NOTE: At the request of participants I am making available my <u>notes</u> from my opening talk for the conference, "Spiritual, But Not Religious!" – October 17, 2009. These are the notes from which I spoke, they do not constitute a formal manuscript. I am sharing them solely for the personal use of participants. These notes may not be reproduced for any other purpose.

Carriers of Memory, Crucibles of Commitment, Cultivators of Novelty: Possibilities for the Church in a Post-Religious Culture

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A scholar never knows whether her work will be of interest or use to others. Hence, an invitation to speak at a conference such as this comes as a gift because, among other reasons, it suggests that neither the trees from which paper is made nor one's brain cells have expired for naught. So, thank you to the conference organizers for the invitation to be here and for the opportunity to extend my thinking about communities of faith in the large Pacific Northwest/Columbia District—British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon.

I want to fulfill the charge given to me for this conference, namely to stimulate a "deeper consideration of the issues, challenges and opportunities," that come into view when we consider the "relevance of the institutional church to people looking for spirituality in a post-religious culture," by developing four themes; themes that, I believe disclose a deep invitation to discipleship at hand in our space and our time.

One: British Columbia, Washington and Oregon arguably can be described as having been *post-religious* from earliest Euro-American settlement. If central to the notion of post-religious are three claims: 1) that over the past fifty years individuals' religious affiliation and practices increasingly have been de-coupled from other inherited factors, such as family, ethnicity, education and social class, 2) that during this same period there has come an intensifying rediscovery of the experiential, an impulse to emancipate the self from all that constrains it, and a growing suspicion that institutions are not good for individuals, and 3) that the role of religious institutions in broader social life has become less significant and even contested, THEN, this region has been "post-religious" since earliest Euro-American settlement.

Historical and contemporary demographic data makes clear that religious bodies, especially those that emerged from the 16th century Magisterial Reformation never achieved the kind of traction in this region that they achieved elsewhere. That does not mean there are not

vital faith communities here—there are and they have had an impact on the region, especially on its social welfare and educational institutions, disproportionate to their numbers. But these denominations have never had here the demographic depth and social power they wielded elsewhere in Canada and the U.S.

The reasons for their reduced traction are many. Two key ones are the de-centering and dislocating that result from geographic mobility and the encounter with nature in this place. Few people entered this region to replicate what they left behind. Economic aspirations and freedom from constraints of all kinds propelled people then and now. Mobility itself weakens connections among people and so the social fabric. With every move, relationships are severed. For significant numbers the value of building new connections ceases to be worth the effort, especially if their present situation feels "temporary," until the next best opportunity arises. Temporary and tentative are qualities imbibed through the air and water of the Northwest.

The scale and grandeur of our surroundings de-center the human, feeding the region's post-religious character. Nature here dislocates people. Such dislocation constitutes what theologians refer to as a boundary experience, a "liminal" space or threshold of encounter with the forces of existence, which are equally potent with death and life, destruction and inspiration.

The experience of dislocation contributes to the durability of the myth of the West—a narrative about this region as a place of seemingly infinite space, resources and opportunity. The narrative resonates with human aspirations for greater freedom, wealth, power, a fresh start, escape, and peace. Anything is possible here—even turning back or escaping time.

The promises for BC's historic faith communities in the region's having to a great extent been post-religious from its earliest Euro-American settlement are two. First, you know and even embody the region's sensibilities, and so do not need to fear them as odd and aberrant. You know the temptations of this place, both individual and institutional. You know the freedom that distance can bring, you know the exhilaration of its beauty, the awe and release of being dwarfed by mountains. And so the second promise is that in knowing both the temptations and the exhilaration, you are better positioned to appreciate the deep desires and spiritual possibilities of this region and so respond to them in ways that make the riches of the Christian tradition intelligible by articulating freshly theology and spiritual practice.

Among the key temptations of this post-religious context are: taking pride in the temporary and tentative—making a virtue of always keeping one's options option. The claim to

utter self-sufficiency—what I have accomplished and what I have are "mine and mine alone," I earned the all on my own. The denial that other beings have a claim on me, my emotions, time, resources---I am responsible for me, you are responsible for you, your needs are not my concern. It is no accident that the MacArthur Foundation genius grant recipient, historian Richard White, titled his history of the West, "It's Your Misfortune, and None of my Own" (Oklahoma UP, 1991). Being easily lured by novelty—new places, new experiences, new people. Ease of existing in a state of amnesia, a forgetfulness of oneself, one's past, and other beings that masks deep pain and fear. And, there is the temptation to view faith communities utterly pragmatically, as civilizing forces, albeit ones aligned with and not questioning economic, political and cultural arrangements.

