

Yamauchi Lecture

Creating a Theology of Care for a Coastal-Carnival Place

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The title of this talk, “Creating a Theology of Care for a Coastal-Carnival Place,” implies that a particular kind of theology can be created *for* a particular kind of place. This idea may seem strange to some; how does one “create” theology “for” a particular place? Theology, in simple terms, means “words about God” or “talking about God.” Through theology, human beings seek to understand God, our eternal source and sustenance, and how we are in relationship to God. So what does it mean to *create* theology, and what would it mean to think about God differently in relation to different places? It may help to start with some basics. What is meant by the term, “theology of place?” And why might creating such a theology make a difference in the world . . . or at least to the people of a particular place?

I. Technical Introduction

Theology of place is a type of theology—a way of reflecting on and talking about God—that draws upon two previously established types of *situated* theology: the socially-situated and the ecologically-situated. Situated theologies deliberately privilege ideas about God that arise from and speak to people in the specificity of their contexts, with context typically meaning a situation or milieu shaped by such factors as race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, income level, historical factors, geographical region of upbringing, etc. According to situated theologies, God is experienced in diverse ways

according to variations in context. The idea is that contexts act like filters: different filters allow distinctive ways for human beings to experience and communicate their experiences of the divine source and sustenance—i.e., God—that affects their lives.

Socially Situated Theology

One of the major types of situated theologies is the “socially situated.” This type of theology speaks directly to people’s *human* social situation. For example, Latin American liberation theology grew out of suffering communities from Latin American countries during the politically turbulent times of the 1960s – 1980s. Generated from grass-roots groups called “Christian Base Communities,” this liberation theology spoke directly to people’s everyday situations of poverty and insecurity, proclaiming that God’s liberating power is first and foremost “for the poor.” This and other types of liberation theology, such as Black liberation theology and feminist theology, thus emphasize the social context from which people’s ideas about God arise. They consider how people’s ideas of God differ according to different human social situations. They ask, “How does God speak directly *within* and *to* those contexts?”

Ecologically Situated Theology

The other major type of situated theology is ecological theology. This type of theology takes Earth, or a particular ecosystem within Earth, as its context. In other words, either the biosphere as a whole, or a specific *bioregion* (such as the Mississippi River watershed or the Pontchartrain Basin estuary system) is the “situation” from and from which ecological theology speaks. Ecological theology thus teaches that a particular ecological system or region has a bearing on how people understand who God is and how they exist in relation to God.

Ecological theology first of all emphasizes that human beings are earthlings: Created from Earth's soil (*adamah*), humans are creatures *of the soil* (*adam*) [Gen. 2:7]. Ecological theology underscores the idea that when we humans lose sight of our connection to the land and its ecology, our ideas about God become impoverished of respect for the very ecological systems that keeps us alive. By intentionally privileging the earth-context, then, ecological theology calls upon people to live wisely with Earth's ecosystems and creatures.

Theology of Place

What I am calling "theology of place" brings together aspects of these two different kinds of "situated theology"—the socially contextualized and the ecologically contextualized. Theology of place thus addresses people in their specific *eco-cultural* contexts. It addresses those who identify with a particular place or feel they "belong to" a place by virtue of growing up there and/or making that place their home later in life. Theologies of place underscore that the people of a place are ecologically *and* culturally situated, these two contextual strands always being intertwined. Put simply, humans are *shaped by* the places in which we live, and in turn, we have responsibilities for those places. Since situated theologies always include an ethical aspect, speaking of how we *ought to* live in relationship to God and others, a theology *of place* addresses more specifically how being part of a distinctive place shapes our knowledge of and relationship with God and, in turn, how this relationship with God influences the ways we ought to live within that place.

New Orleans as context for a theology of place

Theology can of course be done in relationship to any place. At the same time, only certain people can speak from and for any given place, depending on their relationship to

that place. A theology of place is only authentic when it is spoken by someone who “comes from,” or feels that s/he “belongs to,” the place from and for which s/he speaks. For the purpose of this essay, then, we will consider the specific place of New Orleans in its coastal wetlands context, the eco-cultural place where this speaker and this audience are currently located.

II. Personal Introduction

When I was in graduate school and pondering a topic for my dissertation, I thought back to why I became interested in studying theology in the first place. One of the reasons, which I couldn’t get past, stemmed from my experiences of a place. New Orleans, the city where I’d gone to college, had had a profound impact on my life and my spiritual development. There was something *there* . . . something that had imbued in me a deep feeling that there is a “more” or a “depth” to existence. My experiences in New Orleans had imparted to me something akin to what theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, in 1799, called an “intuition of the universe.”¹ Through my personal experiences of a particular place, an experience of the infinite had been opened to me.

