Reading Murray Bodo's *Wounded Angels* and *Visions and Revisions*

Though these two poetry collections were written a couple of years apart, because of a publishing delay, both came out within a month of one another in the spring of 2009. Though different in many ways, they express the same concerns for justice, compassion, respect for the uniqueness of each person, reverence for all of creation, and peace. These concerns, manifest in varied poetic forms using stunning images and melodic language, make both books appropriate for any class in which the Franciscan values are infused. A creative instructor could easily use any of these poems as touchstones, catalysts for discussions of our core values. I can also envision staff members forming discussion groups using Bodo's poetry as a focal point. There is such an abundance of thought-provoking material that springs from these poems that it is difficult to choose one direction. What follows is one person's response to the reading of these two fine collections.

<u>Introduction</u>

Murray Bodo's *The Earth Moves at Midnight* (2003) begins with the death of his mother and ends with the death of his father. In "*Growing Hard of Hearing,*" the final poem in that collection, he addresses his deceased parents: "*You, my mother and father, and I/your only book, all three become words/I'm the last to preserve*" (91). The "only book," of course, is a metaphor for himself as the only child, the only one left to memorialize their lives in words. He takes up this lone-survivor theme again in *Wounded Angels* (2009). In a poem addressed to his mother, "Sewing Box," he writes: "I have the sewing box and pillow cases/you embroidered—having no children/to give them to"(105). The realization that he's the only one left to keep his particular dead alive in words appears

again in “The Old Sporting Goods Store When He Was Twelve” (21). This poem describes Lesio, McNellis, and Bonita, people he knew from the store. He asks them: “*Am I the only one who hears/you talking by the kerosene/stove? Gone so many years and none/but me to remember…*” (22).

It may be that he *is* the only one to remember these special people. But how blessed they (and we) are to have Murray Bodo be the one mining the language for the best words to portray their lives! In reading *Wounded Angels* and *Visions and Revisions: Celebrating 800 Years of the Franciscan Way of Life,* I sense that he feels as privileged to be the one to preserve their memories as he does to be able to delve into the vast store of words and use them to honor his parents and others (including his Franciscan brothers and sisters) who are long gone. Words and memory—these are his concerns. Though at times we may get them wrong, he suggests that all the trouble we go through to get words and memory right is vital to our own well-being and the well-being of others in our community. When words and memory speak the Truth (which we can easily distort and wound), all kinds of healing can take place. We can denigrate people with our words and harm them. We can honor people with our words and heal them. Bodo’s interest is in honoring and healing.

<u>“More Than” Murray Bodo</u>

In three different poems in *Wounded Angels,* we find references to what is “more than” what we see before us.

> What to make of photos that are
> supposed to be us and are at times
> prophetic, glimpses of *more than*
> the contours of the physical shape
> we cut in the air around us…(my italics, 9)

In “Holy Relics,” there are “pilgrims/seeking *more than* an arrangement of bones” (my italics, 37); and in reflecting on the work of the man who carves wood to feed his family in “Writing in Assisi,” the speaker suspects that the wood carver

> …chips away every day,
> mallet to chisel to wood,
> to surprise himself
> with something *more than* food (my italics, 46).

In *Visions and Revisions,* the speaker of “Hearing Things” refers to “couplets that reach for *more than* rhyme” (my italics, 59). Even when the words “more than” aren’t explicit, we get the sense that each person, place or thing Bodo considers is always much *more than* meets the eye or the ear.

But what does he mean by the expression “more than”? An earlier book, *Song of the Sparrow,* offers some clues. In that book of prose and poetry, Bodo says that he looks for “the transcendent in the particular” (22). I take it, then, that the “more than” in his poems refers to the transcendent. “Particulars themselves,” he goes on to say, “tend to be self-serving and convoluted. Only the transcendent, the metaphysical, frees the particular concrete experience from the poet’s own introversion” (22). All the subjects of his poems, whether person, place or thing, are particular and concrete. One might say that *Wounded Angels* and *Visions and Revisions* are books bursting with winged nouns, that is, persons, places, things (with an accent on persons) that are the stuff of memory. “Particular concrete experience” is revisited and, in the process, freed from itself by the transcendence that the poet is able to sense and present to us through the “magic of words” (32, *Song of the Sparrow*).

