

7:30 p.m.

Pacific School of Religion Chapel

This is a tale of two cities one of which is Venice, the other is a city we don't often recognize as a city -- namely the G...T...U...

Jaffier stood immobilized, his gaze fixed upon the scene below. It was a large vision. Looking down from the height of the Campanile, he spoke, perhaps menacingly of Venice's destiny.

The city and the people and the sea appear before me. The peaceful city is in my hands without knowing it. The city which is there is going to disappear...The city is still happy this evening in its splendor; for this evening people sleep secure and trusting.¹

It was a vulnerable moment in the city's history. A band of mercenaries had been hired to loot and burn Venice and Jaffier was to be the leader of this action. But Simone Weil's hero has noticed that the city exists and his position has changed. Jaffier, the author writes, has "paid attention" and reality has penetrated his being.

Little known by students of Weil, the three act drama of the city, Venise Sauvée (Venice Saved) is highly representative of her thought. Yet to be translated from the French into English, this composition for the theatre might be said to be her most embracing work although it remained incomplete at the time of Weil's death. Those who know something about this twentieth century French philosopher will recognize central themes from her better known writings: grace, gravity, illusion, attention and redemptive suffering. Simone Weil crafted her three act tragedy to instruct her reader in the practice of looking. One acknowledges that this human activity, so very ordinary, represents for Weil the method by which we will grasp the extraordinary -- the divine.

The play was greatly valued by Weil. She made several copies of the manuscript and took great care in placing the same in the hands of her most trusted friends before she departed her native soil (France) in 1942. In truth, I was first drawn to Venice Saved precisely because I found this concern over her writing-in-progress so compelling. Weil wrote to her parents, in her last month before her premature death at thirty four, that parts of the play were to be integrated with other expressions of her creative effort.

Weil chose to express herself as a playwright at a time in her life that can be characterized as truly dramatic. She had begun Venice Saved just months before the German troops entered her city, Paris, and continued the writing during the restless, fretful years of her residence in southern France. Uprooted from the familiar and far from friends, Weil integrated the issues of her own life into the story of Venice and the plight of Jaffier, her "perfect hero". Drama had long held Weil's interest, however. After her year long experience as an assembly line worker in the French automobile industry, she had experimented with the idea of communicating Greek tragedy to workers as a means of instructing solidarity. (Clearly, this effort deserves a lecture in itself.) Her reasoning, then and later, was that affliction hardened our souls and empathy was encouraged only through a veritable loss of self. Boredom and passivity were symptoms, Weil observed, of people who had become inured to pain. The theatre permitted all to identify with afflicted characters and open to the possibility of feeling for one another again.

This notion of the theatre as a forum for reawakening compassion placed Weil in tension with many of her contemporaries. She disliked Giraudoux, for example, because she felt he did not grasp the moral possibilities of playwriting. The

1. Venise Sauvée, Act 2, Poèmes, Paris: Gallimard, 1968, pp.94-96

theatrical setting, then, was a site for instruction and transformation. Audience members, while apparently passive observers, were, in Weil's theory, ready recipients of soul-touching experience. She saw the irony in her efforts, the tension between the real and the illusory but she was persuaded that good theatre transforms all from denial and hardness into a community of empathetic citizens. The theatre was for her a microcosm, then, of the world with its convoluted possibilities for grasping truth and goodness when the gaze turns inward and away from the needs of the self.

Perhaps an even greater reason for Weil's turn to the stage was her fear of imposing ideas upon another. She wrote of her desire to fade, to allow truth to emanate between souls without the dazzling barrier of selves. In the drama, actors address one another and the audience but the message is less in the words than in the internal action. Weil hoped to craft a tragedy that would gradually move all to a deep sense of the real without cajoling, without explicit manipulation of words. The play at its best would transform illusion into reality on all levels.

Weil had had an abiding love for Greek tragedy and in the years before the composition of Venice Saved she translated and commented on certain Greek tragedians. Her belief was that Greek tragedy and certain plays of Shakespeare contained the truths of Christianity in the creation of heroes who incarnated redemptive suffering. Prometheus and Isaiah were seen as Christ-like in their respective capacity to endure because of love. Humiliation, sorrow, affliction are the conditions of tragedy and the true hero is one who accepts this plight with serenity. This bearing is exemplified for Weil in Sophocles' Antigone, a woman "most pure" who grasped out of divine madness that we must obey God first. Jaffier was to give voice, in the twentieth century, to this form of heroism: a figure so in love that the action chosen is nothing but obedience to God's call.

