

ATTENTION AS PRAYER

Interview with Poet and Chaplain, Martha Serpas

by Nadia Colburn

Martha Serpas is the author of two collections of poetry, *Côte Blanche* (New Issues) and *The Dirty Side of the Storm* (W.W. Norton). Her third book *The Diener*, is coming out in 2015 from Louisiana State University Press. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Southwest Review*, and *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*, as well as in a number of anthologies, including the *Library of America's American Religious Poems*. She holds degrees in English and creative writing from Louisiana State University, New York University, and the University of Houston, as well as a Masters of Divinity from Yale Divinity School. For many years, as an educational consultant and as a poet-in-residence, she facilitated the teaching of writing to children in New York City classrooms. She has taught recently at Yale Divinity School and the University of Tampa, where she also served as poetry editor of *Tampa Review*. A native of south Louisiana, she remains active in efforts to restore Louisiana's wetlands. Since 2006, she has worked as a trauma chaplain, first at Tampa General Hospital and now at Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center. She teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston.

I spoke to Martha about her work as a poet and a chaplain in August of 2014.

NC: What was the role of religion and spirituality in your childhood?

MS: I grew up around 80 miles south of New Orleans on Bayou Lafourche. The area I grew up in is the second largest Cajun settlement, and because of that, it's almost entirely Catholic, so I grew up really in a mono-religious environment. Cajun Catholicism is very place specific—it was less dogmatic and more sacramental. There were feast days. There was the practice of the sacraments and little talk about doctrine. Social justice and treatment of the poor took precedent. I never heard the word abortion from the pulpit and never heard about homosexuality. The emphasis was on practice, on family, and on extended family.

Most of the people I grew up around lived on a single street with three generations living in houses right on the same street. My mother grew up about forty miles away and my father also roughly forty miles away in a different town. My parents moved to Bayou Lafourche so my



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father could practice law. Even though they had grown up relatively close by, they weren't considered natives. Now, I have one older sister who lives in Austin, but most of my extended family is either on the bayou or in New Orleans.

NC: Was it hard for you to leave?

MS: When I was in my early teens, I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. But when I graduated from high school, I was ready to take off and do something new. But I only went to Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge, so I wasn't that far from home. Since then, I sort of long for the place. If there were a university in South Lafourche, I'd be there. I visit as often as I can.

NC: And I know you write about the bayou very often. What is that like to write about it but not to live there?

MS: I remember Updike writing about enhancement through distance. And I think that's true for me. I don't know how my writing would change if I lived there, but it's my primary subject.

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NC: You have said that, for you, writing is prayer; that it’s unmediated experience of the Divine.

MS: Yes, I wait until something seizes me. That is the best description I can give—it’s to be seized by something. Then my attention is so focused—it’s a kind of meditation. I could write in a room full of people if I were in that focused state. Simone Weil famously said, “absolute unmixed attention is prayer.” Any activity that allows that kind of attention is a spiritual practice.

NC: Do you have other spiritual practices—other things that give you that unbroken attention?

MS: I often go back to Tampa and work as a chaplain at Tampa General Hospital in the trauma unit with patients and families. I was there for four months this past January to April. I often feel that walking into a room with a family, or walking into a room to speak with a patient is akin to writing a poem—the whiteness of the environment is like a paper ready for the word. I don’t know what’s going to happen, and the patient doesn’t either. We go back and forth writing this text. And I think that that’s probably the second most important spiritual practice for me.

NC: How did you come to your chaplaincy work?

MS: In the 90s, I was in Divinity school, studying religion and the arts, and many of my friends were working towards being ordained. Students in divinity school are headed towards different careers—non-profits, doctoral degrees—it’s a very diverse group, and many of my friends spent a semester working in the hospital. It was something I was always interested in, but it was not part of my curriculum. Later, I went back to divinity school to teach for a semester, and after I finished, I had a semester off. I took that opportunity to go to Tampa General and work as a chaplain.

NC: Are chaplains assigned according to faith tradition or is it interfaith?

MS: When I first started in 2007, I was the only Catholic—there were Presbyterian and Methodist chaplains, a Jewish chaplain, a Buddhist, and a Native American chaplain, and if a call came in, only one of us went.

As chaplains, sometimes the news is good and sometimes the news is difficult, but all the time, our goal is not to provide comfort but rather to help people be in the moment so that they can begin to process what’s happening. A simple way to put it is that many people will jump to thinking, “I know this is it, he won’t come through,” or “I know God will heal him.” And, of course, neither of those

thoughts are true—we don’t know what is going to happen, and that waiting, that synapse, is the most difficult place for anyone to be.

NC: How do you manage practically to be both a chaplain and professor of poetry?