Something about this place touched me from the beginning. The first time I visited New Orleans—on my own, on a college-visit trip—I stayed at the Park View Guest House on St. Charles Avenue, right on the edge of Audubon Park. As I walked through the park on that balmy March day, I was mesmerized. Ambling through a moist medium, cradled by encircling live oak branches, I felt something there. Not a person, and not a “thing” at all, but more like a presence, an energy. Later that day, gently rocked by the streetcar as it

¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 1799, (Cambridge University Press, 1988, 1996).

made its way toward the French Quarter, I once again experienced a presence. It was like a blanket of energy draping over me and touching my life. The slowly swaying streetcar ride, coupled with the driver's reassuring voice that, "No, baby, I wasn't going to 'miss' the French Quarter," conveyed to me a feeling at once of uncanniness and yet ease on this, my first visit to the Big Easy.

What I encountered during this first visit to New Orleans was a place penetrated by and exuding spirit. This perceived spirit was not like an object in front of me, but like a subject who flowed toward me and enveloped me. Nor was this spirit like a "person." It was not demarcated that way. So while I do not believe that a place has the same kind of subjectivity as, say, a human person, my encounters with New Orleans nonetheless gave me the experience of an experiential or relational *presence* of sorts. Thus I will employ the term "spirit of place" to refer to what seems to be a living presence that I've encountered in and through this place.

How does a place have spirit?

What do I mean in claiming that a place has spirit? I mean that there is a "there" there, a "soul," something akin to what Martin Buber describes in his theology of the *I-Thou* (or *I-You*) relationship. Buber asserts that we encounter the eternal or infinite whenever we truly enter into relationship with another being, whether that being is a person or an aspect of the natural world. "In every sphere, through everything that becomes present to us," he says, "we gaze toward the train of the eternal You; in each we perceive a breath of it in every You we address the eternal You."² Hence his famous example of the I-You relationship with a tree:

² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970, p. 57.

I contemplate a tree. . . . But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. . . . Whatever belongs to the tree is included: its form and its mechanics, its colors and its chemistry, its conversation with the elements and its conversation with the stars—all this in its entirety. . . . The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it—only differently. One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is *reciprocity*.³

What I am saying about “spirit” of place, then, is that a place is more than an inanimate object. Like the situation with the tree described by Buber, above, a place is not merely an “It.” Many places seem to convey a personality or character, having a certain power to encounter us, surround us, and saturate us with its presence. A place may be thought of as a “being,” of sorts, one with which we can enter into relationship. Spirit of place, then, is the vital quality of a place, which people may encounter when they enter into relationship with said place.

This is not to say that a place is “god.” To idealize a particular place as god spawns certain dangers, since turning anything finite (a person, place, thing, or idea) into one’s “ultimate concern” can lead to the idolization of that finite thing.⁴ Such idolatry often becomes manifest in behaviors such as racism, ethnocentrism, and ultra-nationalism. So it’s not that a place *is* a divine being. Nevertheless, a place, much like a person or an aspect of the natural world, has the power to *manifest* the infinite—the divine *You* (again drawing on Buber’s terminology)—when we enter into relationship with it.

Spirit of Place and “Holy Spirit”

From a Christian perspective, spirit of place may be thought of as a microcosm of the Holy Spirit. Hildegard of Bingen envisioned Spirit as “the breath that binds both of them

³ *I and Thou*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970, pp. 57 – 58. My emphasis.

⁴ This is what Paul Tillich warned of in describing the demonic power of the “gods of blood and soil.” For example, making one’s “homeland” one’s god, as he saw in the case of Nazi Germany.

(Father and Son, the traditional names for the two other members of the trinity) together."⁵ As the enlivening power that also joins God in communion with creation, Spirit is described by theologian Elizabeth Johnson as the "energizing presence" of the universe, as that power that "pervad(es) the cosmos and all of its interrelated creatures with life."⁶ As Advocate, Inspirer, Sustainer and Challenger (titles commonly associated with the Holy Spirit), Spirit is "mover and encourager . . . the source of transforming energy among all creatures."⁷ And like Hildegard of Bingen's *viriditas*, Spirit is the vitality or "greening power" that radiates throughout all creation. This vitalizing and indeed re-vitalizing power, at the human level, is "the wellspring of the energy which draws people to one another, so that they come together, rejoice in one another and praise the God who is himself in community."⁸ The spirit of a place thus mirrors and draws its power from the Holy Spirit, serving a similar enlivening and relational function, only on a smaller, more limited scale.