Just as the notion of the heroic had been a subject of Weil's thoughts before the drama of the city was conceived, so, too, was the city as symbol of human vitality and endurance embraced by Weil in an earlier period. While Venice is the perfect locus for her tragic creation -- beautiful, enduring, dignified -- Troy was also a pivotal symbol for her. Weil had re-read and translated Homer's Iliad several years before she began to write the play. Her remarkable essay on the Iliad was composed at the same time that she began Venice Saved. In this essay, she wrote that the hero of the Iliad was "force". The play might be said to provide a counterweight to this position. For Jaffier is transformed from a man of force into a citizen attached to a republic through love and compassion for all of the city's dwellers.

Although Simone Weil wrote fewer than a dozen poems, there is an integrity in these creative expressions which enhances her essays. In her late adolescence Weil composed a poem on the occasion of St. Charlemagne's birthday. Her effort is particularly interesting because it anticipates her notion of heroism. She did not create an ode to the male warrior saint but dedicated her words to the female patron saint of Paris, St. Geneviève. This protectress is represented as a solitary figure who kept watch over the city while its inhabitants slept. It is not difficult to compare this poetic effort with Venice Saved; St. Geneviève seems to reappear as Violetta, the principal female character in the story of Venice's preservation. Although the action of the drama is set in an Italian city in the early seventeenth century, its symbolic content reaches back to antiquity, moves through European history and forward into the events of the Second World War.

The political reality of her own day was an essential factor in shaping the tragedy. Hitler's army was a nightmare and its advance across the Continent compelled Weil to consider the consequences of foreign troops lodged within the boundaries of her homeland. Other writers had considered the drama of political intrigue and military invasion. Some had focused on the same event that Simone Weil chose as the frame of her drama --- the Renaissance machinations of Venetian ambassadors, imperial officers and mercenaries. But Weil is the sole playwright to emphasize the tragic plight of the city itself. She wished to dramatize the melancholic destiny of transpersonal realities and show that individual fates are only facets of a larger tragedy. Thomas Otway, the English Restoration writer, had written a play about Venice based upon the Abbé Saint-Réal's study of a conspiracy that actually occurred in 1618. Whether Weil knew the seventeenth century playwright's rendition of this event is unclear but she, too, availed herself of the St. Réal text. This much can be said by way of comparison: Weil focused upon the city, Otway upon two lovers and a friendship. Otway's principal theme was the tragic destiny met by the lovers who become helplessly enmeshed in political misfortune. Weil's antipathy to sentimentality was well established in her literary criticism and there is every reason to believe that she would have found Otway's lens clouded with romantic distortion. Historical event was important to Weil and she chose to stay close to the original account and not trivialize the role of mercenaries and the Council in the life of the city republic.

What then is the plot and how did Weil construct her drama? St. Réal had published his account of an attempted conspiracy fifty years after it was alleged to have happened in 1618.² He had told of a plan to vanquish Venice by mercenary forces in order to bring the republic under the power of the Spanish king. The ambassador from Spain was said to have arranged with professional soldiers a surprise attack upon the city, plundering the population and igniting fires throughout the city. Abbé St. Réal notes that one of the mercenaries revealed the plot to the Venetian governors, the Council of Ten, and hundreds of foreign troops were executed and the ambassador was sent packing. Weil's tragedy follows the lines presented here but she writes symbolically, offering her readers a study in attachment, betrayal and transcendence. Each act represents a spiritual moment in the movement toward wholeness.

The drama begins with mercenaries in excited conversation with one another about the rewards of conquest. It is night and the action takes place in the home of the courtesan who is embittered by her treatment by Venice and longs for revenge. Her sympathies are with the military and Weil characterizes her in a manner that persuades us that she is justified in her hatred of the Venetians. We are introduced to the anti-hero, Renaud, and the hero, Jaffier, in this act; they distrust one another but are collaborators in the conspiracy who will work together. Renaud is a professional soldier who is alienated from his homeland and stimulated by political intrigue. He regards himself as a master of political realism and will take Jaffier into his full confidence in the second act and teach him the art of "statecraft". Irony prevails, with Weil constructing a hero who will receive this lesson as the first in turning away from the conspiracy and sensing deep compassion for the Venetians.

