

## WORSHIP

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## WORSHIP

*Janet Walton*

Improvisation and Imagination: Holy Play 290

*Winfried Haunerland*

The Heirs of the Clergy? The New Pastoral Ministries and the Reform of the Minor Orders 305

*Richard D. McCall*

The Shape of the Eucharistic Prayer:  
An Essay on the Unfolding of an Action 321

*Lester Ruth*

Reconsidering the Emergence of  
the Second Great Awakening and  
Camp Meetings Among Early Methodists 334

*Nathan D. Mitchell*

The Amen Corner 356

Announcement 365

Book Reviews 366

*Worship* web site: <http://www.sja.osb.org/worship>

## Improvisation and Imagination: Holy Play<sup>1</sup>

The man bent over his guitar,  
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.  
They said, "You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are."  
The man replied, "Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar."  
And they said then, "But play, you must,  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,  
A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are."<sup>2</sup>

A blue guitar. Out of the ordinary, strange, maybe disturbing. Its sounds are beyond us and yet ourselves. Things are changed upon a blue guitar. Throughout this poem, Wallace Stevens invites the reader to *play* with this metaphor, that is, to hear it, to see it, to grapple with it in a context of other images, rhythms, and sounds. By stoking our memories and evoking our imaginations, Stevens accompanies readers into a creative moment. He invites us to engage this blue guitar. Why blue? What kinds of sounds? Why is it urgent to play? How are the sounds beyond us, yet ourselves? Not every reader will care, but for some, those who suspend disbelief for even a moment, they will discover something; they will sense what a blue guitar says about ourselves and about the world we live in.

Twenty years ago, liturgical scholar Joseph Gelineau called contemporary churches to a similar kind of *play* in worship. He challenged churches to throw its symbols as if tossing balls to one

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<sup>1</sup>This article was part of a report given to the Henry Luce Foundation, now a part of *The Papers of the Henry Luce Fellows in Theology*, Vol. 4, Matthew Zyniewicz, editor.

<sup>2</sup>Wallace Stevens, *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (New York: Knopf 1952) 3.

another.<sup>3</sup> Gelineau felt that churches were missing the point of coming together. They were not modeling a way of life in their liturgies that was any different from business as usual the rest of the week. One problem Gelineau pointed out was the way churches used symbols. He decried the persistent attempts to control their interpretations as if there were predetermined meanings that a community must get. Such control undermined the power of symbols, in fact, contradicted their purpose. It would be as if Wallace Stevens *told* us what a blue guitar did rather than letting readers figure it out for themselves. Gelineau urged churches to find more dynamic ways to engage their symbols, to play with them, so that each person could discover their meanings for themselves. He offered an example from his congregation's experience of water in the Easter Vigil. "The congregation moved in procession to a room next to the nave. The room was in total darkness except for a spotlight in the ceiling over a large bowl of water. . . . The passage through the dark room with the bowl of water was entirely silent. When people entered the room, they looked at the water; some made the sign of the cross, some drank, some sprinkled themselves or splashed water over their heads; some did nothing."<sup>4</sup>

Gelineau comments: "Everyone had to find a meaning in this event, to situate themselves in relation to it, to take a stand."<sup>5</sup> When members of a congregation are *expected* to respond, to be interactive participants, they are involved in improvisation. In this example, each person made a choice from a varied repertory of possibilities. By making their own decisions, whether it was to do nothing or to splash water over their heads, they brought their own particular life experiences into some dialogue with what was happening in this ritual through the use of water. It was a time for discovery, for body-mediated knowledge, for holy play.

Of course, those who came into the room already knew something about the significance of water in general and about its role in this particular liturgical setting as a reminder of each person's

<sup>3</sup>Joseph Gelineau, "The Symbols of Christian Initiation," in William Reedy, editor, *Becoming A Catholic Christian Today* (New York: Sadlier 1979) 190-94. I am grateful to Frank Henderson for pointing me to this article.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

baptism. And every experience is also new, informed by whatever is currently happening in their lives, in our world. This specific experience invited each person to remember layers of experiences with water and baptism and to let those memories flood into this experience to enrich it. But a ritual experience does not stop with what we remember; it goes beyond the past and adds knowledge from the present moment. Maybe a sign of the cross with water reminds us of the beauty of our bodies and our ability to bless each other with these bodies. Maybe splashing ourselves with water, something never thought about until the moment of doing it, encourages breaking open other patterns in our lives. With no prescribed response, the choice comes from within each person. The leaders of the community act as coaches. They set the context through the environment: its sounds, its silence, its light, and the way people are together. What happens depends. It depends on what each member of the community desires or can do in the moment.

