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## Theme Essay by Cherise Wyneken

### Thank You, Oscar Wilde and Pablo Neruda



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**When I first started writing poetry in my mid-fifties**, everything I saw or heard was a prompt for a poem. Although I became exhausted, I learned it's never wise to ignore a prompt.

By the time I reached my late sixties, a fellow poet whose criticism I valued suggested I write about something dear to my life causing me pain. No problem there. My religious faith was a mess. My regular attendance at Lutheran churches

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had failed to lead me to a satisfying relationship with the power we call God. As a new century approached, my search through the Gospels fired up doubts about the dogma of my church.

So, I took my friend's advice and began working on a poetic sequence of my spiritual journey, a journey I was still in the midst of. A quote from Oscar Wilde—"Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?"—spurred me on. It was a nudge to dig deeper into the religious realm for myself instead of accepting what others said.

I began by selecting poems from my files that fit the subject. I organized them according to the chronology of my journey, then wrote new pieces to fill in at the proper places.

The first, "According to Hoyle," expresses my initial feeling of entrapment, as shown in this excerpt:

I zombied through life  
eyes focused on the squares  
a life in a life in a life  
like a set of nesting dolls  
never going beyond the game board.

The final sequence consists of 24 poems. They all touch on fear, a major aspect of my journey: fear of losing my soul, fear of leading my children on the "wrong path," fear of being separated from God.

I found that deep in the cellar of my mind, I was flooded with images of objects I'd seen as a child in Grandma's basement: a silver, ghost-like cream can waiting to grab me as I entered; large cabbages hanging by their roots like giant spiders; pumpkins and squashes lining a shelf with ghoulish grins. Now, they all seemed to say, "Don't go there; you'll be hurt. Don't change your beliefs about God."

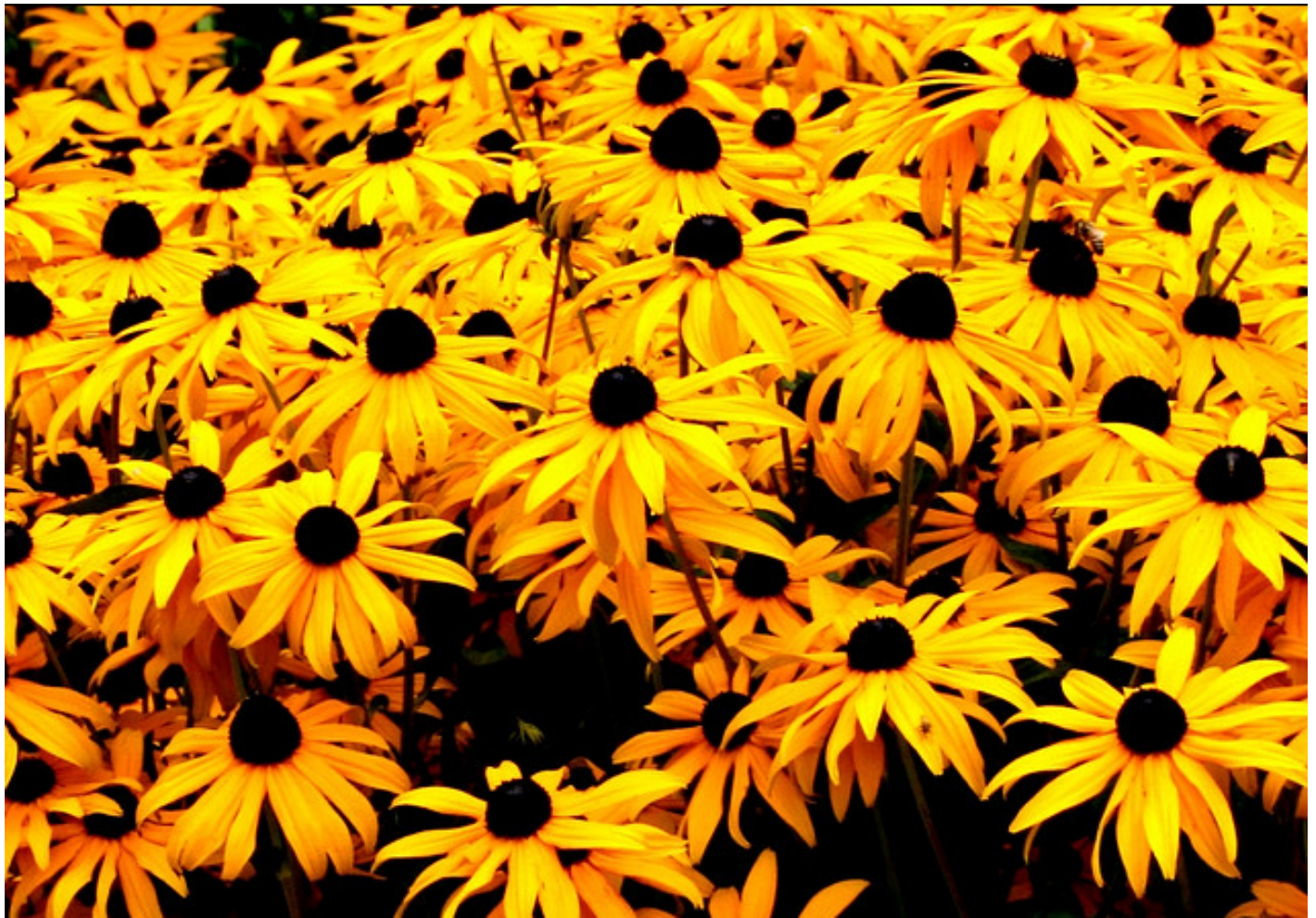
Large purple clouds drifting above seemed filled with wisdom that I could reach up and grab or let slowly drift away. They led me to feel I was at a significant place that required me to keep searching. Or give up.