The first and second acts allow us to know the protagonists and their respective motives. Renaud is motivated by personal ambition and dreams of greatness. Jaffier and his friend Pierre are similarly uprooted but they are provincials who Weil intimates may trace themselves to Cathari civilization. While I cannot elaborate upon this connection here, I must note that Weil had come to believe that

2. César Vichard de Saint-Réal, Conspiracy of the Spanish Against the Venetian Republic in 1618, 1674

the slaughter of Cathari believers during the Albigensian Crusade had set a precedent for other European acts of genocide. Pierre is the exemplary friend, loyal to and supportive of Jaffier and wishing only to share the glory of conquest with his compatriot. But Jaffier is ambiguous. Weil never reveals why he has come to Venice; he seems to remain an outsider who has strong leadership ability but little interest in personal gain. We meet Violetta, the daughter of the Secretary of the Venetian Council of Ten in the second act. She is characterized by Weil as "infinitely precious", naive and enthusiastic but it is through her that Jaffier experiences Venetian beauty. She rhapsodizes about the festivities of Pentecost, that day of the planned sack of Venice. Of course, she is innocent of political intrigue and only speaks of the wonder of Venetian community and the ritual of the Doge's marriage to the Adriatic Sea.

Jaffier has been moved, as we already know, to abandon the conspiracy and preserve the city from mercenary attack. Before the third act begins he has betrayed the plot to the Council and has asked that his friend Pierre be spared. Although he exacts a promise from Violetta's father, the Secretary of the Council, he is betrayed. We are informed that exigencies of state require that all the conspirators be executed, save one -- Jaffier. He beseeches the Council to take his life and spare that of Pierre's; again he is rebuffed. Unable to persuade the Council, Jaffier begins to suffer unbearable guilt. The full horror of affliction consumes him; his cries for relief are unheard, his noble posture crumbles and he perceives himself to be the lowest of criminals deserving of all the abuse that is soon to be heaped upon him.

The final act, set in the public square, builds upon the theme of redemptive suffering. Weil is insistent -- heroic address falls to the law of gravity. Jaffier will not be greeted as saviour of the city by the Venetians; no triumphant moment will come for the hero. Rather, the Council of Ten, having heard the plot and dispatched troops to repress it, ask: "What kind of man betrays his friends?" We know that this hero has just saved the republic from brutal devastation but Weil wishes us to recognize that an apparently just solution cannot emerge here. On the contrary, Jaffier's noble deed is lost to the Council. He is a man of shame, sent from the city he has come to love, with a mandate to never return. He is distrusted, worthy only of exile. As the play comes to an end, Jaffier is permitted by his Venetian escorts to join a remnant of the mercenary force that is being besieged by the Venetians. He is shot and dies; his guards mutter that it is well to be "rid of the vermin".

This review of Weil's drama of the city provides a surface sense of her intention; protagonists have interacted around the question of Venice's future and events have moved to forestall the success of imperial conquest of the republic. It is appropriate at this juncture to explore the meaning of a drama dedicated to a city. My interpretation is succinct: the human city is sacred and our grasp of this truth is fleeting. Perhaps such holy cities as Benares and Jerusalem are readily grasped as holy cities, great pilgrimage centers, and serve as ideal types of every city. The historian Lewis Mumford asserts, and I concur, "The human city first took form as the home of God: a place where eternal values were represented and divine possibilities revealed."³ While there is a past tense character in Mumford's observation, I urge us to focus upon the immutable nature of "God's home". Simone Weil's lovers of the city, Violetta and Jaffier, know this. Violetta remarks that Venice needs no army for a defense because her beauty will protect her. Jaffier has not only heard these words but upon looking, leaning past himself and paying attention, he sees this beauty. In Weilian terms,

