

Miriam Therese Winter – story and song.¹
Scripture Luke 8:1-3

Have you heard of her? Maybe not, but you may have heard her music or poetry or prayers, without knowing it was her. That's how it has been for me. From time to time I have encountered her contributions to sacred music and liturgy in the context of worship. The fruits of her faithful discipleship have more than once inspired or even opened up pathways of discipleship for me as well.

From our Cloud of witnesses today I want to share part of her story, part of her voice - which is both story and song.

Sister Miriam Therese Winter of the Roman Catholic Medical Mission Sisters was born as Gloria Winter in 1938.

As early as she can remember, she says, she walked and talked with God. and she was 6 when she first fell in love with words and the magic of metaphor.

In her words,

I saw that life had rhyme and rhythm and mysterious, mystical meaning. If I looked and listened hard enough, I could touch the soul of the universe and find there more than enough to satisfy my soul's insatiable craving for life beyond my own. The natural world has always been my primary sacrament, linking me to the Source of life through its intricate, intimate, infinite web of interconnectedness. Before I encountered

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religion, before I could say, let alone comprehend, the word “theology,” before there was ever a whisper aloud about women becoming priests, I was

ordained by the Spirit of God to celebrate the liturgy of Life.

I was ordained by the Spirit of God to celebrate the liturgy of life – beautiful line.

At age 17 she left home, family, a coveted four-year scholarship to the college of her father’s dreams, left parties, pep rallies, freedom and friends and any possibility for marriage and motherhood to enter religious life with the Roman Catholic Medical Mission Sisters.

She wanted to be part of their work in the world for two reasons first, she was keenly aware of an invitation by God to religious life, it’s always an invitation.

and second and just as importantly because she wanted to be a medical doctor and work in Africa. With them, she was certain this dream of hers would become a reality.

Her immediate love of the RC liturgy, sacred song and ability to play piano meant that on the eve of Vatican II, the Medical Mission sisters who needed a liturgist instead of another doctor or nurse in their midst decided that she would get a music degree instead of a medical degree. And the time she did not think it wise to go against her superiors wishes.

During her bachelor degree of music studies, she became proficient in the Latin Mass and the organ, but as soon as she graduated neither of these skills were required. Vatican II changed the Latin to the vernacular and the Medical mission sisters didn't have an organ. They couldn't afford one. Oh yes, and the sisters assigned her to teach the novices, the very thing she had vowed to herself she would never do.

This was in 1965. In her despair she picked up a guitar, something the mission could afford, taught herself 3 chords and began to pour her anguish into song.

An example of the lyrics that came to her then:

*Come to me over the water, Peter
Walk on the waves of the storming sea
I know your boat is frail and fragile,
but believe in me.*

*I can do anything when faith doesn't weaken
See, the sea sleeps in the palm of my hand
My love's a light that leads like a beacon
to the promised land.*

Her most infamous song of the time, again that came from the depths of despair at the time and one that I learned on the Medical Mission sisters' album that my parents owned was

Joy is like the rain.....

Would you like to sing it with me?

I saw rain drops on my window, Joy is like the rain.

Laughter runs across my pane, Slips away and comes again.

Joy is like the rain.

I saw clouds upon a mountain, Joy is like a cloud.

Sometimes silver, sometimes gray, Always sun not far away.

Joy is like a cloud.

I saw Christ in wind and thunder, Joy is tried by storm.

Christ asleep within my boat, Whipped by wind, yet still afloat,

Joy is tried by storm.

I saw rain drops on a river, Joy is like the rain,

Bit by bit the river grows, 'til all at once it overflows.

Joy is like the rain.

Before I continue with Miriam's story, I want to turn to our scripture for today.

Luke 8:1-3.

8 Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were

with him, **2** as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, **3** and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them[a] out of their resources.

Did anyone know that these verses were in the Bible? I didn't notice them myself for a long time. These are verses that seem like filler between the important stories - between the story of the sinful woman who anointed Jesus feet and the parable of the sower. But I don't imagine the gospel writer needed filler. He wouldn't have written this if it didn't matter.

We do find out several important things in these few verses.

First, the women are named, not always a requirement for biblical women -

Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, **3** and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others - this kind of naming grounds these women in the political and historical reality of the time - just as Miriam Therese Winter's story is grounded in a particular political, religious and historical moment.

Second, the women followed him along with the twelve - twelve male disciples.

Third, they had been cured of demons and diseases - recipients of Jesus' healing ministry.

Fourth, they provided for them, Jesus and the twelve, out of their resources.

