

THE ARTS AND CHRISTIAN FORMATION

By MARGARET WOODWARD

Formation is ...?

PERHAPS WHAT cannot be said can be shown. Come with me to a large, carpeted room.¹ Here twenty adults are taking part in 'life-telling': a nondiscursive process of giving form to their own stories and lives. Everyone has agreed to risk being surprised. Participants want to get off the treadmill of routinized perceptions and constructions of reality that mimic movement but that keep people exactly where they are. This first seminar session begins with some hesitancy, some sense of heightened vulnerability. If there is a shared intention, there is also indeterminacy. No one knows what will happen, what securities will have to be abandoned, or whether the pain and pleasure of this making of art and meaning will be worthwhile.

Group consensus is that there will be no lock-step involvement in exercises suggested as cues or prompts to the creative impulse. People are urged to follow their own interests and intuitions wherever these may lead. However, all engage in an initial exercise which asks them to revisit a house in which they spent some of their childhood. They draw houses, rooms, furniture, objects, people. Unexpectedly, these are not illustrations, not drawings of the already known, but discoveries. Images have a precision that owes little to literal exactitude, but that reveals a perspective and a proportion belonging to deeper realms of significance and meaning. One man looks at his drawing and shakes his head. There are only two rooms in his house.

The man ignores the next exercise. He withdraws to a corner of the room and hunches over his sketch. Then, disregarding everyone, he writes a letter. He appears to have removed himself from the group, many of whom look askance as though this expression of personal freedom violates some unnamed norm.

A week later, he speaks of what has happened. He does not want to explain but to be heard so as to confirm his own hearing and experience. Only then does the act of making meaning reach wholeness of form.

Two rooms. For the first time, he realizes the poverty of his European childhood and his parents' impoverishment of spirit. At fourteen he rebelled at the harsh life which saw him rise at 4.30 a.m., work on the farm, then go to school, returning only to more work and more criticism from a father who seemed stern and unyielding. One Sunday, a priest visited his parish church. Missionaries, said this priest, were desperately needed in Australia. Would any young people in the congregation respond? The youth's hand shot up. He and his father argued violently about this decision, but with his vocation and escape sanctioned by his local Church, the young man boarded a ship for a foreign country and a religious order. Between himself and his father lay the hard silence of mutual ill-feeling. More than a year later, his father wrote him one letter, the only letter he was to receive. Angry still or unable to communicate, the son did not reply. Months, years passed. Then came a telegram, announcing his father's death. Now, years later still, the son speaks. 'I suppose you wonder what I was doing last week. Well, I was answering my father's letter.'

So far, all that the group has done is venture beyond the familiar. There has been little discussion of art or of the processes of making art. Gradually people become more daring with diverse media—clay, masks, song, dance, mime, painting, photography. Every instance of creation witnesses to the power of form. A woman who has been reflecting with some pain on how certain institutions have oppressed her decides to dance. At first her whole body trembles. This is the woman the group knows: timid, unlikely to risk an opinion, claiming few personal gifts. But as she moves, the dance finds its own momentum, evolving unexpected rhythms and conviction. Movement strengthens. Limbs firm. Anguish turns into anger. There is a startling discipline in this whirling evocation of inner turmoil. Several of the watchers weep, their private pain somehow tapped. The dance surges forward into triumph as it integrates and expresses a struggle for life. Whatever the impulse that demanded the dance form, it is dance itself that forms. Finally the dancer sinks to the floor with arms raised, her body signalling exhaustion and victory. She beams at her audience.

Forming both reveals people to themselves and renders them more attentive to others. Inducted into some aspects of the art of mime, seminar participants design their own clown faces and costumes and set off for the city. The clown convention takes over, distancing people and enabling new perceptions. For some of the actors, there is a sense of dedifferentiation to replace fixity: 'My world of thought and word dissolves and I am swimming freely in a tide of colour and silence'. Absorption produces acute awareness.