3. Lewis Mumford, The City in History, N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961, p.575

Jaffier has been ensnared and God has taken residence in the hero's soul. Here are Weil's words veritably describing the movement of the eye from an exterior to an interior gaze: "The soul's natural inclination to love beauty is the trap God most frequently uses in order to win it and open it to the breath from on high."⁴

The beauty of a city is not in its particular topography, its arrangement of thoroughfares, its architecture. It is in its totality -- the past echoing through its stones, the present in its activity, the future in its endurance; the city holds the whole. But this reality can be easily overlooked or not recognized at all. Had Renaud and Violetta not addressed Jaffier as they did in their Campanile conversations with the hero Jaffier, would he have "paid attention" and perceived the vulnerability of Venice? Seemingly stunned by the political cynicism of the mercenary leader and entranced by the joyous naiveté of the Council Secretary's daughter, Jaffier paused and made room for the vision of the city. "Secure and trusting" in their sleep, the Venetians could not know that they filled a mercenary with compassion and prevented destruction.

How fragile the city is and what ease there is in experiencing it as a market center, a site of transaction, a productive unit of a larger power. American literature is filled with an expression of urban phobia and a dystopic view of city life. Melville, Hawthorne and a host of contemporary writers encourage us to be wary of these geographic clusters of people and the ugliness of such high density living. They, and we, experience scarcity and secrecy. In a long conversation between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, Italo Calvino, the Italian novelist, portrays for us the city of the mind as fearful:

With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.⁵

In Venice Saved, the conspiracy is hidden from the citizens, and mercenaries talk in the night in their quarters of the "fruits of victory". Weil presents us with a perspective of secrecy and scarcity that can only move toward violence, against the republic and its inhabitants, against the looters and arsonists. The rewards of conquest are not really abundant; there is a limit to the number of buildings to be fired, the number of women to be raped, and even the shape of power to be gained. The city remains unseen by the outsiders, the uprooted; it is only a target, an object of strategy.

But Violetta expresses to Jaffier the city dweller's perspective. And when her father notices his daughter's ebullience, she responds in words of abundance:

It seems to me that I am disposed to love. It seems to me also that I love all the universe. How many good and beautiful human beings there are...⁶

Langston Hughes and Harriet Arnow echo Violetta in their respective expressions of the city seen as a locus of the many. In The Dollmaker, Arnow's quite remarkable epic novel, Gertie Nevels discovers that Jesus is virtually the face of all her neighbors in the shanty dwellings of postwar Detroit. God's creation is beautiful and this beauty is vast and ever-present. Although we may see beauty, it is not likely that we will sustain our gaze. In community, our memory of beauty can be evoked and this neighborly reminder will nourish our experience of that which seems

4. Simone Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God", Waiting for God, p. 101
5. Invisible Cities, N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Pbl., 1972, p.44
6. Venise Sauvée, Act 2, p.87

ephemeral.

Weil wants her audience to experience beauty through Jaffier. But it is clearly not a solitary experience. Through Violetta's description of the Venetian celebration of the sea's marriage to the city, we sense the hero's desire to be a Venetian. Through beauty and memory Jaffier experiences connection. He did not know this in the mercenary quarters among his co-conspirators of the first act; nor was he secure in this from his position in the Campanile of the second act. Beauty, neighborliness and attachment led him to the public square of the final scenes wherein compassion saves the city.

Part of the beauty of a city is its traces of a time past. Calvino's narrator explains to Kublai Khan:

As this wave of memories flow in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands ... The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like lines of a hand, written in the corners of streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.⁷

The continuity of people and the storehouse of knowing of things past are assured where memory has a forum. Hannah Arendt writes of the modern loss of public attachment and our current failure to remember as symptoms of our disengagement from "wordliness".⁸ For Weil, the republic of seventeenth century Venice is symbolic of the city worthy of preservation. Although her Venetians show little compassion for the informer hero, and appear to know little of the secrets which almost destroyed them, they are citizens and politics invariably fall short of the common good. Nonetheless, for her the human frailties of governance in a republic are far superior to the autocratic structures of imperial rule. Jaffier's political act was to address a situation that threatened the people of the former polity. His address, sparked by identification with a rooted citizenry, was an act of public friendship. Clearly, he sacrificed his personal attachments, especially to friend Pierre, for a common good. Arendt's depiction of this choice would cast Jaffier as "a character of startling unexpectedness". In her understanding of the human condition of natality, the world will not be lost so long as an address is made in the public realm and memory is regarded as a valued community possession.