III. The Distinctive Place of New Orleans

What are some of the influences that make *this* place, New Orleans, a spiritual place?

Ecologically Situated: Mississippi River and the Pontchartrain Basin Estuary

The Pontchartrain Basin, within which New Orleans is situated, may be described as an estuary. It connects the Mississippi River to the great Lake Pontchartrain, which is nearly an ocean bay. An estuary is a place where the waters of a major river meet and mingle with the waters of the sea. Without the Mississippi River running through it, and without the land's proximity to the Gulf of Mexico, we would not have this very particular

⁵ *Book of Divine Works* (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1987), 11.

⁶ *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992; 1994), 134.

⁷ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 135.

⁸ Jurgen Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, p. 309.

place. The land of New Orleans has been built up by the Mississippi's tendency to periodically overspill its banks or "natural levees." The over-spill built up land as the river extended its reach into the sea. Colonial New Orleans was founded precisely at the is geographical site due to a crescent-shaped swathe of relatively high ground coupled to a critical water-land route that connects the river to the sea. Native Americans already living in the seventeenth century along the banks of the river, the bayou, and Lake Pontchartrain first revealed the *Bayou St. John-Bayou Road* corridor to the LeMoyne brothers (Iberville and Bienville), setting the course for the Crescent City's future emergence.

In this place, Spirit vibrates upon the wetlands, creating an estuarine rhythm. The Mississippi River rushes down the delta, (ideally) building up land through its overspill,⁹ while river-gulf waters hybridity generates the various aquatic niches necessary for the spawning of marsh and marine species. Lake Pontchartrain's immensity, matched by the river's curvature, sculpts New Orleans' urban-scape, instilling in its residents a swirling sense of place. These flowing geographical processes produce a distinctive place pulsating with possibility.

Before human beings walled in New Orleans with artificial levees, the river's periodic flooding worked well to replenish the land and create land anew, reaching toward the sea. After nearly a century of constructing higher and longer levees, however, much of New Orleans sits at the bottom of a scooped-out and sinking bowl. It is not easy figuring out what to do about this problem, since the we live and work in typically cannot withstand floods and cannot quickly spring back again after sitting in flood waters that cannot easily drain out of the city. [We *could*, of course, build different kinds of structures

⁹ When *allowed* to overspill, that is.

to live and work in; the renewed (post-Katrina) practice of raising up houses on pilings is the beginning of this. Indeed, those who remain here will have to build differently.] One thing Katrina surely taught us is that we are doomed when we have no easy way to drain the floodwaters once they have entered the “bowl” of New Orleans.

Socially Situated: Carnival as Cultural Performance

In addition to being situated within an estuary, New Orleans is a carnival-place. By saying this I do not mean to imply that “Mardi Gras” is New Orleans’ only or even best celebratory season (Jazz Fest season is great, too!), nor that Carnival is the only cultural event that shapes this place. Yet it must be admitted that the annual Carnival season in New Orleans is a decisively formative event, helping to bring a certain character to New Orleans and continually providing opportunities for cultural performances of lasting significance. The event of carnival produces spaces for the proliferation of “public ritual” both during and after Carnival season.

Public rituals are those performance genres where there is no *absolute* boundary between performer and audience; that is, those who traditionally would be “audience” also “perform.” Such rituals typically take place in public areas, so they are not *private* performances in the way that paying for a ticket to go to the opera or theatre is. I’ve overheard people who grew up in New Orleans speak with dismay about attending parades in other cities: they are often quite shocked to realize that most American parades are rather staid affairs, where people watch from the sidelines rather than beg for beads and dance in the streets.

Carnival parades are an all-together different species, and their aspect of “public ritual” makes them somewhat wild. In this coastal-carnival place, “the people” participate.

Parade-*goers*, as we are sometimes called, are also performers: we jump and scream; we make eye contact with the float-riders and plead for beads and other throws. While to an outsider, behavior described as such might sound demeaning, in actuality it is improvisational cultural performance, and it wouldn't be much of a parade without it! Short-term bonds of friendship form among "parade-goers" as they wait and then jump for beads, dance to the high school bands, "ooh" and "ahh" at the more creative floats, and give each other's children the kids' most highly prized throws.