#### A CALL TO RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

The onset of the millennium, when many people are attending even more closely to their own spiritual resources, is challenging traditional religious institutions to look at what they communicate through their sacred texts, their sacred elements, their liturgical spaces, their assemblies. How is their heritage, the convictions they have developed over time, connecting to the needs of people now and in the next century? We live in a dangerous world where children murder children, where hatred and prejudice incite continual wars, where poverty dooms millions, where air and water and soil are polluted casually, where natural disasters wipe away whole villages in minutes, where depression silently kills our friends. And it is a world where many people feel like novelist Jane Smiley's Lidie Newton. When faced with the crisis of taking a stand (in her case, about abolition) she said, "Frank and I didn't pray. It didn't occur to us. We had swum in religion all our lives and had not gotten wet."<sup>6</sup>

Confronted with a decision that would, in Frank's case, cost his life, and for Lidie, change it forever, they did not turn to God or to a church for help. Though they were involved in religion all their

<sup>6</sup>Jane Smiley, *The All True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* (New York: Knopf 1998) 148.

lives, that connection had no significant value when they were confronted with a decision about whether or not to stand up for what they knew was right. Yet, the point of religious membership is to support such moments; the intention of doing worship is to practice a way of life that models justice, so that when the time comes we are empowered by it to take a stand. We get wet so we can act in the face of danger, so we can carry on even when dreams are dashed. We get wet so that we can move together, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., on a dangerous pilgrimage toward the uncharted promised land that is always being created in the midst of the wilderness, calling others to join, to create, to overcome.<sup>7</sup>

The journey, as King points out, is always being created. There are always new challenges, new decisions, unpredicted failures and successes. Life is not static. Such rhythms of life call for worship that models a way to make continual choices, that gives each person a sense of agency, that affords not only permission but the power to act in the moment. This power emanates from the tradition but not necessarily in ways that have been tried and tested before. Gelineau invites us to let go of caution in our worshiping communities, not to be concerned with protecting our traditions as if they might break if we play with them. Instead, he urges us to throw what is most precious to one another. Tossing can be frightening. We do not know how to throw something precious. We might drop it. We do not know who will catch it. Throwing, catching or dropping all assume active involvement of individuals and communities; all assume collective and collaborative movement along uncharted paths. Our liturgical forms have the capacity to help us to "get wet" if we want to play, toss, catch, and drop.

YOU HAVE A BLUE GUITAR,

YOU DO NOT PLAY THINGS AS THEY ARE

Week after week, communities come together as people who share a pilgrimage. It is a pilgrimage fraught with danger but also rich with blessings. We want to discover the implications of belief in God for this pilgrimage; so we read and listen to sacred texts, the same texts, over and over; we meet around holy actions: blessing

<sup>7</sup>Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis 1996) 111.

God, one another, eating and drinking with all kinds of people, over and over. We do not do these things mindlessly but rather with an avid desire to layer our knowing and to act in light of what we do each time. We work together, we play together, to glimpse more and more dimensions of our relationships with God, with one another and with our created world. We practice living differently. We want to feel in our bones what life is like when every person is honored and is called upon, when hunger is satisfied, hope is reinforced, love known for what it might be. For a time we try out being in such a world which does not yet exist. We play as if it does so that when we leave we can do our part to shape relationships anew. We return to share where we have been and learn what we might try another time. Worship cannot be business as usual; congregations cannot depend solely on what they have always done. We live in a time where many people die from neglect, hate, and exclusion. It is a time that calls for something different, playing things not as they are.