The two books deal with different aspects of the poet’s memory. *Wounded Angels* centers on memories of particular people in his family of origin, his family of Franciscan

brothers and sisters, and the family of humanity all around him, prostitutes and scholars alike. In *Visions and Revisions*, on the other hand, he remembers and celebrates the lives and gifts of Francis and Clare that are presented to him in various guises. Ordinary life becomes extraordinary. The subjects in this book run the gamut from medieval art to modern day shopping malls to the wisdom of his friend Denise Levertov. Neither fresco (thing) nor mall (place) nor Denise Levertov (person) remains represented on the page unwinged. They are always “more than” themselves, that is, imbued with the transcendence of God, which is why one is hard-pressed to find anything sentimental here. The poet shows great regard and gratitude for the persons, places and things in his life. One senses that he knows to the depths of his soul that he cannot do what he does or be who he is without them.

Holy Relics as Things

Relics were commonplace for those of us who came of age in the pre-Vatican II Church. We learned early on that special graces could come to us if we were close to a slither of bone from some great saint. These relics (things) could be found in altars or encased in the rosaries we carried around in our purses and pockets. Perhaps our “belief” in such things has diminished. But in the poem “Holy Relics,” which I referred to above, Bodo asks us to take another look:

> Silent the tombs where bone-specimens
> lie for inspection—
> relics no different to the eye than
> those of kings and queens
> or the anonymous peasant whose tomb
> was field or forest.
>
> Where are the souls that quickened us
> and brought us here—pilgrims
> seeking more than an arrangement of bones?

Yet, the air
does sing with their signature.
Sometimes everywhere (37).

Bones of saints look the same as bones of kings or peasants. It's the faith of the believers themselves that makes them holy relics. When the speaker asks where the souls are that brought the pilgrims on their journey seeking something more than bones, he seems to be looking to resurrect the living spirit in those bones. The very question as to where the souls are causes him to "see" that those souls, the spirit of the holy relics, never left. It is we who did the leaving. Pay attention, the speaker seems to say, and you'll see that the souls of those saints that quickened us are as present as they've ever been. The spirit that emanates from the particular thing, the transcendent, depends on our being true seekers, that is, faith-filled and open.

Ordinary Things

It's not only the holy relics that contain the living spirit that spurs us on our journey. It's also the ordinary things of daily life. Just scan the contents pages of *Wounded Angels* and *Visions and Revisions* and you'll see that *things* are everywhere present in these books: junkyard Dodge, album, rifle, house, glass, shells, bells, mirror, photo, water, beach, diary, desk, painting, etc. These are all *things* and they are all made holy in these books by the writer/believer Murray Bodo. Take, for example, "Junkyard Dodge." The car itself, the thing, becomes the vehicle (pardon the pun) for the speaker's very important ruminations about the past and present, ruminations which seem to move him forward in his self-understanding.

In this opening poem, the speaker, a grown man, is looking back and trying to enter the time of his boyhood when he was free to sit in the old Dodge and bring it to life with

his imagination. It is a movie scene, and he and Errol Flynn are the heroes saving "the sloop," that is, the old Dodge, from sinking. It's as if, in journeying back in time, he is also journeying forward. He admits that he is pretending that it's a desire for adventure that takes him back to his youth when, in reality, it is age itself. Even though he tries to create distance between his boyhood and adulthood by referring to himself as "the little boy," we get the sense that he is quite intimate with the youngster who imagines the car as a ship but who is close enough to "the man" that he is able, as an adult, to "sail back" there and see the transcendent that he probably was not conscious of as a boy. (Or, at least he would not have been able to identify it as such.) The particular experience, the boy feeling safe "sitting on the bare springs/where upholstery used to be," is freed from its lifeless past because the adult has the courage not only to remember this important childhood scene but to contemplate what it means for the adult looking back. He seems to have awakened the memory in a healthy way. There is no obsessive holding on but a clear-headed gratitude for what the memory has taught the grown-up. Clearly, the junkyard Dodge is more than the *thing* it is. The transcendent is truly present. Which is to say it is as much a holy relic as the bones of a saint.