These big parades are really just a small aspect of the greater New Orleans carnival "event." Carnival, as the liturgical season from Epiphany through "Mardi Gras Day," creates a set aside space-time, or *chronotope*, which beckons heightened revelry and public performance as Fat Tuesday draws near. The carnival chronotope provides one of two sacred days for Mardi Gras Indian masking (the other being "St. Joseph's Day"), and it instigates throughout the city a proliferation of official and unofficial "walking parades," exotic *costuming* in the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood and elsewhere, a proliferation of music at the various music venues, and family parties across the city.

The so-called "Mardi Gras Indians" are of such great significance to the Carnival chronotope (and the chronotope's effect on the development of New Orleans' spirit overall) that their influence deserves special mention. Whether or not you've ever "seen" Mardi Gras Indians, you have know you have been touched by their spirit if certain musical riffs, like "Iko Iko" and "Ma day, cu day fi yo on a Mardi Gras day" have a certain power over you. If you've ever heard any New Orleans musicians, from brass bands to R. & B., talk about the roots of their own music, you have probably heard them say that one of their strongest influences is the music of the Mardi Gras Indians. And if you are a musician playing a gifg

during the Carnival season, you had *better* be able to play at least one song stemming from Mardi Gras Indian chants. It's practically mandatory. So even if you're one of those people who chooses to hide away from much of the revelry of the season, chances are you *have* been touched by Mardi Gras Indian music, and that when you hear some variation of it, it lifts your spirit.

Jazz musician Wynton Marsalis is credited with the proclamation that in New Orleans culture does not come down from "on high" but instead "bubbles up from the streets." I think that all of us who have lived here for more than a year or two *know* what he's talking about: he's talking about the music and dance traditions that have evolved from New Orleans *parading* traditions, and not primarily the old-line Carnival parades but even more so the street parades that you might just "run into." He's talking about New Orleans' "cultural performance" traditions, which emerge from neighborhood streets and clubs. These "creole" traditions¹⁰ have evolved over time from inventive people who integrated aspects of Senegambian, Native American, French, Spanish and Haitian traditions to create something new.

Born out of the initial conditions of postcolonial inventiveness culled in the midst of colonial violence,¹¹ New Orleans' creole culture arose as at once conflictual and creative, strategic and redemptive. The city's Carnival chronotope—a designated (and liturgical) space-time that allowed creative playfulness and a certain liberality—opened up possibilities for the development of creole cultural performance. The official "Sunday off"

¹⁰ Here I am using the term "creole" as a descriptive word for traditions created in the "new world" by coalescing traditions that came from the "old worlds" of Senegambia, France, Native American cultures, etc.

¹¹ Which took place in this particular location precisely because of its specific geological situatedness between the Mississippi and Lake Pontchartrain.

from typical work, applicable to slave and free people alike,¹² served as the other chief space-time that enabled the emergence of new cultural forms. Indeed, jazz music, second-line parades, and many of the cultural traditions famously associated with New Orleans today benefited from the Carnival and Sunday chronotopes, wherein people found ways to gather for the exchange of ideas and other cultural, economic, political and spiritual currency.

The postcolonial connection between two peoples—Africans and Native Americans—emanates through Mardi Gras Indian music and its derivatives. On Sundays, slaves and free people of color would gather and trade their own "goods" at Congo Square.¹³ Such goods included not only foodstuffs and crafts, but also performance traditions and the kind of practical and redemptive wisdom practices that sustain perseverance and creativity among a postcolonial people. Situated at the edge of the colonial city, on the land path that links Bayou St. John to the Mississippi, Congo Square is a New Orleans place node that links the eco-geological patterns of this city to the cultural performances of postcolonial peoples.

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IV. What's Theology Got to do with It?

I have been arguing in this essay that it is in and through places that people come to experience and share with one another God's "good vibrations." If New Orleans truly is a place where we may experience spirit and glean wisdom through our involvement in the

¹² Many people, of course, continued to work on this day, but the work and trade they took part in on Sundays was typically for their *own* livelihood instead of for the benefit of their master or employer. Thus they

¹³ Congo Square was the unofficial marketplace, located across the back edge of the colonial town (across Rampart Street), where both enslaved and free African peoples set up trade, and where strong Afro-Creole cultural artistic traditions emerged.

natural and cultural situations of this place, then we must ask ourselves how a theology of place can help us become more attuned to this? We must furthermore ask how a theology of place may lead us toward becoming involved in caring for this place? If our conceptions of God, or the divine, have no significance to how we live our lives, then there is little reason to “do” theology. But theologians believe otherwise. Theologians believe that how we “think about God,” or how we imagine the divine, does make a difference in our relationships with others. For a theology of place, our conceptions of divinity in relationship to the places of which we are a part should make a difference in how we live our lives within that place. A theology of place thus should not only help us to imagine how we are related to the divine in and through places (as interesting as those imaginings may be), but it should also kindle in us a more discerning, compassionate, joy-filled and sustainable mode of living within place. It should inspire a place-cherishing ethics.

