Nontheist Friends Network - meeting for worship and creative conversation
Thursday evening, 6 May, 7pm UK time, by Zoom

PHILIP GROSS

The language of poetry, and creative uses of the word 'God'

The heart of this evening will be your conversations with each other, but first, bear with me while I share, and weave some questions round, three poems. With each poem, I'll put the words on the screen so you can see the shapes they make in the white space, a visual form of silence, in which they hang – just as this presentation and our conversations do in the Quaker silence that began and will conclude the evening.

After I've spoken, we'll have a few minutes for anyone who would like to ask me to be clearer, to check out their own understanding of what I've said. But let's not dwell on the words too long, so we can move into much smaller groups, and have those conversation with each other – a chance to share whatever you make of the questions sparked by what you've heard, to hear what you're saying out loud, and to see how first thoughts sometimes change and move on in the speaking and listening, back and forth.

When we move back into open session, the most valuable things to share will be any instances you've noticed of finding yourself saying something unexpected (to yourself) or feeling grateful for somebody else's contribution that differs from your usual point of view. In other words, moments of possible change – in other words, of creativity..

I've said that this will centre on three poems. It would be a reasonable Quaker question to ask: *Why poems? Why not just say what do you mean in plain language?*

My answer: because I trust what I hear in my poems, the ones that work, which have a life of their own, more than I trust my own opinions. The poem is where the different levels of thought, feeling, intuition and physical sensation come into play with and get tested out against, each other.

And the poems, much like what I find myself saying in meeting for worship, seem strangely at ease in using the word 'God'.

My apologies then to those of you who come to this network hoping to escape that word and the stories and imagery that goes with it. All I would say is that this new ease in using the word has come about *only since* I have identified myself as a non-theist. That is not an accident. And the question that interests me is not *whether* or not to use that lexicon of language around God, but *how*.

Mattins

And what if (this
        was the sore stiff body
                speaking; this was three a.m.)
                    it was all a mistake;

if it wasn't the cool
        and constant soul God loved
                but me?

(This was dark; this was the Mattins

                  of the body,
            moving in its slippers
        through the cloisters of itself
to its offices.) Not

            me eternal, resurrected,
        made thirty again, nor
weighted down with gravegoods

but this – me as is, as am

in passing.
        If this rusty high C
                of sciatica, low
                    chime of heartburn

was the sympathetic quiver
        on my nerve strings
                of the choir

of angels? If *this* was theology:

.... imagine it. (This was the wince
        of the floorboard on the landing,
            the half-unwilling almost-
human timbre of the bathroom hinge.)

The body, shrugged clean

of the tricks and self-
        deceptions of the mind,
            stepping out of (or into) itself
like the pool of Siloam,

in a dog-shake of spray-drips of light...

The body made new —
            not *young*... Not the body
                        in general but this one
in time, with its stuttering-out like stars

of brain cells, with what may be the hum

of a home in its ears, pipes clicking,
            an appliance shuddering to rest,
                        the bare skin chilling, and
each breath a little of its warmth

dispersed... Body washed in the blood

of its own veins, baptised
            from within with the kiss
                        and the commerce of oxygen,
of carbon, of their conversation. If it was *this*

God loved, if the secret got out...
                                    well, what then?

Every line of that poem is informed by that various and closely-woven culture of God language that I grew up with and which has shaped so much of the world's art and literature. It matters very little whether the reader takes the word 'God' as literal belief – in the curious sense of 'to believe in' – or whether they experience it as metaphor. Or, for that matter, whether they think I do.

A word about metaphor... Again, my apologies to anyone here who, in the normal spread of our diverse dispositions, would say they *don't do metaphor*. The power of metaphor doesn't lie in a claim to *be the same as* the thing it refers to. It's about a likeness seen from one particular angle. It is about our possible relationships to the things we see, and all the feelings and sensations and associations that go with them. In other words, it's a tool to use, a thought-experiment... and also a question: If I look at it *this* way, what does it help me to see?

Metaphor is a direct line to some of our more personal engagements with an idea. It appeals to all our senses, not just our common sense. Not so much a thought-experiment but an invitation to *live* that way of seeing long enough to find out.

The language of a metaphor and myth, not the language of science and testable knowledge, is where the world's religions most naturally speak. It's a disastrous, and thoroughly modern, mistake – two mistakes, rather – *either* to counterpose religion and science, as if they were natural enemies... *or* to foist claims for scientific truth on the great

and millennia-long collaborative works of art that are the major faiths.

When I write 'God', it may be because paraphrasing it into the language of discursive reason would be long and clumsy; it would take paragraphs to *explain* what one simple word can simply *do*.

That last word, *do*, is important. What a word *means*, a definition, is only half of the point. What it enacts, what it makes happen, is the rest. When Martin Buber tells us that the most intimate, direct relationship with things is not *I/it* but *I/thou*, that's where the language of myth and metaphor can take us. This poem is in part about that form of address, that sense of You...

Psalm: You

... who can number the waves on the sea, and each
wave, say where it began… number likewise the beat

of each heart, my mud-pulse in my cupped hand *and* the tremor-tick
in the breast of the greenfinch, found stunned

by the stroke of wrong sky that was our window… the quickening
too, number that, of the pulse on the scan,

the clump of cells still undecided between bird or fish or mammal…
to number their count till the end (would we wish

to know that, of ourselves or the ones by our side?)… who tolerate
our counting rhymes, child to child in the dark,

our itch to call a wave a wave, discrete, as if we believed
in a moment when a thing becomes a thing

distinct from the whole ocean, seamlessness which You, if
we can use the word at all, must surely see, or be.

So what has that got to do with Quakerism? I'm not saying that poetry is the same thing as ministry in Meeting. It employs a lot more conscious craft than that... but maybe in the interests of finding its way to the same place.

In both cases we know the words in themselves are only part of what a poem, or what the ministry, is. The other half is what a listener makes of it – and how those words are held by the particular shape and acoustics of a listening space.

Anyone who has spoken in public knows that the space between us can be dead air... or it can be resonant and tingling. At best a meeting for worship can be that resonant space.

And it's in that space, or in the space between two people, friends or lovers or good workmates, maybe, I'd say that God, whatever you might think I mean by that, is to be found.

And whatever

has to be
left or to leave us
       including our selves

this space
we form between us
       (flexing

fringed with our skin's warmth
round the edges
       sometimes

rippling with one
voice or the other
       sometimes not)

still
       is

/ is an astonishment
that somehow
       I believe

will stand for us before
God
       who equally

(much like it) may be
(but much more so)
       no thing

no this and no that
but living
       space

           between