Places

Not only do the *things* in his life lift the poet's experience beyond the particular but places do as well. Whether he's in Gallup, New Mexico, or Cincinnati, Ohio, or Assisi, Italy, or the inside of a train, he is able to elevate each particular place in such a way that it becomes more than its geography. One poem in which transcendence is fully experienced by the speaker and fully shared with his readers through his choice of words that convey the experience is "The Southwest Chief" (16-18), a poignant account of his

journey to his father's funeral. In this poem, we get the sense that it's the journey itself, the actual train ride, that prepares him (almost in a mystical way) for his destination—the ritual that will mark his tremendous personal loss.

As if to see it more clearly, he recounts his unusual experience on the train in the third person: "…he enters the diner of the Southwest Chief." There's nothing out of the ordinary here: a man on his way to his father's funeral goes to the dining car (an ordinary *place*) to get a bite to eat. What follows, though, is anything but ordinary:

> When the maitre-d asks, "How many?"
> and he says, "One," everything comes down.
> He returns to his room and looks into the dark.
> A full moon stares in on him staring back:
> his own pupil, detached, floats in black night
> follows him until they enter the hole called
> Raton Pass. It reappears when they emerge,
> a face etched in grey on the white moon
> become his pupil leading him who once held it
> secure in its own socket, thinking the eye
> was not like one's face that changes
> in the mirror as the eye does not, except
> to grey a bit like the etchings on the moon
> like hills and valleys when you see them on TV,
> that other eye that looks back at you with news
> from the moon, but this time from the astronaut's eye
> or the camera that follows him about the moon
> alone with heavy shoes that keep him from sliding
> into space the way his eye did when he was asked
> how many are you and his eye became the moon.

No doubt he has dined alone before but this time, when he says "One," the realization that both parents are dead seems to race through his entire being. It's as if he has been stricken with the knowledge of the finality of their lives and his utter aloneness. He returns to his room a different person. Alone on the train going to his father's funeral, he is transfixed as he stares at the full moon which he senses that his own pupil is joining. The pupil, the dark center in the middle of the iris through which light reaches the retina,

is essential. Without it, his sight is not the same. There can be no light. His parents are gone; his security is gone. How could he not be shaken by this strange experience? But as unsettling as it is, he is helped by it. The dark pupil joins the light of the moon and together they lead him, steady him for the rest of the journey. He will not "slid[e] into space" the way he might have without having gone through this amazing experience. He seems to have a better grasp afterwards. He is more prepared for what he'll face at the end of the train ride.

The second part of this poem has a somewhat lighter tone. It's interesting to note that in all the poems that precede this second part of "The Southwest Chief," the poet refers to himself in the third person (e.g. "the man has no memory of the boy on the tricycle…"). But after the experience on the train, which I suspect now becomes a sacred *place* for him, he is finally able say "I" instead of "the boy" or "the man." He speaks of the house where he lived with his parents, "its fence, the color of the faded images/*I* have of mother and dad and me…" He goes on to say, "*I* am left alone thinking…" Finally, towards the end of this incredibly moving poem, he says

> …*I* take out the album *I* carry
> to look at grey pictures of three
> like the moon, the train, and me.

"He" has definitely come somewhere after the experience on the train. It's as if in the dissembling of his eye, its pupil becoming one with the moon, he is able to *see* his situation more clearly. One senses that he will never be able to look at that picture of himself with his parents without also bringing to mind the Southwest Chief on that important journey on the train to his father's funeral. I hear an almost childlike ring to that last line—"the moon, the train, and me"—which suggests a kind of rebirth, going

back in order to move forward. The moon and the train are no longer mere places. With his careful choice and placement of words, the poet evokes the transcendent in a particular train on a particular day lived by a particular person who not only faces a huge loss in his life but who also receives the grace to begin to understand.

Persons

Before we look at particular poems and ways in which they reverence persons, I want to examine the structure of this book. Like many poets, he arranges his poems in sections. There are five parts, each with a different focus: (i) boy with junkyard dodge, (ii) tree with birds, (iii) jar with shells, (iv) wounded angels, (v) ending with beginning. But he includes three italicized poems which are spread through and seemingly hovering over the ones in these five sections: *"Wounded Angel," "Wounded Angel 2," "Wounded Angel 3."* *Wounded Angel* is the title of the picture on the front, a reproduction of a painting by Hugo Simberg. At first glance one might think the title is sentimental. But if you look closely at the picture and read the three poems with this title, you'll see that they are anything but sentimental.