Caritas

I propose that we develop a theologically grounded ethics of place, one that puts forward the virtue of *caritas*, Latin for “love” or “loving kindness,” as a way to live in relationship to place. Much more than the modern connotation of the word “charity” (which, in today’s world, often means giving money to a cause, or doing something ethical because one “ought” to, but not because one really feels *moved* to), *caritas* points to a love for the divine so strong that it flows back to us, compelling us to love others. *Caritas* is not a self-serving kind of love, then, even though it does come back to the self, having a positive effect upon the self. Rather, *caritas* is a love of compassion. It is a love that grows from empathy—truly feeling for others, desiring what is good and beautiful for others, precisely because one is connected to others. *Caritas* is a relational ethic, arising from the

understanding that we truly are connected to one another at an ontological level: our very nature is not to be separate individuals but interconnected beings; we *are* through our interrelatedness, and thus we do have the ability to feel one another's pain, to share in one another's joy, and to desire the best for one another, in part because we are part of one another. As in all relational theologies,¹⁴ the idea of the divine comes in to play here because "God" is conceived as the ultimate Source and Sustainer of the web of interrelationships. Our very ability to experience empathy and to live with compassion is rooted in God, the source of all there is.

Bringing an ethics of *caritas* to bear upon a place requires that we develop a deep knowledge of and commitment to the places we are part of. To truly care about a place means to *act* from the experientially gained knowledge that our ethical practices fan out into the many sets and subsets of relations that constitute a place. An ethics of *caritas* calls us to critically appreciate, care for, and work to transform the places of which we are a part, knowing that in doing so we are drawing from the relational energy of God (or the Spirit), nourishing and cultivating our own lives.

Wisdom

Wisdom sits in places.

--Keith Basso, "Wisdom Sits in Places"

In his article explicating the connection between place and wisdom in Western Apache culture, anthropologist Keith Basso shares the intriguing insight that "[w]isdom sits in places." In traditional western Apache culture, as Basso interprets it, wisdom is gained

¹⁴Such as ecological theology, feminist theology, wisdom theology, etc.

by paying close attention to one's actions in relation to places. Of course, in order to glean wisdom from a place one must be *involved* in particular places. Through involvement in places, people may come to comprehend the intricate patterns and the particular stories associated with places. Wise people, in other words, are able to draw wisdom from their familiarity with the places they know. As Basso continues his thesis, he says that due to their acute perception and intuitive knowledge of a place, those with wisdom have the power to perceive slight disturbances in natural and cultural patterns, which then enables them to help people in their community avoid situations of danger and successfully navigate change.

Drawing from Basso's interpretation of western Apache insights, we may think of Wisdom as a kind of knowledge that derives from people's careful observation of and engagement with places. Embedded in the eco-cultural complexity that comprises places, the kind of knowledge we call "wisdom" does not have to do with static facts but rather with how people live within their communities, including their natural environments. What's more, just because wisdom is bound up with places does not mean that this kind of knowledge is simply parochial, forever bound to "the way things have always been." Instead, as places undergo transformation so, too, does wisdom. In contrast to facts, then, wisdom is an alive, flowing and dynamic knowledge.

Wisdom's in the biblical tradition

The female figure of Wisdom is found in the biblical books of the Jewish wisdom tradition, including the inter-testamental literature. In some passages Wisdom is depicted as a desirable quality that humans should seek to adopt; in some she is depicted as a divine attribute, a characteristic of God that verges toward being a persona of God (similar to the

idea of the Logos and Holy Spirit being “personas” of the one God); finally, in some she is depicted as a divine personage in her own right, working in tandem with God the creator and liberator. For example, in the creation hymn of Proverbs 8, Wisdom is portrayed as God’s companion, a “master-craftsperson” or “playful child,” who works with God in the process of creating the universe.¹⁵ Thus the Jewish figure of Wisdom is similar in many ways to the Christian idea of *Logos*, the divine Word, who is described in the Gospel of John as being “with God” from the beginning of time, aiding God in the creation of the universe.¹⁶