Question: These women had resources in an economy where women were regarded as property? Or the families they were part of had resources that they were in charge of and responsible for disbursing? Puzzling yet, important. They provided for Jesus and the twelve out of their own resources. Jesus, unlike even the birds of the air and the foxes of the field did not have a place to rest his head and yet, he was provided for, out of these women's resources. Their discipleship use of their resources whatever they were, according to these few verses made Jesus' itineration possible.

Now in my own discipleship journey, I imbibed with my Mennonite breakfast cereal of puffed wheat that resources must all be given away in order to follow Jesus. Like the story of the rich young ruler and Zaccheaus, if I couldn't give everything away and try to live on nothing or next to nothing then I couldn't truly be a follower of Jesus.

If we put Miriam Therese Winter's story and this scripture together, what might we glean?

That the resources that we find ourselves responsible for, a musical gift or the ability to manage financial and other resources, as was the case for the women in these few verses, whatever the resource can find a place within our discipleship journey.

Miriam's ordination by the Spirit to celebrate the liturgy of Life, her love of liturgy, word and sacred song, were resources that Miriam had that like it or not and at first she didn't like it - provided for Jesus' itineration in today's world. Through her songs, she calls them simple songs she helped people all over the globe to be aware of the presence of God.

She eventually did get to Africa and Thailand – actually she travelled to and served on four continents, not as a medical doctor as she had at first hoped but as a healer nonetheless through the healing power of sacred song and liturgy.

When she fully embraced her gift and calling she obtained a Theology degree at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario and after obtaining a PhD from Princeton she became a professor of liturgy, worship and spirituality at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

I do not know when she wrote the prayer, Our Mother, a counterpart to the Our Father that Christians pray as Jesus taught us. I presume it was in the years of her professorship.

Several years ago I began praying the Our Mother along with the Our Father, long before I knew who wrote it. When I found out it was Miriam, the prayer gained even more credence in my mind because I respected what I had learned of her life of faithfulness.

Just as the Our Father so eloquently reminds us of the magnificence, and transcendence of God as well as our need for God daily in bread and forgiveness and salvation from evil.

The Our Mother, reminds us of God's immanence, or close presence along with similar reminders about our daily reliance on God's sustaining presence within, among and around us in the community that gather's in God's name.

I have shared this prayer with individuals occasionally as I have sensed they had need. This morning I share Miriam's prayer with all of you, trusting as Miriam Therese Winter did that the words that she's been given can be a resource and inspiration to others.

Let us pray together,

*Our Mother who is within us
we celebrate your many names.*

Your wisdom come.

Your will be done,

unfolding from the depths within us.

Each day you give us all that we need.

You remind us of our limits

and we let go.

You support us in our power

and we act with courage.

For you are the dwelling place within us

*the empowerment around us
and the celebration among us
now and for ever. Amen*

I now draw this sermon to a conclusion by summarizing how she saw her role in this odyssey of life and faith and path of discipleship to which each one of us is invited. In her own words:

To claim one's mission and ministry is life's fundamental challenge. Mine is a mission of healing. I sensed that as a very young child. Although I veered away from the medical, the core of the call is the same. I sing of One with the power to heal our hearts and our relationships, the suffering of marginal societies, the wounds of both past and present. Persistent healing energy is required to erase the scars that still remain from centuries of separation within a divided church and to overcome the layer upon layer of abuse inflicted in the name of religions. A healing presence gives grace the chance to overcome systematic injustice and stem its destructive force, to put back together a broken world, to comfort the suffering, encourage the dying, and root out those self-serving attitudes that punish and plague our planet. As she sang her songs she grew to more fully understand that all of life is sacred, that hidden deep in the world we know, the song of ages come and gone is waiting to be felt and freed. ... "the rhythm of the universe with its manifold improvisations, the harmonic resonance of sun and sea, the melodies of bees and birds, wind and wave, cat call and

waterfall, the drumbeat of rain encountering earth, the counterpoint of the daily, of nature's sounds and human sound: This is sacred music. This song is praise of God."

In a final chapter in her biography she tries to express what it means to let the songs express themselves through her.

As metaphor meets melody and rhymes and rhythms intersect, the pulse of a world beyond our world resonates within me. I let go, let Spirit lead, and savor the experience. The sung word and the poetic word arise from an oasis somewhere inside where I go to integrate life and love, pain and disappointment, and a passion for possibilities.

She also says of herself, I am not really a musician. I am not really a composer. I am just a singer of simple songs who knows that the call to be who I am is a call that comes from God.

So what is it that wants to express itself through each one of us? What is that one thing with which our lives find resonance? That thing (and it doesn't have to be a song) but anything that helps us integrate life and love, pain and disappointment and opens up within us a passion for possibility, That is where our pathway of discipleship lies and like Mary and Joanna and Susanna of Luke's gospel we too can provide for Jesus' ministry in our world out of our own resources.