Holy play. Getting wet. We play because, in Diane Ackerman's words, play "carries one across fear and uncertainty toward the slippery edges of possibility, where one must use oneself fully and stretch human limits to achieve the remarkable."<sup>8</sup> Play is a vehicle for discovery and growth. In the midst of repetition and inevitably some tedium "we set bigger challenges, develop new skills, take greater chances, canvass worlds."<sup>9</sup>

"Holy play," which I use interchangeably with improvisation, is essential for effective ritualizing. Play is not a disregard for tradition, as liturgical scholar David Power reminds us. It is rather "a texting of traditions, rites and texts for their adequacy in a fresh intertextuality."<sup>10</sup> The building blocks of rituals, its symbols, presume holy play. The word itself, derived from the Greek *symballo*, means something thrown together. Symbols accrue their meanings from what clashes and crashes, what is hurled and what is caught over centuries of use. So when communities use symbols, they, too, join in layering more meanings from what has been tossed and dropped. And continually they discover new meanings

<sup>8</sup> Diane Ackerman, *Deep Play* (New York: Random House 1999) 38.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> David Power, Unpublished manuscript.

for changing times. It is active layering. There is always more to know and to add.

In worshiping congregations where people are the primary symbols, they do not commonly play as a way of being in community with each other. Nor do they play with the things, the elements, the textures and texts around which they gather. Tossing what is precious takes courage and practice. Gelineau urges us to try it. In this essay I am offering a strategy for such play based on a study of improvisation among artists.

BUT PLAY YOU MUST,

A TUNE BEYOND US, YET OURSELVES

Improvisation is not an unprepared, unskilled, relentless imposition of one's point of view on others. That would be a nightmare for all. Rather, it is a process that intends to make space for new layers of experiences to be added to old ones, for boundaries to be stretched ever so slightly, for freshness, greenness, blueness, clearness. Applied to worship, it means that leaders and members of worshiping congregations provide and take space and time to discover their own interpretations of symbols, to negotiate different sets of meanings among the many that are available and to take a stand in relation to them. And it calls for doing what we practice in the midst of worship beyond the ritual time and space. Improvisation is a way of life that invites what is "most disturbing, more immediate, and also more powerful and rewarding" to get in.<sup>11</sup> It requires listening, waiting, taking in, trying something, practicing. As the jazz musician Red Rodney says, "You keep playing, keep studying, keep listening, keep learning, and you keep developing."<sup>12</sup>

The term "improvisation," as I am using it in this article, describes an attitude toward worship as well as the skills needed to embody it. Improvisation is a way of being that intends to pray and live in the moment from what each person remembers and from what each is willing to continually envision. No one knows where

<sup>11</sup> A. Frost and R. Yarrow as cited by Hazel Smith and Roger Dean, *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts Since 1945* (the Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers 1997) 40.

<sup>12</sup> Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago 1994) 485.

the pilgrimage will end nor even where it will wander, only that each person contributes to its twists and turns.

By drawing from the work of artists, most of whom spend many hours a day developing their skills of improvisation, I am not presuming that members of congregations or leaders can, nor need to, turn over large amounts of their time and energy to follow a similar regime of learning and developing in order to improvise. Rather I am exploring an approach to worship that uses what we know about improvisation in artistic venues to encourage active, collaborative, "holy play." I am proposing that worshiping congregations develop an artistic mindset and a schema for improvising as a way to enjoy the freedom and the power worship can provide. It is "holy play," a way of breaking the habits we have developed that miss the riches of our symbols, a vehicle for claiming the power of our partnership with one another and God. Improvisation or holy play intends to use engaged bodily ways of knowing to transform ourselves and our world.

In another Wallace Stevens poem, "St Armorer's Church from the Outside," he offers the image of a church that once upon a time was a huge success but is now rotting.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it is so ravaged that there is a sumac tree growing upward from a ruined altar. A sumac tree. Something living in the midst of what seemed to be dead. An anti-structure. Stevens calls the image a "chapel of breath." The old St Armorer's continues but not as anyone expected. Through its ruins something new appears.