In relation to *place*—the place from and for which we are doing theology—we may imagine Wisdom as the divine communication and activity, which dwells within and imbues places. This idea corresponds with another aspect of Wisdom found in the Jewish wisdom literature, where Wisdom is depicted as “seek[ing] a resting place” (for *Sirach*, in Jerusalem) and becoming intimately involved with a particular group of people (the people Israel). This passage links Wisdom to the theological idea of the *Shekinah*, often described as God’s “indwelling presence,” including the idea of indwelling in a place.¹⁷ Thus we may

Those people who are attentive to places and enter into relationship with places (rather than simply look upon a place as an “It”) thus may encounter divine Wisdom. Coupling these Jewish theological ideas of *Wisdom* and the *Shekinah* to Basso’s description of a western Apache concept of wisdom (noted above), leads us to an understanding of Wisdom as a kind of God-given knowledge or Way, discerned from paying special attention to a place, which can lead us to developing an ethics of caring for place.

¹⁵ Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 147.

¹⁶ The prologue to the Gospel of John echoes the first creation story in the Book of Genesis, where God creates “the heavens and the earth.” In John, however, it is *Logos* or God’s “Word” that is there “from the beginning” as the divine creative will and activity.

¹⁷ In the Jewish tradition this place would typically be the temple, Israel, or the city of Jerusalem.

Wisdom is a necessary element for developing an ethics of caring for place. If wisdom is a way of knowing and acting, i.e., a way of perceptive living within and in relation to a place, then a wise ethics in relation to place means people being attuned to the patterns of that place. As noted in the above discussion of Basso's assessment of western Apache culture, people acquire wisdom through their intentional participation in places. Attuned to place, wisdom is a way of knowing that includes an awareness of the problems and possibilities of a place. Wisdom also embraces a real affection for place, which may manifest itself at times in joyful celebration and at other times in sorrowful weeping.

A wisdom-inspired *caritas* should become incarnate in our *practices* of caring for a particular place. At times this may translate into nourishing past traditions; at other times it should translate into working for change. As a parent cherishes her child, so *caritas* desires the best for, and even wishes to think the best of, the places it cherishes. Yet such wishful thinking cannot be allowed to become sheer nostalgia. When it does, people hamper rather than inspire necessary growth and change. To cherish a place, then, means to relate to that place with both affection and a critical eye. One must be able to discern the prejudicial and encumbering patterns of a place, becoming open to and inspiring others to work for transformation when transformation is needed.

Cherishment or *caritas* is the kind of compassionate love that seeks out and encourages life-practices of wisdom. Cherishment brings together the virtues of wisdom and love. It is as an active, embodied love, integrating *eros* and *agape*, passion and charity. An ethic of cherishment, then, inspires people to enjoy the beauty and creativity of a place while also helping people to discern the need for responsible transformation of said place. Born of place-embedded wisdom, cherishment thus does not sever revelry from

responsibility. It does not see an incompatibility of carnival and care. As the Wisdom figure found in Proverbs 8 is described variously as God's playful child and God's skillful artisan, so a wisdom-inspired *caritas* insists that we may take pleasure in delighting with God in creation, even as we seek to bring about the "common good."

V. Doing Theology for THIS Place

A wisdom-inspired *caritas* for *this* place, the city of New Orleans within coastal Louisiana, must begin with a lived appreciation of the estuary's patterns and an understanding of how the city's various cultures have come to be a part of this place. Wisdom entails not just "getting it," intellectually, but also "feeling it" in one's own spirit. The rhythms of this place—a fertile estuary of sweet and salt waters; a water-bound place that soaks in and reflects sounds in unique way; a place whose history stems from the various cultures brought together at this juncture of navigable waterways, giving birth to a *creole* culture with a propensity toward cultural performance—all this has already and is still giving rise to art that "bubbles up from the streets," expressing and further creating the character of this place.

To embody wisdom, one must take the time to experience and appreciate what is already given, which, in turn, should help one to discern the need for transformation. In relation to New Orleans, the incorporation of wisdom in our lives should encourage us to support those coastal restoration projects that mimic rather than work against the estuary's natural rhythms. With wisdom we might even come to accept that we cannot forever control the Mississippi River. In other words, our levee control projects are mortal; we should not expect from them divine strength. This is one of wisdom's hardest lessons,

that we cannot always mold nature into whatever we deem is in our own best interest, but we must instead take a longer view, coming to appreciate a the greater good, the good of the land and the ecosystem, which might require us to give something up. Here is where we need to develop a deeper appreciation and practice of *caritas*, the kind of love that does not cling to that which, by its very nature, cannot forever remain the same. Caritas attends to the well being of others, knowing that one's own wellbeing is bound up with that of others.