In 1881 the first Anglican Bishop of British Columbia, George Hills, frustrated after a decades long effort to replicate in BC the Anglican Church of England, bemoaned the "constitutional religious apathy" characterizing "the people of the whole Pacific slope." Hills was a remarkably durable and resilient bishop, gifted with steady vision and a healthy dose of pragmatism. However, I don't think he was ready to appreciate what, I think, we are called to ponder: how this place and the experience of coming here profoundly affect the ways in which people construct social relationships and their sense of themselves—their identity, meaning and purpose,—community and anthropology, to use the theological code words. I think a central task of faith communities today is to discern and articulate the theology embedded in the life narratives of those who have come to this region, to appreciate the spiritual impulses and insights present in the temptations of a post-religious context, and to welcome the potency of genuine newness, biblically always a sign of God's presence, in the experience of dislocation and desire that so profoundly mark life in the great Northwest. My next three themes are ways I see of doing that.

Two: In a post-religious context, faith communities are carriers of memory—at best deep and subversive memory that continuously dislocates and relocates through the on-going process of conversion. Or to put it another way—historic faith communities are themselves communities of spiritual seekers in relationship with a rich body of tradition.

Memory is a narrative, the story within which one lives, a story that inspires the imagination, weaves together mind and heart, elaborates the connections among the physical, social and natural body. Religion is a "chain of memory." In a post-religious context, those

entities that historically, at least since the mid 17th century have been the major carriers or transmitters of memory—churches, schools, ethnic and family networks and more are changing radically—some would say breaking down, others evolving. As a result, we are in a time of clumsiness and confusion about how to pass on tradition, by which I mean, borrowing from the theologian Edward Farley, the human community's insights, conveyed beyond a single lifespan, "into the way things are, into what we human beings are up against, into the perils and promises of life." Tradition, so understood, "assists a people in the ordering of life, the interpretation of situations, and in creative responses to the new." We're here today because we think that our traditions have something to offer to that task of ordering life, interpreting experience, feeding our imaginations for dealing with the challenges of our time and are pondering why most people in the region don't grasp that.

Farley is concerned that a post-religious context yields a traditionless society, one in which we experience a "dispersal of consciousness" and the emergence of perhaps "a new kind of human being . . . . one whose consciousness is incapable of empathetic response to the claim of the other living things." In my contribution to *Cascadia, The Elusive Utopia*, I posed that perhaps in this place of weakened traditional memory, a new, bio-centric memory might be emerging, a memory "that puts all living things and the Earth itself in the center, a memory in which humans understand themselves intimately and totally as part of some larger web of life." But, I asked there, what do the more compelling myths of the West, and sensitivity to an expansive and grand environment, capable equally of inspiring and destroying human beings, mean for the project of creating a bio-centric memory?

This is where I believe historic faith communities are crucial. Historic faith communities live a story, embody a memory, exhibit a virtue of stability. Participation in an historic faith community is a wager of sorts, a wager that if one steeps oneself in the community's story, lives with those shaped by the story and lets that story read one through to the marrow of one's bones, one has a better chance of encountering and knowing intimately the deepest truth of all existence, what we call God. The story we live is the meaning of our deepest longing, love, hope and suffering. Constitutive of that story are three elements that speak to the spiritual longings of people in a post-religious age: 1) that all that exists, including us, is, at its core, relational. In being so our existence mirrors the inner, Trinitarian life of God, and hence gives the lie to utter self-sufficiency; 2) that reconciliation—with ourselves, our neighbors,

fellow beings upon the earth and the earth itself is the heart of what God has accomplished through Jesus—as Paul puts it, we are strangers and aliens no longer but fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God; and, 3) hospitality to the stranger is the central practice of those who believe, love and hope in and through Jesus.

Familiarity breeds forgetfulness. Martin Buber wrote about the leprosy of fluency—being so familiar with a text that we think we know what it means, and so are not able to encounter it anew. Annie Dillard in an essay in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* says that if we woke up to what goes on in the liturgy, we would never walk into a church again without wearing a hardhat and trembling. It is easy to forget the power and nuance and heart of the narrative we seek to live.

An important task for historic faith communities here in our place, is, I think, to return to the originating stories from which our tradition emerged. Returning to them with fresh eyes and ears is an on-going spiritual practice. It allows the originating stories once again to attune our attention, order our dispositions, and mold our sensibilities. Returning to those originating stories with the real questions of our personal and public lives, reframes them once again as they originally were—stories that spoke to questions and longings of spiritual seekers. In this boundary space of BC—we are on the border and in this boundary or liminal time that we are short-handing as "post-religious," those of us within the historic faith communities are called to lose our contentment with shorthand phrases and answers that are unintelligible to most of the people around us. We are called to befriend our own deep personal and public spiritual questions. Dong so will make us better able to hear the questions of the seekers who surround us.