No radiance of dead blaze, but something seen  
In a mystic eye, no sign of life but life  
Itself, the presence of the intelligible  
In that which is created as its symbol.<sup>14</sup>

A chapel of breath, "That which is always beginning because it is part / Of that which is always beginning, over and over."<sup>15</sup> A chapel

<sup>13</sup>I am grateful to Peter Hawkins for introducing me to this poem. He used it in his response to my presentation on "Improvisation and Imagination" at the 1998 Luce Fellows Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

<sup>14</sup>Wallace Stevens, "St Armorer's Church from the Outside" in *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf 1955).

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

of breath, where life is connected to death but not controlled by it, where resilience and freshness continue regardless.

A chapel of breath expresses the essence of improvisation. In its purest and most formative state improvisation is a process rather than a product; it is a series of steps using a sound, an idea, an action, an element that develops and changes in both predicted and unexpected ways through the give and take of the performers. With rigorous attention to the moment, coupled with the free play of imagination, these sounds, ideas, actions expand to disclose what is heretofore unseen or unheard or untouched. What is born is often marked by familiarity but also surprise. In the words of Viola Spolin, "Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. . . . It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression."<sup>16</sup>

The skills of the best jazz improvisors offer an example. To be effective they listen to each other very closely, they move into the dialogue from what they hear and add their own particular take at the moment. As they absorb the sound, the emotion, tension, beauty, they notice the familiar patterns and play with the texture. They may imitate the sounds, or they may draw from them and go on. In the process, the sound grows, it is a living response in the moment. The process repeats itself. More listening, more learning, more dialogue, more practicing, more risks, more conversation from within and without. Every performance offers another opportunity. No one can know for sure what will happen. Maybe nothing noteworthy. Maybe something good, that is satisfying, but not more. Once in awhile something extraordinary happens. "Entering into another world of awareness and sensitivity, they feel a deep reverence for 'all living things.' In spiritual communion, they merge together in the shine of a universal life force — timeless, peaceful, yet energizing and euphoric."<sup>17</sup>

Improvising artists and improvising worshiping congregations share a similar process, though the components are different. Something is given. As artists begin with an idea or a theme, congregations begin with texts intermingled with rituals of the body.

<sup>16</sup>Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern 1963) 4.

<sup>17</sup>Berliner, 498.

From a repertoire of practiced patterns the experiences build among all the performers (here I am including the leaders and the congregation). What happens depends on what the performers expect, what they want to do, what skills they have to do it, their willingness to take in what happens in the moment and to try out a response. About improvisation in the theater, Paul Sills comments: "True improvisation is a dialogue between people. Not just on the level of what the scene is about but also a dialogue from the being-something that has never been said before that now comes up . . . It's not what I know and what you know; it's something that happens between us that's a discovery. As I say, you can't make this discovery alone. There is always the other."<sup>18</sup>

Improvisation in worship, as in art, involves attention, surrender, testing, give and take in the moment. Memories mix with imagination, old skills give way to new ones, what is and what was become the ground for what can be. This process of improvisation leads to insight, agency, commitment.

*A TUNE UPON THE BLUE GUITAR/OF THINGS  
EXACTLY AS THEY ARE*

The following schema, based on the steps of creative processes is a framework for developing worshiping congregations where improvisation and imagination are at the heart of their lives, and thus, their liturgies. It involves four steps: take every offer, presume discomfort, go beyond the predictable, try it.

1. Take every offer.

Improvisation at its core is a series of offers. An offer puts energy into space, it initiates play, it stirs ambivalence, respects mystery, lights "the possible's slow fuse."<sup>19</sup> Without any presumption of a particular response but expecting that something will certainly happen, an offer starts an interaction. It is the primary way of being together.

In a Christian setting, improvisation as a way of doing our worship seems quite natural. The goal of Christian worship is a momentary stop on our own pilgrimages to test out our own

<sup>18</sup> Paul Sills as cited in Smith and Dean, 213.