One clown recalls a response: 'My son's got cancer', confides a little old lady, weeping inside, hard outside. In the intensity of their own listening and being unquestionably clown, people discover aspects of who they are and can be. 'The mask I wore removed the masks I need', says one. Body and imagination are liberated; there is a newly perceived eventfulness in the ordinary; increasing confidence generates increasing courage; and what has happened demands image, metaphor, poetry and celebratory ritual rather than discussion or analysis.

In forming, the medium, the stuff of life, exerts its own constraints. The intentionality of the artist is important, but cannot predetermine outcomes. A sculptor, for example, uses clay to express feminine symbol and struggle. Her efforts stretch the clay to its limits. Fragile shapes splinter in the kiln. She begins again and again, struggling with the resistances of the clay, seeing what appeared complete crumble and break. She, like the clay, is extended, troubled, moved to the edges of possibility. The final form of her sculpture exceeds her initial vision of what lies within the clay and herself. Had the sculptor clung to premature definition, she would have disallowed the working of her art. Had she failed to keep her creative impulse alive, she would have refused to endure those progressive formings called forth by a sense of incompleteness. Instead, each disruption of expectation contributes to a process of transformation that affects the artist, her intentions, the medium, the successive formings and the final art work.

The power of form

'Formation is . . . ?' This first question, which centres on formation and the arts, resists preconceptions and highlights some neglected dimensions of Christian formation. Although the four examples described—of the letter writer, the dancer, the clowns and the sculptor—do not address directly or explicitly what is meant by 'Christian formation', they do offer some clues for a continued probing and envisioning of this work. To reflect on these examples is to discern how forms and forming can be powerful, and why the act of creating in the arts is more than an analogy for what is desirable in Christian formation.

i) The letter writer

The letter writer does not divulge the contents of his letter. His focus is on the form and formings which enable him to break the bonds of a constricted and confining reality. It is as though an imposed and internalized script has kept him unforgiving and unforgiven until his habitual perceptions and the internalized

structuring of his history are disrupted by a simple drawing. At one level, the writer has become conscious of more: of the social situation and economic pressures conditioning life for his father and himself. Yet it seems unlikely that any simple process of informing the son, any provision of socio-economic data, would have wrought such change. Rather, intuitive movement, evoked by an initial unsettling and followed by several formings, appears to have empowered the letter writer by rendering him more conscious. That is, he is now better able to perceive and respond justly and imaginatively to persons, life and world. He cannot alter his past, but he can alter its influence and meaning. Reality regains its provisional quality; what it does not determine is what can be or what ought to be.

Have some familiar forms of Christian formation been overly concerned with the work of supplying information, of making persons conscious of more, to the detriment of a concern with developing consciousness?² Is it possible that efforts have been directed to imposing a 'Christian' script? What loss is this, what denial of the fulness of Christian life?

ii) The dancer

If the young man has recourse to significant creative processes, the dancer moves more evidently with an art form. Every art has its discipline, its essential tension between impulse and control, its expression and shaping of feeling. The woman is a dancer able to choreograph her own dance. Yet, in performance, she becomes both maker and recipient. The process in which she engages is sturdily unsentimental. Progressively, in dance, she is de-adapted to those needs which have held her silent and uncertain. The struggle and rage beneath surface self-denigration are owned and expressed, and the dance culminates in a sense that new freedoms are being born.