Another crucial dimension of the memory we carry that is, I think particularly pregnant for our time, is that we remember the entire body. This is the long-standing insight of the historic faith communities that, while not perfectly lived out, led them to serve through education, health care and social welfare, the neighbor in the west. What historic faith communities refused to give up was the understanding of the common good. Now we are being called to a larger understanding of the body, one that incorporates the more than human. This is a point of bridging to spiritual seekers, a bridging that both corrects one of the temptations of our place—self-sufficiency, and that invites seekers into the spiritual wisdom of Trinitarian life.

Three: Faith Communities are Crucibles of Commitment. In my contribution to *Cascadia*, I wondered whether a new bio-centric memory can emerge in this place in which a habit of tentativeness of commitment is so ingrained. I want to suggest that historic faith communities at their best offer spiritual seekers a place to learn commitment. I see four important dimensions in how they do this.

The intergenerational character of faith communities and their commitment to service, model for others the practice of living "on behalf of"—the practices, joys, and asceticism of extending oneself for others. We tend to speak of service as meeting need, but, in fact, we serve on behalf of our neighbor, we serve on behalf of the vision of God's kingdom that is the narrative we inhabit. Learning how to live "on behalf of" gives flesh to dreams of being part of a project that matters because it helps us learn how to be part of something even when we don't "feel like it."

Historic faith communities also offer us a place to "grow up" spiritually. We don't grow up spiritually until we have learned how to endure frustration, negotiate conflict, and get to the other side of disillusionment with a capacity to hope. The Pascal pattern of life, death, and resurrection that marks the liturgical year is about more than our Sunday celebration.

Historic faith communities are crucibles of commitment when they provide mentoring environments, contexts, in which, to borrow from Sharon Parks, "a new, more adequate imagination of life and work can be composed, anchored in a sense of *we*." It offers hospitality to the potential of the emerging self, and it offers worthy dreams of self and world" (134). Such environments include, as described by Parks (pp. 135-146 and following):

> [NOTE—DIRECT QUOTES FROM PARKS IN THIS LISTING]
> *Networks of Belonging* – Mentoring environments are trustworthy places. In them persons are safe enough to be vulnerable and rooted enough to have their imaginations fed and their sense of potential expanded.
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> *Ask "Big Enough" Questions* – Mentoring environments extend hospitality to big questions, questions about the meaning of life, suffering, ruptured relationships, the environment and what one is to do with one's talents and gifts. Big questions are essential to the shaping and nurturing of imagination. Such questions stretch us.
>
> *Encounter with "Otherness"* – God always revises our boundaries outward. This takes an encounter with the other in which we establish an empathetic bond that transcends both them and us and so creates a new we. Such experiences ground commitment to the common good, rather than just to me and mine. Out of such experiences comes compassion (note the resonance with Farley here), the capacity to take the perspective of

another and so recompose our own perspective. From compassion comes the conviction of possibility, the sense that there can be another way. This fosters courage, the ability to risk on behalf of more than mere self-interest.

Habits of Mind – Mentoring environments cultivate four habits of mind:

- Dialogue: Genuine dialogue, real conversation, a back and forth more intent on understanding than on convincing or winning
- Critical Thought: A capacity to step outside of one's own thought and to reflect upon it as object, to recognize multiple perspectives, to see the pieces of something and be able to analyze them
- Connective/Holistic Thinking: A capacity to see fitting connections among things; a recognizing of patterns and natural connections and affinities that bind them into a whole.
- Contemplative Mind: Capacity to pause, to stop and notice one's interior life, an act essential to developing one's inner authority, to activating awareness of self and the self's connections to the world.

Finally, historic faith communities are crucibles of commitment when they exemplify and teach what I want to call "the pleasures of being overwhelmed," (a concept to which Craig Dykstra of the Lilly Endowment introduced me in his contribution to a new book *For Life Abundant*. Eerdmans, 2008.) To be overwhelmed tends to have a negative connotation, especially in a self-reliant culture that prides individual control. Yes, "we are overwhelmed by the sheer hugeness or complexity of something. We can't get our arms around it. We can't figure it out. We are unable to organize it and bring it under control." But overwhelming happens in other ways—"on the shore of a mountain lake at sunset, we are overwhelmed by beauty. At the birth of a grandchild, we are overwhelmed with joy. At a low point in our lives, we are overwhelmed by unexpected generosity." Indeed, the British theologian David Ford says that "Jesus Christ is an embodiment of multiple overwhelmings—baptized, driven into the desert by the spirit, announcing the kingdom of God as something worth everything else, a pearl beyond our wildest desires." The life of Christian faith, says Ford, "is itself the most profound experience there is of being overwhelmed. In baptism we take on than identity shaped by the overwhelmings of creation death, resurrection and the Holy Spirit. We enter a community that spans generations and relates us to perhaps to billion people alive today. This is a dynamic of being shaped by being overwhelmed" (See Dykstra in *For Life Abundant*, 53-55).