<sup>19</sup> Emily Dickinson, "The possible's slow fuse is lit by the imagination."

choices over against the choices Jesus made in his lifetime. While Jesus learned from the generations of persons who preceded him, he made his own claim on a way of living and dying. So, the point of our gathering together is to engage in a similar process. Through it we remember how holiness has been known, how it has been lived in unnumbered stories. Words, sounds, sights, smells, tastes remind us. Symbols urge us to believe in our own connection to ordinary and extraordinary power, to try on this connection to a Holy Spirit for ourselves. It is an ever expanding vision, a movement that presumes a series of offers.

In a liturgical setting, to take every offer, presumes two phases. The offer is given. And the offer is received. The community does both.

a. The offer is given, that is, it is clear and genuine. In the example, described by Gelineau, the water was placed in an adjacent room. Some persons in the community had looked ahead on behalf of the rest of the community and prepared the space, the procession, the accent of light on the water, and the bowl of water itself. The offer was clear. It was also genuine, that is, there was no presumption of a "right" response. It was simply an offer. Even to not participate, at least visibly, was also possible. What happened depended on the desire and willingness of the congregation to play with the offer.

b. The offer is received. Each person negotiates a particular response from what they remember, from what they have practiced week after week, and from what they are moved to try. One person adds a subtle variation to the offer; another, perhaps empowered by the first, does something quite different. There may be lots of repetition, as in this example where many people made the sign of the cross, an action with which they were very comfortable. Perhaps no one will do what is familiar; there will be only a hint of where we have been. When enough has been done, the community senses it is time to move to another offer. The next offer will take a different form, but the process is the same.

2. Presume discomfort.

Since improvisation is about making room for choices, the process inevitably moves through moments of discomfort. There is always time between an offer and the reception of it where not knowing what comes next predominates. While this feeling of

disquiet yearns for quick resolution, discomfort provides the incentive to be creative and critical and to break away from what is habitual and familiar. Maxine Greene regards this time of discomfort as a necessary step to stir our imaginations. She describes it as "an interrogative mode, the painful particularity; the sensation of falling into space; all these introduce a vantage point that subverts the systematic, the complete."<sup>20</sup> Discomfort is integral to the process of improvisation.

To accept the inevitability of discomfort as part of worship is quite a challenge for many worshiping congregations who come to church or to temples for comfort. Surrounded by such a rapid pace of change in our world, people often want an oasis of ease. Comfort is one part of what liturgical experiences do provide. However, that comfort is wrapped in symbols that presume moments of discomfort. Relationships with God, marked by God's promise to be with God's people as modeled in the life of Jesus, certainly do not assure an easy pilgrimage. What is given to each of us for our comfort is the certainty of God's presence, but even that comes with a hook. God is often known most intimately through absence.

To presume discomfort as an integral part of worship is necessary if we want to live into a life shaped by transformation. In the spaces that swirl between knowing and unknowing there is time for holding back and daring, desiring and doing, free-fall and landing and everything in between. It is the fertile time that precedes choice. Using the water example again briefly, I suspect that many people in the procession were not sure where they were going when they were asked to leave the nave nor did they know what they would find when they got to the place. For some, not knowing was exciting, even though also marked by discomfort. For others, the idea of moving was very disruptive. Why couldn't they sit in their pews as they had for years, and there, listen and watch the blessing of the water? To move to another space in procession imposed discomfort on all participants. When they reached the water, there was even more discomfort. What should they do? If there were any children present, to play with the water would have been quite natural, but for adults, especially for those

<sup>20</sup> Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1995) 19.

who have lived with scripted actions in our liturgies, here was a real and genuine offer in a space where each person had to make a choice. The invitation required attending to oneself, opening oneself, accepting some discomfort, and moving with it. Many people in the same situation helped. Inevitably someone was bold enough to begin. That daring inspired and empowered others. Holy play ensued.

New awarenesses often begin with feelings of being off balance, uncertain, anxious, excited. It is the emotional space which makes room for choice and ultimately, freedom and power.