A prerequisite for admission to Christian ministry—and involvement in the tasks of encouraging Christian formation—should be a capacity to allow indeterminacy. Premature formulation should not be confused with authentic formation. Ministry is not transmission, not confinement in the already-known. The Christian stories of faith are lively and enlivening; they are not declamatory formulae, to which individuals' lives and stories must be connected. Has Christian formation been interpreted in too exclusively a logico-rational manner? Must we make room again for surprise and newness? Can we discover the sacredness of the deeply human and move, as the dancer did, in non-chronological time and space? To do so may be to learn that, within an experience of the holy, there is no need for any artificial 'connecting'.

iii) The clowns

Complementing the creative struggle of the dancer is the exuberance of the clowns. Entry into clowning conventions destabilizes identity and the conventions people are accustomed to live by. The clowns move in a space at once imaginary and real: they become adults who can play, who can take initiatives with total strangers, who can draw upon traits of daring and compassion of which they were previously unaware. The more they delight in newfound aspects of personal identity, the more open they become and the more effective they are in listening to other people. They notice responses and avoidances. Clowns insert the unexpected into a familiarized environment. They are not always well-received: at a crowded city railway station, two youths menace them with flick-knives. Vulnerability has positive and negative consequences. Clowns learn to evaluate the quality of their own interventions and the effects of introducing dissonance or disruption.

What seems of particular significance for Christian formation is the power of imagination and play both to destabilize and to energize. Christian service calls for forms of troubling, of disturbing the *status quo*, of inviting conversion. What will evoke enthusiasm, passion, the kind of divine madness needed to confront evil? Indictment? A carefully constructed set of strategies? Might it be healthily destabilizing to encourage what appear, at first, nonfunctional or even useless: and imagining and dreaming that shatter the boundaries currently defining what we are able to do and not able to do?

Within the clown convention, each clown has his or her distinctive face, garb and ways of communicating and responding. Individuality and difference contribute to self-knowledge and how each clown interacts with passers by. However one describes the self-consciousness achieved in clowning, it does not represent the kind of self-centredness so often deplored today. Focus on the inner, the individual and the idiosyncratic is frequently seen as a regression to a narcissistic and optimistic past—to hyperindividualism and to ignorance of the social, communal and structural. Do pitfalls in Christian formation include not only attending exclusively to the individual, but also an indifference that treats all those involved in Christian formation as homogeneous? Clowning suggests a vitalizing contradiction: when imagination releases and opens up potential for the individual, there is an awakening of social awareness and concern. The problem may be, not that too much attention has been directed to the individual, but that such attention has been superficial and unimaginative. What is the profound relationship between what happens in the inner life of the person and that person's capacity for action in the wider world?

iv) The sculptor

The fourth example presented earlier, of the sculptor, points to the role of media in the making of art. What might this mean for an art of Christian formation? The artist works with the stuff of life: with earth, stone, flesh and blood, metal, paint, light. Creative reciprocity demands that the resistances and limits of such media be respected.

Christian formation, then, cannot be pre-programmed. Reciprocity requires active partnership in a process of making; formation is not something done by one person—or by a community—to someone. Nor can a description or process of Christian formation be adequate if it does not arise, at least in part, out of recognition of persons, their experience and life-worlds, their aspirations and fears. Are Churches at risk of adopting standardized processes of Christian formation, of processing persons? Could this mean that functional norms and ecclesiocentric concerns have become paramount? Might a more authentic Christian formation be slower, less 'efficient' and less predictable? Would the process itself be less stable, undergoing change and refinements of form, if it were truly attentive to reciprocities? How might communal celebrations and liturgies, themselves participative in Christian formation, become different were the actual lives and experiences of persons to contribute to their shaping? Who asks what such celebrations do? If media were respected, what difference would this make to the pronounced absence of a feminine intelligence in much that passes for 'Christian formation' and how would an interplay of male and female intelligence function creatively for churches and communities? Would attention to the stuff of life introduce other perspectives too: for example, to what extent are approaches to Christian formation scripted by and for people who belong to the middle class, and what would happen if the underclass groups in society were also makers of formative expressions of faith? Enquiry and imagining might go further, to a theology of the cosmos, and to how regard for the whole of life and world continues to open up our vision of what Christian formation might become.

v) Other aspects of the examples

Obviously, respect for media requires concern with the intelligent forming of feeling—something which I have tried to illustrate here. Witkin (1977) and Ross (1978)³ elaborate on the education of affectivity, and I have drawn upon their rich insights in the preceding discussion. They are concerned lest the creative impulse, awakened by what interests and disturbs, be spent aimlessly, with energy dissipated and creation curtailed. They see a need for

interim steps, for holding forms, for something that will keep inspiration alive. In the examples given, the first holding form for the clowns is makeup and dress; for the letter writer, it is a drawing; for the dancer, it is the decision to dance; for the sculptor, it is an initial image.