Weil and Calvino have provided me with insights regarding the abundant city; both write of cities of the mind -- Weil's imaginative drama of a city in jeopardy, Calvino's remarkable narrative of the city everywhere. In the latter, the explorer sits in a garden and tells stories to Kublai Khan of cities unseen but desired by the Chinese conqueror. When Marco Polo is asked to speak of his native city Venice he responds, "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice." Although the Graduate Theological Union is not a city of the mind, perhaps "a city on a hill", it might be incorporated into Marco Polo's narrative. I believe that Weil's Venice is "everywhere" in its possibilities and vulnerabilities. In the remaining time I will explore "desires and fears" of the city Graduate Theological Union, indicating something about abundance, scarcity, address, secrecy and public friendship.

I pause here and open a parenthesis to speak of my gratitude. It is a privilege, indeed, to be named the tenth Graduate Theological Union Faculty Lecturer. I came to this city sixteen years ago as a special student at the Franciscan School and

7. Invisible Cities, pp.10-11

8. See The Human Condition, passim, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958

eventually worked my way through the Ph.D. program in Religion and Society. Since 1981 I have held the Aurelia Reinhardt Chair in Religion and Culture at the Thomas Starr King School of Religious Leadership. I have been continuously here. In this time I have been fortunate to make many friends, among them Anne McGrew Bennett, the truly remarkable person to whom my remarks this evening are dedicated. She and I were classmates in the first G.T.U. class in feminist theology. We worked together on an early anthology of feminist readings, Women in a Strange Land, which contained writings of many women students attending the consortium in the early seventies. We worked together on the Board of the then Office of Women's Affairs and now the Center of Women and Religion, and we continued our collaboration until this Fall. Anne died exactly one month ago to the day. I miss her and I believe the world is a great deal lonelier for her leaving us. Before I close my parenthesis I want to thank my colleagues for their support of me, more particularly for their continued education of me. I regard the G.T.U. as the most important educational institution for me and I believe it to be much more. With the parenthesis closed I return to the character of the Graduate Theological Union --- an abundant city.

This past summer I had the opportunity to escort a former minister of religion from Indonesia around the Graduate Theological Union. I told him that we are known by many Berkeley residents as "holy hill". His reaction was not particularly receptive, raising doubts about whether contemporary Americans know the difference between the holy and the everyday. Our conversation became rather intense and, after a while, I gave up trying to convince him that our identification with matters holy was well justified. Before the visitor left we went to the Library; he had some concern about the lack of publications on Islam in the American experience. He had visited religious education centers at Hartford, Harvard, Yale, Chicago. Much to my delight a volume precisely on the subject of his interest veritably appeared at hand while I pursued the appropriate G.T.U. Library stack. He was thrilled with my find and asked how I had come to discover the volume. I answered cryptically that we were on "holy hill".

While I am uncertain that such a story conveys much about the sacred character of the city on this hill, I do believe that another story conveys my meaning. It is the narrative of the original vision, the founding story of our consortium. Mindful of James Baldwin's notion of "first works", I suggest we "pay attention" to the beginnings. Baldwin, in the introductory remarks to his recent collection of non-fiction writings, speaks of the distinctiveness of the black church experience and the importance of "first works".

In the church I come from --- which is not at all the same church to which white Americans belong --- we were counselled, from time to time, to do our first works over ... To do our first works over means to reexamine everything. Go back as far as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth ...⁹

In my telling I would emphasize the multi-storied character of the founding story. I appreciate that many of you know another version or a different emphasis; some of you were directly involved in the story. My interpretation focuses upon the sense of abundance and the appropriateness of Mumford's understanding of the sacred origin of cities --- places of "eternal value" and "divine possibility".