### 3. Go beyond the predictable.

Aba Kahn, a wealthy prince and imam, established a fund a numbers of years ago for a competition among architectural projects. Dissatisfied with the quality of architecture in the Islamic world he offered an incentive to change the situation. Among the awardees in 1998 was a mosque. (The awards were not given to the architects but rather to the projects.) The design of the mosque evoked considerable controversy. Nothing about it seemed to suggest that it was a mosque. There were no minarets, no dome, no solid wall to face while praying. Many Muslims were angry. But, a jury of respected artists and architects had considered this mosque to be an extraordinary model of Islamic architecture. The building made an offer to the local community and to the world community. It invited Muslims to consider again the meanings of Islam and the role of a building in communicating them. The mosque evoked dialogue about the symbols of Islam. Though any new mosque would have been the source of some conversation, with a familiar structure the questions may have focused on taste, style, and the varied choices of artists and architects. But this mosque made a different offer. Instead of passing on the symbols and their meanings cautiously, assured that they would endure as they had been interpreted, the architects and all those involved in the design of the building tossed the symbols. The ripples continue.

Worship described as boring, a tiring repetition of the same old ideas, the same old actions with the same old people doing all of it, is not true to its name. How can an encounter with God through people's stories be boring? Only when congregations have settled down to what they have always known with no desire to discover

how the symbols of worship unfold in their lives can it be described as boring. Improvisation assumes that there is always a series of offers, moments that invite participants to go beyond the predictable. The rationale is simple. There is always more of God than we have grasped and more within us than we have thus far recognized. To uncover fresh meanings requires pressing beyond and under what we have always thought and believed.

Imagine a congregation where the sacred texts are read as an offer, where the congregation is expected to respond: to ask questions, to listen for what was left out, to wonder why certain details were so important. The leaders coach the community. From their study, they urge the congregation to go beyond what they have thought when hearing these stories before, to wrestle with them to see what more they can learn and know about the choices they make daily. The coaches add layers of understanding from the tradition, explain what is obscure. But the real work, inner dialogue and public sharing, is done by everyone.

#### 4. Try something.

When Maya Lin was a student sculptor, she proposed a plan for the Vietnam memorial in Washington, D.C. Many scoffed at her idea. Though distinguished artists also submitted their designs, the committee chose Lin's concept. Today, this Vietnam Memorial is the most frequented memorial in Washington. People continue to flock to it to touch the names of the men and women who died in the war. Often they trace their names. To look at the names is not enough. Maya Lin made an offer. It was real and genuine. She invited people to feel the names. It is more difficult to place your hand on the names of these dead, often such young women and men. But, in doing it, there is no way to miss the connection. Parents and relatives of these women and men weep openly. Others, too. The offer is powerful. The letters are symbols; there, for our remembering, for imagining, for grasping something about the choices we make in our lives.

What does it mean for worshiping communities to try something? How would the blessing of God become an offer? What kind of arrangements of space encourage interaction? What forms of music inspire courage? How might praying require taking a

stance? Two related examples of community provide illustrations of trying something.

a. The conversations that usually ensue from discussions about language for God and humankind often avoid the words of the Lord's Prayer. The arguments are that these were Jesus' words, that Jesus commanded us to use them and that everyone knows them by heart so no change is possible. So how can a community make an offer, try something through the Lord's Prayer? But how can it not make an offer knowing that what is most precious is the first ball to toss, as Gelineau states it.

In the midst of a planning meeting with women who were responsible for the liturgy at a high school reunion, someone raised a question about the Lord's Prayer. How shall we pray? With what words shall we begin? Since we were a group of women planning for a group of women, why not try something, why not substitute the word mother as we begin? Most of the people accepted the offer by rejecting it without much time for discomfort or any thought of going beyond the predictable response. But one woman, one who had not spoken in this meeting responded differently. She was shaken by this offer. She was a mother and had never thought about God as mother. The idea took her breath away. Here was an image for God that expressed her identity as a mother. She wanted to try it. The group could not imagine trying it and they did not. It was too great a risk. Imagine what might have happened if in the few moments before the prayer began, instead of the familiar introduction to the prayer, this woman introduced it through her experience. A chapel of breath.

b. The second example explores a possibility for give and take in our community prayers. Instead of prayers prepared ahead, or printed for our use, or led by one person, the prayer is improvised. A member of the community calls the community to pray with a short introduction at the end of which she invites them to pray in the form of a call and response, that is, someone calls out an image of God that she/he relates to particularly in this moment, someone else responds with a petition or a word of thanks related to this image. And so the rhythm begins, another image, another prayer. Sometimes there is silence between an image and a response. That, too, is understood as part of the prayer. To take every offer



## The Heirs of the Clergy? The New Pastoral Ministries the Reform of the Minor Orders

presumes that one is willing to try something, to presume discomfort, but to step up and go beyond the predictable, to throw oneself into the fray without knowing where it will end.

