

Dear Ones,

For a wordsmith it's hard to admit, but I do believe I'm running on empty. Words are failing me these days. The moment I open my mouth, whatever comes out just feels like "blah blah blah blah." Has this ever happened to you? Something intensely felt has occurred and you stand there, with .....no words. Silence doesn't diminish the experience, I've come to believe that muted silence honors the moment. That's how I'm feeling this morning as I sit with it all. Quiet. Struck dumb. Yet, I want to send some words out to you. Amazingly, I'm pressing them out on the flat screen of my smart little phone.

It's no wonder that silence is flooding into the approach of my sabbatical time away from St. Philip's parish~ June 15-September 15. I will be going off of the grid, so to speak. No email, no facetime with the parish I hold so dear, no Facebook even. I'm unplugging from inter-connected screens for the summer and running out the back screened door to play and reconnect with my kids.

It's the practice of The Episcopal Church, and the Diocese of Western North Carolina, that full-time ordained clergy are given a sabbatical away from the parish for every five years of service. It's a generous opportunity to replenish the well, refill the cup, model wellness for the congregation, and remind everyone that clergy are not indispensable. No one needs that reminder more than the clergy themselves. We feed on perceived need. It's hard to believe that I have been your pastor and friend for five years at St. Philip's Church. The time has flown and yet, week in and week out, I almost feel like I've been living here in the shadow of the church for all eternity.

The Louisville Institute sabbatical grant that I received in February of this year is affording myself and my family some significant space of time to just be, by the sea. It's no coincidence that my grant is also about re-setting the space and pace of my words.

Since March I have been taking Letterset Printing I , II, and III at Asheville Bookworks.

<http://www.ashevillebookworks.com/> . This is a print shop dedicated to teaching book arts: paper-making, setting type by hand, mixing inks, setting up presses,

cutting paper, printing, print-making, binding, and creating beautiful art pieces as well as functional books. An amazing array of people circle in and around the environs of eclectic West Asheville NC including Frank Brannon, a master printer and my mentor.

I come from a long line of Kansas prairie printers. Many of my days have been filled with impressions and my recollections of the scents, sounds, and vocabulary of the craft of printing. I have many memories of my grandfather's storefront newspaper office on Factory Street in Enterprise, Kansas. Albert J. Hoisington was editor and publisher of a four page weekly, the Enterprise Journal, for over fifty years. At the turn of the century his father founded the paper and decades later his five sons and daughter grew in that space too. Many of their children, my first cousins now living all over the country, are fourth generation writers, graphic designers, computer geeks, and artists. We have ink flowing through our veins.

Throughout a good bit of the 20th century my grandfather collected the weekly stories and reflected on lives lived in his little town. By mid-week, every week, he was typing with two fingers on a massive old black cast iron linotype machine, cussing and banging on gears as the outdated machine inevitably broke down. When the press was running, its clanking roar was impressive. The pages would get set, printed on both sides, and mailed out every Thursday. My grandmother would deftly fold and roll the newspapers on a card table and prepare them for mailing at the local post office, pasting subscription labels on each one.

The high ceiling/wooden floored journal office was stifling hot in the summer and bone-chillingly cold in the winter. No matter the temperature outside, at the end of every week Bert Hoisington would fire up the old pot-bellied stove and melt down his words set in the previous week. Then it was time to recollect the stories all over again. Week in and week out, for over fifty years, this was my grandfather's vocation and his back-breaking cycle of labor.

This year I've also been able to recollect the senses of the stories: recall the greasy scent of heavy cast iron machinery, mix a rainbow of rubber-based inks, and lug around wooden trays of old metal type. Much of my printing work is nearly complete. Over the summer I will reflect on this experience and the history of crafting words for others to have and hold. I'll use a laptop computer to string

together my own words and my clean little quiet laser printer to press on with the stories of my time.

The letterset press classes have prepared me to handset type and print my own limited edition of poetry. It's not been an epic journey. I've been intentional in keeping the project quite humble in its scope. For me this has been about pondering the slow process of printing as much as producing its product. I've worked with quiet intention to find wordless spaces of time amongst the letters, to seek a place where printing my words can be a liminal and emptied spiritual practice.