As if to instruct the reader, the poet opens with this declaration in "*Wounded Angels"*: *"Truth is a wounded angel."* The Simberg painting shows two young boys, one looking out at the viewer with the saddest of eyes, carrying an angel on a stretcher. The angel is sitting up, her wing torn, her eyes covered with a blindfold. We see this image, and the poems that refer to it follow in the text. At first I was baffled as to what these three poems had to do with the others in the collection. In a book that examines memory in its various manifestations, why the tripartite reminder that we all take part in the wounding of the good?

"That impulse to bring home the body
as if we are helping mercifully
grateful the victim hasn't eyes to show
we were complicit in the wounding,
the slaughter." (from *"Wounded Angel 2"*)

And in the opening poem, *"Wounded Angel,"* the speaker observes that "*we're the very ones who/wounded her…"* There's the suggestion toward the end of this poem that we all blame others when in fact we are all responsible.

What do the picture and the poems have to do with the first section called "boy with junkyard dodge" in which the poet examines his childhood memories close up? If truth is a "wounded angel" and if all of us are responsible for the wounding, then why include poems about his boyhood, poems that give us pictures of what looks to me like a good and healthy upbringing, a childhood peopled with the likes of Shanty Meyers who owned the trading post on the road to the Navajo Nation and Bodo's mother "baking, frying fish," not to mention Lesio Leonesio whom his mother called "Bullshitta." If you grew up unloved or in a less healthy household, you might find yourself wishing you'd been brought up by these loving parents and the citizens of Gallup, New Mexico, whom Bodo remembers with great affection.

After examining the book more closely, though, I realized that couched in among these scenes of what seem to be an enviable childhood are many wounded, wounded not only by war and poverty but also by other forms of violence. For example, we learn that his father's stepmother had beat his father and locked him in a closet ("Dad's Rifle" 23). Then there's the reference to what was no doubt an accepted cultural norm back in 1948, the words on a mural that read "'Indian squaw, drunk, go back/to your own reservation'" (11). Finally, there's the very moving poem, "The Southwest Chief," in which he writes,

“I am left an only child thinking/there should be more in the picture…” (17). He too is among the wounded. So his decision to include the picture and the three poems that remind us of our responsibility in defiling the goodness in the world makes sense. It is another way that Bodo resists falling into sentimentality. We are all to blame for the wound and we’re all responsible for healing the wound. As the angel herself says, *“I let you carry me home,/an angelic caricature/that only you can cure”* (89).

Persons. He loves them. He regards them. He elevates them beyond themselves. And, in some poems, he portrays the suffering among us in such a touching way that we can’t help but feel deep compassion. “Passover” is one of these poems:

> As though nothing has happened
> they keep up appearances
> “Early Bird Specials” Fridays,
> after which, their evening stroll
> to “work off” dinner, delay
> going home to watch TV.
> No one notices their masked
> pain, their wooden pace since he
> came home, a metal box from
> Iraq. Their route is cyclic,
> unvaried. The angel has
> not passed over; they have no
> child, just tired bodies and
> minds not trying not to die.

Parents all over the country have lost children in Iraq. We know that. There are the funerals, the public expressions of gratitude for their sacrifice. But soon the public ritual is replaced by the individual private ritual, in this case the Friday meal, the stroll, the eventual return home to watch TV. What could be more ordinary? Bodo, the keen and sensitive observer, shows us that the private ritual is burdened with deep pain. Perhaps because their home reminds them of their lost son and the emptiness his death has left behind, they delay going home.

Notice how slowly and reverently this poem builds. Each carefully composed line honors these bereft parents in the most exquisite and loving way until, finally, our compassion cannot be contained as he concludes with the matter-of-fact statement, "…they have no/child…" (95). And, not only does their loss make their bodies and minds tired but this grieving couple is "not trying not to die." A lesser poet may have simply said that they are trying to stay alive. But Bodo sees in them *more than* an effort to stay alive. This particular grief-stricken couple is burdened with more passivity than that. In *not* trying not to die, they have, in a sense, given up. They have let the dull ritual pull them along. They seem drained of the energy it would take merely to stay alive. In "Passover," Bodo indeed goes deeper into the heart of suffering. He sees it and, though he may be powerless to do anything about it, he shares his tender observations with readers, some of whom may be moved to think more deeply about the cost of war.