Are there discernible 'holding forms' within customary processes of Christian formation? Have we neglected some of the sacraments of daily life that could constitute significant holding forms? If an artist's eye is to be brought to media, then ministers will need imagination to see what often is not so much hidden as unnoticed.

'Finished' art forms

None of the preceding examples considers those art works customarily associated with high art. What kind of finality do such works have? Let me offer a further example. In my neighbourhood, an Israeli woodcarver has a tiny shop. For his living, he restores furniture. For his life, he carves magnificent works that respect the colours, texture and natural shapes of found pieces of wood. Gradually, he is building a reputation as a significant artist. One day, he shows me some wood that he has found. Slowly, over weeks, a shape emerges. At last, in the window, he displays what he refuses to price or sell to the many people who want to buy. 'Oh, you've finished it at last!', I say. He looks at me. 'Finished? Never finished! Each day, I take out and touch what I have made, and sometimes my fingers know there is something more I must do. Even when this carving no longer speaks to me, it will go on being completed by every person who, like you, stands before it and sees. No. Not finished.'

I think about how what appears finished resists finality. The pianist who plays Beethoven superbly brings the music alive, discloses unexpected nuances, becomes the music, invites others into the life of the work. Each performance, despite the familiarity of the score, can be what Rothko calls 'an unknown adventure in an unknown space'. In great art, there is always something more to be seen, heard, felt or imagined.

What does this imply for an art of Christian formation? Firstly, perhaps, it identifies the nature of tradition and reminds Christians that theirs is a living inheritance. The task of Christians is not merely to receive what they are told, but to live out that tradition so as to disclose the richness of the unknown within the known. The truths of faith, the great stories and myths and metaphors, are not reducible to ideas. In performance, the old becomes the ever-new. There is a timelessness that is witnessed to in the particularity of each performance, performer and life-context. The

religious identity of Christians is shaped out of personal experience and human action in history that continue to open up dimensions of Christian faith and story. In this way, tradition lives. We tell the Christian story, and it tells us.

The interactions which the woodcarver sees as integral to authentic art remind me of the communal dimension of the creative. It is true that each artist—clown, sculptor, letter writer, dancer, pianist, woodcarver, Christian—must experience the struggle of working in and upon his or her aloneness. Yet, in a profound way, it is this which brings them into the presence of others. Moreover, much of what I have described occurs within the kind of milieu that, at best, a Christian community would provide: an atmosphere of welcome, acceptance, receptivity and freedom. Within it there is room to doubt, question, re-imagine and misname. Such a community is not definable as a place of instruction and legislation. Could it be that the way in which people are present to each other creates a further, imaginary yet accessible space—what D.W. Winnicott calls ‘potential space’?⁴ Such a space is like the intermediate world of childhood play and experimentation where personal strengths of intuition and imagination and symbolization can be developed in safety, a world of ‘let’s pretend’ that is also a world of no pretence. Of course, there is no removing oneself from culture and society. But Christianity is not identical with culture. A Christian community needs to provide spaces where counter-cultural possibilities and actions can be entertained so that, invigorated, Christians can act more responsibly in the world. I wonder what such a community looks like? Perhaps we are only at the point of generating some holding forms for a new way of imagining and being Christian community. Concern for tradition requires that we do not allow images to become fixed, stale and dysfunctional. The woodcarver is right. Art demands reciprocity.