New Orleans' wild spirit, present not only in the roiling river but in the pulse of carnival-related performances, conveys yet another aspect of living wisely in relation to this place. Wisdom entails being willing, at times, to "let go" and celebrate. New Orleans' cultural performance traditions promote our taking pleasure in the rhythmic patterns of this place. As everyone who lives here knows, New Orleans and its coastal wetlands is a "festival place"; it is a place where people come together and celebrate the bounty of this place's ecology (the oyster festival, the strawberry festival, the creole tomato festival, the mirliton festival, etc.) and the bounty of this place's culture (Jazz and Heritage Festival, French Quarter Festival, Zydeco festival, Po-boy Festival, Gumbo Festival, etc.). Even though plagued by severe social problems, New Orleans exudes a "festival spirit" through much of the year, filling residents with celebratory joy, the kind of joy that instigates hope.

A song that has instilled a joyful hope within me is one that I first heard shortly after moving back to New Orleans in the summer of 2006 (a little less than a year after the event of Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans). The song, "Come on home to the dancing ground," was recorded by a Mardi Gras Indian group called the "Wild Tchoupitoulas," and its sound is quintessential New Orleans. Though it may have been composed, in the first

place, as a call to other Mardi Gras Indians to return home, it functions equally well as a call to all of us who have been displaced from and long for the Crescent City. It beckons people back home to their “sacred ground,” a place whose intertwined ecology and culture have created a truly distinctive spirit. This is a spirit many people “catch on to” and, once they do, most do not feel it is easy to be released from.

***Caritas* and the “cares of the world”**

New Orleans has been called the “city that care forgot,” with the word “care” in this phrase meaning “worldly troubles” or “that which causes distress.” The original meaning of “city that care *forgot*,” then, suggests that New Orleans is a place where one may feel *released* from one’s cares, a place where one can be “at ease,” at least for the duration of one’s stay. (Not surprisingly, this phrase can be traced back to tourist propaganda.)¹⁸ And I think there is a certain truth to this experience of New Orleans’ being a balm, a soothing medicine, especially for visitors and for those who have had to move away for too long. Just this past weekend I heard the witness of another believer, a guest preacher at our church. This guest preacher had recently moved away from the city for a job, and she was happy to have had reason to return for a visit. She started out her sermon by explaining to our congregation that she finally knows what it means to “miss home.” Since moving away, it has become ever more clear to her that New Orleans *is* where she feels at home. New Orleans is a place where she feels a comforting energy wrapping around her, bringing her a certain feeling of ease.

This feeling of “ease” associated with the Big Easy, however, is ironic, since those of us who have lived here for a period of time know that New Orleans is *riddled* with cares.

¹⁸Richard Campanella.

We know all too well why there's a conference, taking place at Loyola this Friday entitled, *Preventing Lethal Violence in New Orleans*. We know New Orleans' history of sub-par schools, abandoned housing, drug violence, inadequate mental and physical health care, ecological ignorance, as well as many politicians seeming to care more about their pocket books than their constituents who suffer from the city's many ills. These grim realities characterize this city, just as much as does any sense of "ease." And, of course, the city's uneasiness impacts the lives of people in some communities much more than others.

Those of us who are parents, for example, know of the real struggle to get our children into one of the few good public schools available in New Orleans. While some families are able to come up with private school tuition and while there are a few who get lucky in public school lotteries, what happens to the rest, indeed to the *majority*, of us? What happens after the few "get theirs"? It is sad to say that for the most part in the past, those who "got theirs" would sigh deeply and then forget about the plight of others. Pre-Katrina, I very well might have been one of those people, my family one of those families. And if we didn't get lucky in the lottery (which, in fact, we did not), we would either have dedicated a large part of our family's budget to pay for private school, or we would have left the city, deciding that "given the state of things," this wouldn't be a good place to raise a family. What I mean to say is, we would have remained part of the problem. It would not have crossed our minds to join with those other families whose kids had not "made it" into a good public school, demanding and creating something better. We would not have had the faith to do so. Such, of course, is a universal human problem. But over the years, this lack of faith had perniciously rooted itself in New Orleans. New Orleanians were held down by the belief that, in many areas at least, what "was" could not be changed. So we would

love those aspects of the culture we loved, while remaining resigned to the city's troubles as "just the way things are." For many of us the city seemed long forgotten by the virtues of wisdom and love. It was more the "city that forgot to care" than the "city that care forgot." And so we wallowed in the city's injustices and ineptitude, imbibing Bacchus to celebrate those aspects of the culture we loved, but also to get through the everyday pain of this place.