Visions and Revisions offers several excellent poems directly relating to Francis and Clare: "Clare di Favarone and the Moon," "St. Francis and the Fish," "Francis at Greccio, 1223," etc. Also, there is a "Mass for the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi," a long and lovely poem that I think begs to be read aloud because hearing the sound of its rhythms awakens its content. The rhythms of language, the songs, Bodo suggests, have no other purpose than to honor persons. Nowhere is this idea more explicitly and beautifully sung than in "Hearing Things" (59):

> Always they sing here,
> their melodies, their harmonies
>
> sounding from a glance
> in the mirror say, the way
>
> I hear things as they
> did, or the color of my voice,

or a musical choice
that was theirs and I'd forgotten.

They sing here now in
couplets that reach for more than rhyme,

that want to hold on
lest they vanish like their voices,

the loved ones. How can
song be anything other than

notation to one's
desire that they, so loved, shall live.

In this poem, Bodo stops to consider his reason for writing. He tells us that the voices of lost loves ones are always there in the poems/songs. Like all of us, like the couple in "Passover" who lost their son, he wants his "loved ones" to live. He wants to remember. And the only way for this one Franciscan, Murray Bodo, to continue to express that desire, that love, is to write/sing his poems in the best way possible. His aim is to remember and honor *persons.* "Hearing Things" is a love poem to those who have touched his life and made him *more than* he could ever be without them.

Conclusion

Wounded Angels begins with a poem remembering his boyhood and ends with a poem remembering his mother as a girl. Between these two poems is a generous array of poems that opens us to the transcendent in the persons, places and things that concern Bodo. Whether he is pondering the pain his father feels when his only son becomes a priest ("A Hard Floor Ghazal" 67) or daffodils in a brown beer bottle "(Daffodils 33) or asylum seekers forced to live in gypsy trailers ("Asylum City" 91), he is always paying homage whether the subject at hand is fraught with sorrow or joy. The same is true of *Visions and Revisions,* a book which begins in Assisi with "Writer's Block," a poem that

describes the frustration of not being able to write because he has "lost his center" and concludes with the admission that he can't do it alone. He needs others to get the words flowing again. This book, which celebrates 800 years of the Franciscan way of life, ends with "Revision" in which he is imagining himself on his way back to Assisi, a place he has been going to for over thirty years. Murray Bodo, who again refers to himself in the third person just as he did when he looked back on his childhood, is older now. In "Revision," he ponders the last time he'll go to Assisi:

> And when he returns
> the last time, it will be
> cold and something
> will have changed,
> as if weather knew
> what he'd become
> but for the scratching
> of his pen.

It is fitting that this book, which he says is as much a homage to the Franciscan way of life as to "life itself as it is lived by one Franciscan in the 21st Century" (88), end with a reference to his writing, "the scratching/of his pen." One of the most important lessons that St. Francis of Assisi, Murray Bodo's spiritual father, teaches is to reverence the uniqueness of the individual. Each of us is different. Each Franciscan is different. The uniqueness of Murray Bodo's vocation as a Franciscan is that it is inseparable from his vocation as a poet. Though *Visions and Revisions* is a book "celebrating" his Franciscan way of life, it also presents us with a voice (Bodo's voice) reminding us every step of the way that, Franciscan or not, he experiences the full range of human emotions that all of us face each and every day. As he writes in *Song of the Sparrow,* "…life is not a continuous celebration. It is rather a rhythm of joys and sorrows, certitude and doubt,

fullness and emptiness, intimacy and loneliness, turning inward and turning outward" (72). This rhythm is everywhere present in his poetry.

In the foreword to *Wounded Angels,* Herbert Lomas says that Murray Bodo is "the most human holy man you could ever meet, and the most fun." He adds that this "laughing, joking, loving, still-more-than-half-Italian Dr. Bodo" makes "everyone he meets want to appoint him as their spiritual adviser" (xi). After reading and re-reading both *Wounded Angels* and *Visions and Revisions,* I can certainly see why.

Barbara Wuest in The Journal of the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities. Winter, 2010.

Murray Bodo's, Wounded Angels, is now available in the U.S. from Eighth Day Books:
1-800-841-2541 or orders@eighthdaybooks.com

Visions and Revisions is available from Tau publications at Tau-publishing.com