MS: I’m lucky because I often teach only every other spring. My partner was teaching in Tampa until very recently, and Tampa General welcomed me back whenever I could come. The structure of pastoral formation involves being part of a community of other chaplains. Chaplains do intense reflections on what’s happening in visits. I had that community while I was working and visiting patients and families. My responsibility was to the trauma unit connecting to patients and families. Tampa has a very unusual set up for chaplains: the director has really worked to put us in contact with families, so that if they want our support we are already there—families don’t have to ask. Many who find the support helpful would not have asked for it.

NC: How do you see the work of poetry interacting with the work of chaplaincy?

MS: The description I gave of a visit being as a text with the writer and reader moving back and forth—the interpretation a reader makes of a poem puts the reader in the role of a writer. That is one connection I see between the two kinds of work I do.

Another connection is that kind of deep attention I was talking about. It seems to me that the deep attention of writing a poem is a very solitary attention—one is alone with one’s own imagination and music—while being a chaplain requires that one pay a lot of attention to other people.

NC: How do those different attentions work for you?

MS: There is a walk out into the hall when I leave a family during which I’m required to shed the conversation and move on. I think that there is a solitude there that might be akin to either finishing a poem or deciding to take a break from it, which also has a shedding and a solitude. We go in and out of community and solitude.

NC: Is the population of students and the population at the hospital similar or different?

MS: Different, however, there are moments when students speak as if they are struggling with staying in the moment, and that part is similar. I sometimes feel myself drawn to that chaplain space, and that’s not really my role with students who are trying to write poems. However, trying to be

in the moment when working on a poem is a kind of letting go of expectations for the poem, and that is similar to letting go of a knowledge of what's going to happen to the patient.

NC: Sometimes, working within a degree program as a poetry teacher, I have felt that there is a lot of emphasis on production, on the "goodness" of a poem, on the ends more than the means. How do you reconcile this with the work of being attentive to the moment and then also the work of letting go?

It's paradoxical. On the one hand we're all trying to improve technique—that's important. Where else in this culture are writers going to get the space and time to work on technique and also to develop a voice for lack of a better term? And on the other hand, that focus can get in our way. Degree programs can focus on production, and there can be a homogenization of poems and voice.

I teach a class that is primary wisdom literature—everything from the Tao to Emerson. It's a really fun class because students who need a break from the focused work on technique have the opportunity to consider purpose and to consider the paradox that they have to grapple with between technique as control and meaning as unfolding.

NC: I've been re-reading Whitman, who is one my favorite wisdom writers, and I've been really struck by his incredible technique and his simultaneous move away from technique. At the same time, he keeps his unwavering attention the heart of meaning. How do you encourage students to pursue meaning as writers?

MS: The students I teach know my interests. They can choose which teachers to work with, so students I tend to teach are already there—they know they're struggling with purpose. I can't really help them with that. I can only give them the space to take the focus off production and see what they find out for themselves. At the same time, we all need to work on technique, and I have colleagues who are much better at teaching craft than I am.

NC: Your poems have wonderful technique. They are very controlled, musical, focused, and precise.

MS: Thank you.

NC: Do you ever bring poetry to your work as a chaplain?

MS: I bring it in with the other chaplains but not very often with families. I know that a lot of people do bring in poems with families and patients, but I only did once when it was very organic. I guess I don't want to impose my practice

onto others, but maybe I've been overly cautious.

NC: What do you see as the solace of faith or of a spiritual tradition?

MS: I think the connectedness that we feel individually and that we also feel as a community comes through faith. That is consoling, and it's also not consoling. I'm kind of playing with Augustine here—there are parts that fall away and are replaced by other parts to maintain a wholeness and constancy.

That's related to the environmental aspects—poetry, like faith, can raise attention and also hold up a part of the whole that always falls away. Again, I'm almost directly quoting Augustine—what falls away will be replaced by something else, so the whole is consoling, and yet, the necessary loss is devastating.

My part of Louisiana was built by silt that was washed down the river between the time of Paul and the time of Aquinas, so something somewhere was destroyed in order to build this land, and something will be built out of this loss. That's faith but not very consoling.

NC: Similarly, what power do you think words and poetry have to provide solace or to make change?

MS: Environmental poems can simply alert people to connect to the landscape and to experience what's happening. More broadly, I think poetry focuses us on that place of music and words, images and assertions, that cannot be expressed otherwise. A poem that moves me reconnects me to the world in that deep attentive way we've been talking about.

NC: Are there poets who particularly influence you?

MS: Initially, I was taken with the music of Yeats and really was drawn to poetry that conveyed its impact through music and sound, repetition and scale, primarily. Then, I would say Anne Sexton. I think the breadth of her subject matter and the power of her analogies caused me to see what poetry could do.

NC: Are you working on anything new?

MS: I have a book coming out in March called *The Diener*—the guy who runs the morgue. A third of the book is poems that have to do with chaplaincy and two-thirds of the book deals with Louisiana, but they shouldn't be separated for all the reasons we've talked about. They move together.

(Read three of Martha's poems on the following pages.) §