After the disaster of Katrina, however, as more and more residents decided to come home and as enterprising young adults from across the United States even chose to move here for the first time, the city experienced a surge of determination to "rebuild right." Many of you in the audience this evening may have felt this creative and benevolent spirit. I am thinking about the newly formed or revived neighborhood organizations; "green" rebuilding organizations; educational reform organizations; community gardens popping up across the city; religious congregations seeking to embody a new spirit; in addition to all the hands-on work of gutting and rebuilding houses, businesses, church buildings, etc. What's more, it was largely faith-based volunteers from across the United States who came (and are coming still!) to help us rebuild and create this place anew. People, including both residents of New Orleans and volunteers helping us rebuild, have been overcome by faith, a power much stronger and more far seeing than simply "the facts." The facts might have told us to abandon ship, to let this place die its short or drawn-out death, depending on when the next flood would occur and depending on how inept the city's after-storm elected leaders might be. But instead a certain spirit enlivened people and a certain faith encouraged people to be *part* of this place's resurrection, so to speak . . . to be a part of the rebirth and renewal of New Orleans by organizing with others to influence their

neighborhoods and city. Faith, whatever this power is, would seem wrapped up with hope and love. And all those people, New Orleanians and volunteers from across the country, both of whom have worked countless hours to rebuild structures and revive the culture of this city, have been carried on the waves of faith.

Following Katrina was a moment in history when the dense fog of resignation lifted and people's good intentions actually *materialized* into new creations. For instance, my husband and I became formative members of a neighborhood group that worked on reopening a nearby school, which had been shuttered since Katrina. We started organizing neighbors around the desire to have a quality public school for the children in our immediate area. Our goal, like that of so many people post-Katrina, was not exactly to rebuild what *was*, but to create anew, drawing on the strength of people's love for this place and their desire that New Orleans would come back stronger and better. We wanted to open a school that would reflect the neighborhood's diversity of race, ethnicity and class. We wanted to create a place where all families in the neighborhood would truly *want* to send their children.

It is my belief that this neighborhood group would never have formed before Katrina, primarily because neighbors would not have believed such change was possible, not in a city of such ingrained school segregation (in practice, even if officially not legal). But after Katrina there was an empty school. After Katrina there was a neighborhood whose children were being bused to various different schools across the city, even as more families were returning. After Katrina there was a city in the process of rebuilding. But even more, there were people who felt they were integral to this place . . . who had begun to

feel it was up to them be involved in what the city would become.¹⁹ Following Katrina, then, was a rare moment in which different kinds of people, with a shared commitment to rebuilding their lives in this place, embraced what I would call a “faith,” a belief and hope that institutions and structures could be rebuilt in a better way than before. Those of us involved in rebuilding—whether houses, neighborhoods, businesses, schools, or churches—seemed less likely to fall into past patterns of resignation. Indeed, a new spirit came over us, and it was a spirit of engagement. It was a spirit of hope and belief that this time our actions would actually make a difference for this place. And that’s because this time it was a different place. It was still New Orleans, but a broken place; a place about which we had many memories of what we loved from the past, but a place that had to be built again, and so in a very real sense it had to become anew. That is why I noticed, on not just a few church kiosks, proclamations from the book of Revelation, “Behold I am making all things new” (21:5).

* * *

As inhabitants of an interconnected universe embedded in particular places, we human beings must not only take care of ourselves, but also the other inhabitants of the places we love. We must care both about the organic and the inorganic infrastructure supporting our lives. This means we must care about the air that we breathe, the water we drink, the soil from which our food grows, and the coastal wetlands that still could protect us from hurricanes, if we would but tend to their well-being. We must care about New

¹⁹ It should be noted that we as a neighborhood group didn’t get exactly what we wanted. After a long fight, we did not convince the powers that be at the Recovery School District to reopen a school at what felt to us like the perfect neighborhood location. However, a number of us in the group remained involved in fighting for a new public school that would serve our area. After several years of community organizing, our charter application was accepted, and the school we founded is now in its third year of operation at a temporary location, with plans for a new building to be constructed in the heart of Mid-City.

Orleans *eco-cultural* patterns—the rhythms of carnival and estuary—from which we are physically and culturally nourished every day. We must revive the virtue of *CARITAS*, learning to care *for* the “city that care forgot.”