Although there was much ferment and considerable negotiation among four of the Protestant seminaries of the present G.T.U. between 1958 and 1962, I think the vision was blurred before 1964. In the earlier efforts to secure cooperation among the several seminaries, emphasis was placed upon the creation of a doctoral level

9. "Introduction", The Price of the Ticket, Collected Non-Fiction, 1958-85, N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, P.xix

coordinated program. John Dillenberger's presence in the discussions after 1962 lifted the curtain that covered a larger vision of education and uncovered a notion of ecumenicity that transcended credits, courses, programmatic expectations. Exemplified in the 1964 convocation address he gave to the graduating class of the Dominican School, then St. Albert's in Oakland, Dillenberger spoke optimistically of the new freedom and spirit of openness in the Church. He observed: "Already in the more recent decades, both Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars have found new areas of agreement and points where their historical judgments coincide ... We are prepared to be enriched by each others discoveries."¹⁰ He added that while agreement is not to be expected in the foreseeable future the "possibility that new truth may break forth for all of us is certainly a live one."

This hope was institutionalized in 1964, months after the Dillenberger address, with the physical move of St. Albert's to Berkeley and the Dominicans formal participation in the consortium. In the next few years the two other Catholic schools joined and by 1968 all of the present seminaries had become full members of the Graduate Theological Union. Between 1968 and 1985 the various affiliates, including the Center for Jewish Studies in 1968, the Center for Urban Black Studies in 1969, the Center for Women and Religion in 1970, were joined to the present structure. The current G.T.U. catalogue echoes Dillenberger's words. It states that theological education will excel where an ecumenical environment thrives, based upon "openness, sensitivity and mutual respect". Most promising and clearly most challenging is the passage of the paragraph which shapes a vision of the "common good". The G.T.U. will "foster a new understanding wherein the common and unique will combine to enrich the lives and work of those who participate in the shared experience". I would hasten to emphasize the notion of new understanding as an outcome of the common activity. This vision is a generous one, a vision of wholeness and wholesome conversation.

In the metaphorical understanding of the Graduate Theological Union as a city, an abundant city of diverse interests but a common zeal to exchange and change, "eternal values" and "divine possibilities" flourish. But with cities in general, Venice, New York, Berkeley, we fail to "pay attention" to the grace and beauty of our immediate environment. Perhaps we are the mercenaries gathered in the dark who do not see what Jaffier sees from the Campanile: the city really exists. In the everyday pursuit of the "fruits of our labor" we may, indeed, overlook the possibilities of "the new", the excitement of looking and seeing persons in their unique presence. With that inattention we move from the promise of the vision of ecumenicity into a narrower understanding of our city. Perhaps it is only an orderly arrangement of units that assures that our respective strategies succeed. We join, then, with Renaud and approach the city as so many structures of opportunity and we lose the sense of abundance attached to the vision.

The anxiety of scarcity, all too easily, displaces a sense of plurality. Instead of sharing Violetta's joy in the new day and the many-faced character of Venice, we privatize our vision. In the last minutes of Weil's third act Violetta sings, innocent of Jaffier's death or the actions of the Council of Ten:

Day that comes so beautifully, smile suspended
Suddenly upon my city and its hundred canals,
How many humans who receive your peace
See the day is sweet!¹¹

As citizens of the Graduate Theological Union do we embrace one another with "openness, sensitivity and mutual respect"? Are we challenged by the new which uses

10. "The Catholic-Protestant Opening", Season, Winter 1964, p.200

11. Venise Sauvée, Act 3, p.133

feminist words and rejects exclusive terms? which insists that the lived experience of non-white men and women need not only be noticed and tolerated but embraced; which prods us to approach the different as opportunity to look afresh at our theology? Do we modify syllabi and bibliography to reflect "new understandings" gained through the shared experience of the "common and the unique"?

In an economy of scarcity trust dissolves and boundaries are constructed to contain what we believe is secure. Muriel Rukeyser, the poet, writes of the phobic consequences that emerge and do violence to our dignity. Our "despisals", need not persist; knowing them, admitting them, fosters healing:

In the human cities, never again to
despise the backside of the city, the ghetto,
or build it again as we build the despised
backsides of houses. Look at your own building.
You are the city.

Rukeyser points to the reality of secrets that divide us:
Among our secrecies, not to despise our Jews
(that is, ourselves) or our darkness, our blacks,
or in our sexuality whatever it takes us
and we know we are productive, too reproductive
for our present invention -- never to despise
the homosexual who goes building another

with touch with touch (not to despise any touch)
each like himself, like herself each.
You are this.