I was like a bird gingerly exploring what is beyond the garden hose. Something frightens it, and it makes a quick U-turn back to the safety of a tree. In my case, back to the safety of childhood: God in a manger beneath my Christmas tree. I turned to nature again to describe my seeking, recalling a walk I once took along a boardwalk in the swamp. Dangerous alligators lurked below, warning me to stay safely where I was.

Like a homeless woman who's lost the support of her family, I attempted to find my way through books by theologians such as Kierkegaard, Moore, Dawkins, Funk, Spong. I ended up feeling they had taken me to a mountaintop and left me there.

The cacophony of words coming from preachers stuck in a pulpit reminded me of the mosquitoes buzzing in a small restroom in Everglades National Park. I recalled driving on a back road in Mexico, where a field of smiling black-eyed Susans suddenly made me see we've put God behind closed doors when he lives in the open everywhere.





While I was working on my sequence, I attended a poetry workshop in which the instructor used Pablo Neruda's "Walking Around" (Robert Bly's translation) as a prompt. All I had to do was read Neruda's first line—"It so happens I am sick of being a man"—and I was off on my own: "I am sick of belonging to the organized church."

Following Neruda's style, I examined what my life had been. When I reached his end section—"I stroll along serenely, with my eyes, my shoes, my rage, forgetting everything"—it sounded just like what I had been doing. In Neruda's words:

I walk by, going through office buildings and orthopedic shops  
and courtyards with washing hanging on the line:  
underwear, towels and shirts from which slow  
dirty tears are falling

I immediately pictured a church and its orthopedic attempts at healing, which seemed like nothing more than the laundering of dirty clothes. I, too, had been strolling along with my rage—not hanging on a clothesline, but buried in a coffin, as I said in my poem "Looking for God":

I walk by. Hear the organ  
swell a funeral dirge,  
see my coffin lid click open,  
feel a heavy pall draw free.

Writing this poem led me to realize I needed to drop my church membership. But it was Neruda's words that moved me toward that stark decision.

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Soon after, I began work on "Pushing the Envelope." In this poem, I expressed my loss and disorientation through images taken from a steep winding drive, west to east, on Bolinas Road in Marin County. And yet, I found something else:

Mt. Tamalpais watersheds  
gather in the gulley—  
giant fonts offering new life  
beyond the dam

I saw that God was bigger than the box below my bed filled with church paraphernalia—offering envelopes, choir music—all that I list in another poem, "Pandora."

I began to realize that God had been there all the time, watching and helping me in my struggle to know Him. In "Fogged In," my second to last poem, I imagine God observing me:

One day she will open her briefcase  
filled with poems she has written  
and find I've been there all along.

I came to see that if He lives everywhere in open fields, He lives in everyone. My final poem is "Toward Tomorrow":

Last rays of setting sun  
pierce the dark cypress path,  
spangle gnarled branches,  
dot posts along the foot bridge,  
lead to open meadows—

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### Publishing Information

- "According to Hoyle" by Cherise Wyneken, *Pilgrimage*, Spring 2013.
- "Looking for God," "Pushing the Envelope," and "Fogged In" by Cherise Wyneken, *The Eloquent Atheist*, February 2008.
- "Toward Tomorrow" by Cherise Wyneken in her chapbook *Things Behind Things* (Pudding House Publications, 2010).
- "[Walking Around](#) [5]" by Pablo Neruda in *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems*, edited and translated by Robert Bly (Beacon Press, 1971; reissued in 1993).
- Oscar Wilde's quote is from his [De Profundis](#) [6], originally written in 1897, when he was in prison, and published posthumously in 1905:

The final mystery is oneself. When one has weighed the sun in a balance, and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens star by star, there still remains oneself. Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?

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Cherise Wyneken's articles, stories, and poems have appeared in a variety of anthologies, periodicals, and journals; two collections of poetry; two poetry chapbooks; a spiritual memoir; a novel; a children's book; and a children's audiocassette. Her latest book is *Stir-Fried Memories* ([Whispering Angel Books](#) [8], 2013).

She was nominated for the 2013 Poetry Pushcart Prize and writes an online poetry column for the [Oakland Examiner](#) [9].

Cherise notes that while some of the poems excerpted in this TW piece have been published individually, she's still looking for a publisher for the entire sequence. For more information, see [Cherise Wyneken's listing on AuthorsDen](#). [10]

*The photo of Cherise Wyneken is © Nan Phelps and used by permission.*

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