In another section of the Wallace Stevens poem, "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens urges:

Throw away the lights, the definitions,  
And say of what you see in the dark  
That it is this or that it is that,  
But do not use the rotted names. . . .  
You as you are? You are yourself.  
The blue guitar surprises you.<sup>21</sup>

This rationale and schema for improvisation and imagination in worship, or as I term it "holy play" dares to suggest that we play with the story of God and our stories. It assumes that this story is constantly layered from what happens among us day to day. When we gather to remind ourselves of our identity as people of God and to take our stand in relation to it, we throw the lights and the definitions, we throw them, not away into oblivion but away to each other, so that they will live among us. From all the nooks and crannies of our life experiences we play with our symbols steeped in traditions and memories, so that we can claim what we see in the darkness. We do not use the rotted names, those that have no life left in them, but rather we draw from their ashes something new from the old. We are communities in search of ways to live, "You as you are? You are yourself." We are communities in search of God. "The blue guitar surprises you."

<sup>21</sup> Stevens, 1952.

Where in the theology of the church should we situate the new parish ministries?<sup>1</sup> To some this question seems pointless. Have not these ministries around the world simply come into existence because there are too few priests? Are not these ecclesial lay ministries, when they do not go beyond the line of what is allowed simply substituting for lacking priests?<sup>2</sup> Speaking precisely, however, we should refer not to "a lack of priests" but to "a lack of ordinations." The cause for this lack of ordinations is basically the conditions currently set down and now in force for access to

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<sup>1</sup>The term "parish ministries" employed in Austria and Switzerland also designates those in the area of the German Bishops Conference who, after a successful program of study at a diocesan or church center, become pastoral ministers ("*Gemeindeassistenten*"); it also includes those who after the conclusion of a basic study of theology are educated as *Pastoralassistenten* and taken into lasting and fulltime ministry as *Pastoralreferenten*. (In the areas just mentioned since the 1970s the bishops have established general ministries for parishes. In Germany there are two groups of full-time, theologically educated parish ministers, employed and supported by the diocese. The "Pastoral-Referents" are educated at a theological faculty at a university and work in a special ministerial area of the parish, while the "Parish-Referents" are educated in special theology schools and work in developing the lay ministers and spiritual life of the parishioners. This is in contrast to the United States where lay ministries have no general, nation-wide episcopal definition or format, and where they emerge from the precise activities done in the parish or diocese, e.g., education, liturgy, peace and justice. Trans.)

<sup>2</sup>See Reinhold Reck, "Wider die Verklärung des Status quo. Pastoralreferentinnen sind eine notwendige Übergangslösung," *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge* 108 (1999) 130ff.

Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art is a book written by Stephen Nachmanovitch and originally published in 1990 by Jeremy Tarcher of the Penguin Group. Free Play is the creative activity of spontaneous free improvisation, by children, by artists, and people of all kinds. According to Stephen Nachmanovitch, free play is more than improvisation. It runs deeper than our activities involving music and art. It is the essence of our being, something we were born with then strive to recapture. A vivid imagination is more than dreaming up stories about dinosaurs and pirates. It is the origin of creativity and innovation, expressed in everything from technology and science to arts and literature.<http://www.victorianweb.org/techn...> Finding your imagination involves shutting out external stimulation and impulses. Tonight, turn off music and television and sit for a while. See what comes to your mind, and come up with alternative ways to spend your time. Janet Walton, Professor of Worship at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, talks about the importance of imagination and improvisation in teaching Christian worship. Janet Walton, Professor of Worship at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, talks about the importance of imagination and improvisation in teaching Christian worship. Upload, livestream, and create your own videos, all in HD.