Her poem continues, chasing away the taboos of our physical body, inviting us to become free:

In the body's ghetto
never to go despising the asshole
nor the useful shit that is our clean clue
to what we need. Never to despise
the clitoris in her least speech.¹²

As the poem moves us toward liberation from a small vision, a series of hateful and divisive sensibilities, we are prompted toward friendship. It is a poem that serves me well in surfacing the idea of public friendship as an aspect of our community. The city abundant is not a geography of frightening places, it is a totality requiring attention to diversity and care in the act of embracing the whole. We know that the Graduate Theological Union is an institution created from its parts and unified by certain arrangements. The realities of common registration and cross-school attendance are splendid strategies for building commonality and a shared vision. A host of meetings -- the doctoral council, area meetings, etc. -- pool the faculty resources and present us with routine opportunity for conversation with one another. But it is impossible to identify a city square, a public space, which invites us to move our school-defined selves into friendship. Perhaps the now defunct Consortium Council came as close as any arrangement for public friendship. Without such space or opportunity the "community of memory" is hard to construct and even harder to celebrate.

Once again I pause to open a parenthesis and speak of my gratitude. Not only are the Graduate Theological Union Faculty Lectures a visible and audible means toward community; they serve to create a neighborly feeling. I am also encouraged by the meetings of the faculty women of this consortium. For the past few years we have

12. "Despisals", Florence Howe & Ellen Bass, eds., No More Masks, Garden City, N.Y. Doubleday Anchor, 1973

been exploring our shared experience. In an abundant city, public friendship is not created out of a need for uniformity; on the contrary, diversity of position proves itself to be inviting. Good friendship embraces difference and the struggle to stay together in spite of discord or even seeming chaos. Thus, I rejoice in the women faculty's desire to communicate and act with a commitment to vocation. We share a sense of exasperation with those institutional arrangements that serve to diminish our full presence and limit our respective gifts. We believe that our presence will make a difference in the health of theological education. One might say that our neighborliness is an experience of biopolis, an expansive attitude about the "divine possibilities" of our "common and unique" effort.

The culture of a biopolis is a lively, lived environment of spirited persons. Its citizens are nourished by vision. A necropolis, by contrast, restrains spontaneity and fears disorder. It arranges human energy into ghettos of labor and distrusts that which erodes the organizational boundaries of its space. Here the freshness of change is swept off the street and talk is merely pleasant and casual; friendships are rarely made. The mercenaries knew Venice as a necropolis, a site of death.

The location of the Graduate Theological Union within a city is a reality that cannot be overlooked and might better be incorporated into the educational program of the schools. While field education encourages students toward an integration of town and gown, these field education activities remain insufficiently recognized by or constructively reflected in the consortium. We who are attached to both the city of the consortium and the more encompassing city know full well how the reality of scarcity casts a wide shadow over the city: inadequate housing, insufficient jobs, ill support of persons and families who have been displaced by events too numerous to name. In what manner do we prepare religious leaders to "pay attention" to the vulnerable city? How is the Graduate Theological Union a neighbor to the proximate neighborhoods of Berkeley? Oakland? The bridges constructed between "holy hill" and the city appear very fragile and yet the traffic moves continuously across them. Do we notice the homeless? Do we consider the ways in which those allegedly urban realities are ours: racial intolerance and ethnic xenophobia? AIDS?

Simone Weil exhorts us through her hero Jaffier to pause, to look and look again through the distracting surface of our glance. In perceiving the fragile beauty of the city, of its vulnerability, we may be moved to care and in our care assure the city's preservation.

Towards the end of Calvino's thoughts about Invisible Cities, his hero Marco Polo addresses the "inferno" as a condition all city dwellers know on some level. We find Marco Polo considering all the cities in Kublai Khan's great atlas; those that are no longer, those that have yet to emerge; those we would call utopian and distopian. But he is particularly attentive to the cities that will succumb to the inferno (perhaps Troy and Carthage, Hiroshima and Dien Bien Pheu) and he tells Kublai Khan that there are only two ways to respond to the inferno's presence in our lives. There are those who will escape by accepting the inferno and looking no further. The second way, Marco Polo concludes and so I:

...is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.¹³

13. Invisible Cities, p.