Over the past five years I have written short little poems and posted them on my internet blog. When I'm hurting I rest in the deep nuances of word play. I find that an internet blog is a place where I can post my poetic play on words' pain yet no one can touch the bruises. I like that, sometimes. This year I've been ready and able to take those pained poems out of the ether, set my words in ink, and bind them. In essence I have been binding my words and my wounds. That has become the point of this slow exercise.

I'm an extremely fast typer on the keyboard. I can touch-type as fast as I think, almost without thinking. It's nothing for me to be able to free-associate and type out a letter like this in about an hour. I pull down the menu on my computer and I can click the font size, or the style of font, or whether I want it to be bold or italic or standard. Click Click Click. When I'm in the groove, my words fly out .....somewhere, I'm not sure where.

It's just not that way with hand setting type. It's a very slow exercise. For the past few months I've carried my words in a different way. I've made time and wandering space to wonder: where do those words come from, and where do they go? Who's holding them? How can I hold on to these words for a little while? When should I let these words go? Who will receive them? How will they be received?

Lately, I've literally carried 60 lb. trays of type to my work table each time I've wanted to change my font size or style. I've picked out each tiny letter and set it backwards in a hand-held metal tray. There's a consistent groove etched in every

bit of type. When you run your finger along a line of type and it's literally in the groove, then you know that you've not turned around your p's and q's and b's and d's. You can't read if it's right, when setting type by hand you have to feel if you're in the groove.

I've learned to mix my ink, kneading the tacky rubber based pigments with a metal spatula into a semi-fluid consistency that will fully impress my words onto the paper. I am grateful to have found a spirited mentor who has also made the cotton fiber paper which carry my tiny words. That took some time to do. As the Benedictines live and breathe, Ora et Labora, we too pray and work. Slowly I will learn that practice.

There is so much preparation in printing, one can get lost in the details, yet eventually the time arrives to approach the fifty year old Vandercook press. The bundle of string-tied handset type is carried on a sheet metal galley tray and slid onto the press. Never lift the bundle or all of your handset type falls out. (This I know!) Then the bundle of type is locked in with wooden blocks called "furniture" and metal spring-loaded tighteners. The moveable type must be rendered immovable. Gaping empty spaces must be filled.

Once I finally ink and trip the rollers three times and print a single proof sheet on thin newsprint, the whole process reverses for editing. Errors are found and furniture is unlocked with a metal key. Then I must take tweezers and literally move the individual letters of my words around on the press until all appear centered or justified. If only I could just "click, click, click" and be finished with the editing. No ink on my hands, no stooping in dim light peering at type that is set upside down and backwards. Alas, no. Composing, editing, and printing go hand in hand with typeset printing. Thought yields to the confines of available empty space and time. One must lift, compose, tie up, slide, surround, tighten, ink, trip, proof, loosen, shift, tweeze, pull out, insert, realign, tighten, and proof again. Only when the time-honored cycle is complete can a page be printed and bound for the ages. Verbosity yields to expediency, for the printer's devil is in the details.

Ultimately, like everything else in this life, there comes the deadline when the flawed work must be released. The type must be broken down, returned to the

wooden box, and made ready for the next story to be told. There comes a time with every story when you've just got to let it go.

It is a profoundly slow exercise. I think much more about the burden of what I say when I literally have to carry my words to the press. Perhaps our commentators on life, God, and politics these days would be well-served to actually do the heavy lifting of their own pontifications. Perhaps our speech is too free and easy to spew these days. I'm not sure.

What's caught my deepest attention through this printing process are the spacers. The empty space holders placed between the movable type. Each letter, word, line, paragraph, and page must be surrounded with spacers made of thin slices of brass, copper, wood, or blocks of lead. It's been in those spaces between the words, lying below the surfaces of the raised type, where I find myself these days. Empty. In-between. I can't read it, but it feels like a groovy place to be.

So, in good time my intentionally limited edition run of simple poetry books will be done. I will take time away this summer to ponder the emptiness between the words. I will make time to look at Chloe and Max more deeply and not be thinking of the half-dozen other things I should be doing at that very moment. We will be in and out and around in the quiet places of spaces this summer.

I am grateful, always, for our dear friends at St. Philip's who will keep a space open for us and for our return at the end of the summer. We will be very glad to come home again, and hopefully the words will also return like waves pressing upon the shifting sand.

+Peace,  
Maria