An art of Christian formation

Much could also be said here about the arts and spirituality, and about a theology of beauty and a theology that is beautiful. Without pretending to offer a comprehensive treatment of the art of Christian formation, however, I would invite your consideration of some significant forms of such formation—in particular, those of education and communication. Related to these latter, and present in discussion of examples of art and meaning making, is the question of the justice of the forms we espouse.

Education

If one of the tasks of Christian formation is to offer an education that enables persons to become reflective subjects, who refuse to

be overwhelmed by the structures and meanings of a dominant culture or of its legitimating rationality, then the forms of faith education will attest to the integrity of our educational intent.

An experience of some of the clowns highlights questions about when and how Christian formation involves troubling, disturbance, a creative disordering. A faithed sense of life and human dignity is often in radical discontinuity with much that Western society deems valuable. Needing a few moments to gather courage for clowning, three people enter a church. They are ordered out—'No clowns in here!' Meanwhile, another group is admitted free to an adjacent car park. Later, one of the clowns ponders: 'Why is it that a Christian church has no room for clowns? Is it our costumes that make our presence somehow irreverent? Why are clowns forbidden when, every year, soldiers bring themselves and their uniforms into this church to remember our country's part in a world war?' The question seems valid. Whose order is being represented in this demonstration of exclusion and inclusion, undertaken in the name of Christianity? What form of education enables the imagining of a different order? How will such education encourage actual participation in reordering?

Where the dominant Western culture is technocratic, applauding prediction, control, management and technique, education that is intended to contribute to Christian formation must manifest a refusal to be co-opted by the prevailing order. This means that such education must enter the domain of the unthinkable.

'Unthinkable' has many meanings that have been illustrated in the art and meaning making described earlier. There is the realm of feeling and affective impulses that, though not irrational, are devalued by a culture which requires an odd combination of rational thought and uncritical compliance. Another kind of 'unthinkableness' has to do with what is experienced as so overwhelming that the thought of it is resisted. How, for instance, can persons express Christianity in a winners-and-losers society? 'Unthinkable' also implies that which cannot yet be thought. Fixed structures of thought seem so 'natural' and acceptable until alternative images and action call them into question. Much that has already been discussed—the disciplines of art that show how thought and feeling relate, attentiveness to the inner life of persons, the nurturing of ego strength and imagination—is important for an education that broaches the unthinkable. Educational forms need to be metaphoric, to pose the 'What if...?' of the prophets, and to introduce indeterminacy rather than certainty. Rendering the unthinkable thinkable could bring shifts of power in the education process, a challenging of ownership of symbols (who is

the teacher? who, the privileged interpreter?), and a rejection of whatever diminishes the subjecthood of the learner.

Communication

Much has already been said about creative reciprocities. Clearly, Christian formation does not mean that one person forms another, or that education can be summed up in a simplistic sender-message-receiver paradigm. In communal mutuality, each person becomes artist and encoder whose task it is to express and re-imagine Christian tradition and faith. Each is both creator and recipient of surprise and gift.

Not the last word . . .

The arts are not the only resource in describing Christian formation, nor is there any prescriptive recipe for forms and processes of forming. Instead, recognizing and delighting in the promise beneath the presently incomplete, we who minister to and with one another move through many forms, many awakenings of impulse, many media resistances and possibilities, many disconcerting moments of disorder and conversion. If this is the task of Christian formation, it is also, in many ways, a sign of inexhaustible richness.

NOTES

¹ The examples that follow have been fictionalized slightly to protect the privacy of students at the Australian National Pastoral Institute whose stories, courage and art continue to make meaning in and for my own life.

² The distinction between being 'conscious of more' and being 'more conscious' derives from my reading of Dom Sebastian Moore, 'The Still Centre', in *The arts, artists and thinkers* (London, 1958).

³ Witkin, Robert: *The intelligence of feeling* (London, 1977); and Ross, Malcolm: *The creative arts* (London, 1978).

⁴ Winnicott, D.W.: *Playing and reality* (London, 1971).