Four: Faith Communities are cultivators of novelty and animators of the body. In this region historic faith communities have played that role, sometimes consciously, sometimes

not. Now as we are in this time of change, of clumsiness and confusion and overwhelming, it is important, I think to take on this sense of ourselves and of our work more deliberately. We are animators of a body that at times has forgotten it is a body and the animators of a body that is waking up to the deeper meaning of a cosmic body of Christ.

We are called to articulate theology anew in a way that incorporates a bio-geo-centric vision and ethic. To do, so I think, will require the exercise of subversive memory, something about which the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has written. In his *Hope Within History* he presents a model of faith development, based on the Exodus. It includes a critique of ideology, a public processing of pain, and a release of new imagination. The second piece of that triad is crucial—the willingness to grieve and ritualize our pain. Without the capacity to acknowledge loss—and loss is, I think, endemic in the narratives of people who have come to this region, we are unable to dream into the future.

Second, we are called to find ways to break open the stories of people's lives within the horizon of the Christian story. We are called to mediate between people and the richness of our Christian theological heritage. We are bearers of a tradition in transition. We think the tradition has value. We know that for so many it is opaque, at worst oppressive and at best irrelevant. So, we look for moments when we can build the bridge between the healing and liberating power of the Christian heritage and the lives of the particular people with whom we work.

To do this there are four skills we need to develop. My former colleague, Jack Shea has stated these very well:

1. To be able to hear religious dimensions articulated in secular language and to respond with Christian religious perceptions. Religious reality is often expressed without using explicit religious vocabulary. People talk about ultimate meaning, identity, hope, their own distortedness, suffering and mystery without resorting to words like God, sin, grace, Christ, heaven, or cross. Religious attitudes haven't gone out of peoples lives, they are expressing them in new language. We need to hear their religious questions.

2. We need to be able to hear an explicitly theological question and to respond to it with accurate theology—meaning respond with the best and richest theology, not hackneyed old formulations.
3. We need to develop the ability to hear an assumptive world and to respond by surfacing it. In any situation religious, theological and ecclesiological assumptions are at play. Often these remain unnamed even while they are influential on our thinking and acting. How practiced are we at listening for the assumptions and bringing them to light so that they might be owned fully, revised, or rejected?
4. Can we hear the relationship between the Christian story and concrete activity? Can we name this relationship when it exists?

Imagination and Innovation—Prayer, Service, Community in our Time and Place: In the release of new imagination that comes from doing our grief work and in the mediation between lived narratives and the power of the larger Christian narrative that makes sense of our own lives and the life of the planet, the church in this place finds its work, I think. And, in finding that work it is freed for the innovations that are the fruit of freed imagination. I am thinking here about innovation in service to the community—in which the Christian communities of this region have excelled. I also am thinking, though, about the ways we do our liturgies. If people come and go, should we think of the cycle of the liturgical year in teaching, preaching and worship on the model of "catch and release." Can we imagine ourselves in our communities as the steady sea with the movements of the liturgical year the tides on which the seekers ebb and flow—to be anchored when something deep in their spirit is awakened to the depths.

Beauty and Fear/Faith and Fascination: For those of us who believe, love, and hope in and through Jesus, those of us who seek to be the church in this place, a fruitful meditations is on the relationship between beauty and fear. If I am right that the scale of this place can both invite experiences of the transcendent and grind a person down into hopelessness, then there is a theology to be explored in the way that works for both. In Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion*, the character Hank Stamper says the place is "so dam big" that a man is "whipped before he gets started." Alternatively, Caroline Leighton in *West Coast Journeys* recounts an experience or being terrified while crossing the Columbia River Bar in a large vessel. The

captain of the vessel takes her forward, literally crawls beside her to the edge of the vessel and has her look over the side to where the water touches the bow. Leighton writes that the beauty of the water, the bubbles and the color overcame her fear. She was absorbed in beauty and her fear vanished.

Equally relevant for us as we seek to be faithful to the gospel and to welcome those whom we encounter in this place, is an understanding of the relationship between faith and fascination. My former colleague, John Shea, writes in his book *The Spirit Master*, that faith is passed on by fascination. At the moment of fascination, he says, there are two possibilities. The first is envy—cutting off at the knees the person who fascinates you. The second is apprenticeship. Apprenticeship begins, says Shea, when we seek to be connected to that which is the source of the fascination in another person. In the great Pacific Northwest, it is especially true, I think, that faith is passed on through fascination. We are fascinated by persons who live with a range of freedom and imagination greater than our own. We want to know from where it comes. That is a moment of opening—a point of invitation into the larger Christian narrative.

Conclusion:

These, then, are some of my musings, reflections, thoughts on the relevance and potential of Christian communities today in this place. We are called to be carriers of memory, crucibles of commitment, and cultivators of novelty, for our communities, for the earth, for the future.

Thank you.

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