



About the Author

After 50 years as campus minister, rector, and street performer (as “Uncle Billy’s Pocket Circus”), the Rev. Tom Woodward and his wife, Ann, retired to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he continues to write. Recently his play, “Body and Soul,” served as the keynote event at a national convention of psychotherapists. If you are interested in his plays, you can reach Tom at TBWSalinas@aol.com.

About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE



Letting the Voices In My Head Out To Play

By the Rev. Tom Woodward

After a final stint of 17 years as rector of a parish, I had thought retirement would be easy — and some of it was. I loved sitting in the pew with my wife, Ann, and being involved in the ongoing life of our parish church, but deep down something was missing. What was missing, I discovered, was the week-by-week wrestling with the deeper questions about life that came in writing and preaching sermons. Even the extra time for meditation and reflection did not stop what was going on in my head.

After a year of frustration, I remembered the wisdom of an old friend and colleague, Ken Feit, who had urged me and others, when we were unable to resolve an inner conflict, to put a different-colored sock on each hand and let the two of them argue it out! That not only worked, it led to my trying the same thing with imaginary characters of my own choosing, echoing Anne Lamott’s advice in her book, *Bird by Bird*, “not to put words in your characters’ mouths.” What wonderful advice it was for me, a writer and retired priest with so many voices from 40-some years of ordained ministry stored away in my head! Soon I was typing furiously just to keep up with the developing dialogues taking place in front of me — and discovering that the more latitude I gave my characters, the more humor emerged in their relationships.

Several weeks into this fun, my comedy writer friend Ron Bloomberg told me about a competition for 15-minute plays, and the lights went on. It didn’t take much to expand and format a couple of my favorite dialogues into 15-minute plays. Now, instead of sermons, there were plays of the same length — the only real difference was how my faith would be expressed. What had been text was now subtext. And if a play were successful, my congregation would consist almost entirely of the unchurched. A preacher’s dream.

Like many others, one thing I have wrestled with year after year is why God seems to heal some people and not others. That, I thought, was a good place to begin — with God on one hand and Eliot, a young family man just diagnosed with incurable cancer, on the other. It was not long before I decided to add a couple of “friends” to the mix. They would be prelude to the real encounter.

My favorite “friend” was a New Age macho guy who, when hearing of Eliot’s condition, commiserated, “You’ve got cancer? Major bummer. I know just what you’re going through. In fact, that is hardest thing I’ve ever had to deal with. Except for me, it wasn’t cancer. It was Capricorn. You see, I am deeply Aquarius, but I’ve got this damned December birthday...” With that as the backdrop, another character – Harry – enters the stage and responds to Eliot with caring and compassion. But hearing the utterly prosaic details of Eliot’s life, Harry, unmasked as God, tells Eliot that he will not cure him. Shaken with a sudden passion, Eliot comes to life: “How could you not, you sonofabitch?” Then, facing the certainty of his death, Eliot slowly begins to understand how this inevitability may allow him in his remaining time to choose an intimacy with his friends and with himself previously unknown to him.

I was stunned when that play was chosen for production — with a real director and real actors — and then humbled, as my interior dialogue took shape in real-life characters. Over the following weeks, several audience members asked to talk about their own responses to the play, as it seemed to reawaken the possibility of religious faith for themselves.

The basis of another play was my memory of Harvey Cox’s 1963 speech about the demonic aspects of the culture of the Miss America Pageant. Ever since hearing that speech, I have struggled with how to address the dark side of that culture. Then it occurred to me: what better place to start than with my own fictional pageant, with one sock representing Phil, the pageant’s host, and the other as Bobbie Wentworth, the pageant’s last contestant?

In the resulting play, it is not long before Bobbie and Phil begin flirting with one another off-camera. Then, as they go before the cameras, Phil asks Bobbie when it was that she first became interested in the “Ms. American Beauty Pageant.” Without a hitch, Bobbie responds, “It was about four months after my sex change operation.” I don’t know where that came from, but there it was — and given that premise, the rest came easily as Bobbie began to unravel the pageant and its warped sense of female identity in a long series of surprises. (You can see the play on Youtube at http://youtu.be/e-P4xxLZO_8)

However, Bobbie was not finished with me. Attending a neighborhood party, I met the Emmy-winning composer, Daniel Steven Crafts, and as we talked about our lives, Danny asked if I would send him my Bobbie Wentworth script. He said it would be perfect for his new genre of opera intended to appeal to people between 25 and 45 years old — comic operas that were highly satirical, with memorable music, and focused on things that matter. After six months of transforming my 15-minute play into a 55-minute libretto (a project full of fun and challenge), the first of our now two operas, “And the Winner Is...” premiered in New Mexico with Metropolitan Opera mezzo-soprano Deborah Domanski in 2012. All that coming from filling a void in my early retirement! What began in anxiety ended up as the opportunity to be a steward of what God gave me over my years as priest.

One last word: the satisfaction of having a play or opera produced continues to be a distant second to my joy in writing and watching how things develop. And I’m fine with rejections. Hey! I’m retired! Not only have I received my rewards, I have my pension!



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