

*This document intersperses process journaling about the act of weaving on a hand-built, four-heddle loom, short essays on the theopoetics of weaving, and historical reflections. It was compiled over the course of “Theopoetics of Weaving and Textile Craft”, an independent study at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago during Fall 2018, overseen by Dr. Mark Swanson as the faculty supervisor.*

### **What is Theopoetics?**

Arts, Religion, and Culture (ARC), a multidisciplinary organization invested in exploring the relationship between creative and spiritual practices, broadly defines theopoetics as:

“(1) an emphasis, style, and positive concern for the intersection of religious reflection and spirituality with the imagination, aesthetics, and the arts, especially as (2) it takes shape in ways that grows community, (3) focuses on material change, and (4) affirms the importance of embodiment.

More generally, theopoetics is not an alternative to theology. It's a way to do religious reflection that gives greater attention to form, genre, and method. It validates art, experience, and the body as a source of religious reflection and is concerned with the emotional and "pre-rational" impact as well as the concrete consequences of religious reflection. Art and ideas should *matter*.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the primary practitioners and theologians of theopoetics is Rubem Alves, a Brazilian writer, working in liberation theology. A thread throughout his work is the short story “That the Dead May Become Gardeners Again”, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.<sup>2</sup> In this story, a dead body washes up on the shore of a small village. The residents prepare the body for burial, and in doing so, imagine all of the might-have-beens for his life, enacting a sort of resurrection in unreached possibility. Alves writes that “Every battle is a battle for the recovery of the lost garden”, and that “Power does not belong to scientific truths. It belongs to our dreams.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arts, Religion, Culture. “What Do People Mean By “Theopoetics”?” digitally accessed via <https://artsreligionculture.org/definitions>, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Guynn, Matt. “Theopoetics: That the Dead May Become Gardeners Again”, in *Cross Currents*, March 22, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Alves, Rubem. “Theopoetics: Longing and Liberation”, in *Struggles for Solidarity: Liberation Theologies in Tension*.” Augsburg Fortress, 1992.

The juxtaposition of theology and arts practice (historically centering writing, but theopoetic principles can be applied across creating), gives us license to imagine other worlds into being.



### **Weaving Definitions**

Warp – The vertical threads, structural, wound onto the loom

Weft – The horizontal threads, not necessarily structural, woven into the weft

Heddle – Guides for the warp threads, raises and lowers certain threads in patterns

Shed – Space created when the heddles lift certain threads

Shuttle – Spool holding the weft thread, passed back and forth through the shed

Waste – Warp that is unable to be used since it is wound onto each side of the loom

Guide threads – Boundary threads that keep the edges of a woven piece even

Tension rods – One at the front and one at the rear of the loom, evens tension

Plain weave – Also called tabby, this is the basic in-out-in-out pattern

Warping board – Tool for measuring and counting the warp threads before they are put onto the loom

Weaver's cross – Formed on the warping board, helps keep threads aligned

### **We Are Created to Create**

God creates. God made oceans and plankton and crimson sunsets and changing leaves and earthworms and housecats and humankind and the Word in Flesh in Christ, and God's breath moved over it all. God's breath is still moving with every spring bud, and every tattoo, and new commitment, and poem.

Meister Eckhart, a 13<sup>th</sup> century theologian and mystic, uses the image of a pot of water, boiling over, to explore the relationship of God to creation. God is the pot of water, Jesus is

the water boiling over, and the Holy Spirit is the flame<sup>4</sup>. In this image, it is unclear where the heat stops, where the water stops, and where the boil begins. They are distinct elements but interdependent, always pouring forth with more energy. God begets and God begets and God begets God, “unceasingly, much as sunlight is constantly, unceasingly, generated by the sun, or as springwater gushes up constantly, unceasingly, from its fountainhead.”<sup>5</sup>

Humankind is made in God’s image, and God’s image is a creator. Humans make tools, and covenants, and carvings, and textiles, and systems. God’s energy is a creative force, giving breath to the world. Bonaventure, an early 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic, wrote a piece called “Retracing the Arts to Theology”. In this, he proposes that the arts are part of fundamental Christian doctrine, since they are vehicles to interpret, integrate, and reflect back the creative works of God in the world. God delights in us, and:

“our spiritual senses must seek with longing, find with joy, and time and again experience the beautiful, the harmonious, the fragrant, the sweet, or the delightful to the touch. Behold how the Divine Wisdom lies hidden in sense perception and how wonderful is the contemplation of the five spiritual senses in the light of their conformity to the senses of the body.”<sup>6</sup>

By creating, we are acting in line and in faith with God our Creator – “we shall see therein the Word begotten and made incarnate, that is, the Divinity and the Humanity and the integrity of all faith.”<sup>7</sup>

Creation also has a shadow side, destruction. The two are intertwined – where does creation begin from the destruction of an apple into apple pie? They are two sides of the same energy. You cannot have one without the other. Creating the new means destroying the old, and destruction will rebirth creation. When the cycle is interrupted, and we forget we are made in God’s image, the shadow side takes control. We destroy, while forgetting to hold the duality, forgetting that destruction and pain can be birthing pangs for new creation.

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[Creating] “opens up a space for unanticipated dreaming in which the past, present, and future are re-shaped as we reorganize and even re-create our own stories and our relationships with others, the world, and the Divine”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> William Harmless. “Mystic as Mystagogue” in *Mystics*. Oxford University Press: New York, 2008. pg. 116-117

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Bonaventure, “Retracing the Arts to Theology”, digitally accessed via <http://people.uvawise.edu/philosophy/phil205/Bonaventure.html>, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> Guynn. “Theopoetics: That the Dead May Become Gardeners Again”

9/13/18

I finished constructing the loom around Labor Day. It was a delay from when I had hoped it would be completed, but throughout the summer, things took longer. The instructions (sourced from Jim Haynie, a retired shop teacher) were comprehensive but sometimes challenging to follow. I started tying hundreds of heddles later in the process than recommended, and the final adjustments with rubber bands and tensioning were delicate processes. Today, I begin to wind the warp threads. Around a card table, 144 times. 24 so far. It is a small table, and I need to bend towards the ground to keep the correct tension of the thread. Twelve bundles of twelve, earth fiber bound by lavender yarn. I get really dizzy, so can only walk around the table 4-6 times continuously before needing to take a second to pause. I think of the Sufi mystics, dervishes, and repetitive motions. The time gap between finishing the construction/frame of the loom and doing the first sample weave is expanded through the winding of these threads. In that liminal space, the loom feels less technical than it has over the past month of building it, and closer to becoming an object that has memory embedded into the material.

9/20/18

I am nervous about rough edges and broken threads. Construction delays meant that I didn't sand down to as fine of a grit as I'd hoped to, since I just needed to get the loom functional. Deciding on a pattern was a challenge because my heddles are limited – I underestimated why they recommend so many, when there are only so many threads that span the width of the loom. There are a set number of heddles for each of the four frames, and the order that the threads are pulled through the frames impact what the pattern will be – raising different sets of frames makes patterns. I don't know if I sanded enough or have lined everything up all the way and won't know until the warp is on and tensioned. I've decided on a simple Scandinavian style for the pattern, and the pattern also allows for plain weave.

### **Functional Beauty**

What does it do to our (Christian) spirituality when we regulate worship to Sunday mornings? When we consume objects simply based on function or status? These questions feel in line with wondering why we only use the good china for special occasions, why we save decorative soaps for decades, instead of letting the everyday use of beautiful objects break through our habits and enliven our spirits with joy.

The table should always be set with care-worn vessels, beautiful in their meaning and use and harmony with the community. They may be simple, chipped, bright colors, or polished metal, set on fabric, filled with good things that nourish our body/hearts. Am I writing about the Eucharist, or breakfast, or both?

We have tried to separate beauty from function, but what is more beautiful than a well-worn basket, woven with care and alternating colors, being used to pick wheat? The synonym of

function is not boredom. If we pick up objects everyday to use them in our lives, why not choose an object that provokes singing, or reflection, or that has been passed down and reminds you of family? This care can be the foundation of how we build our lives together.

I find keeping a daily spiritual practice so, so challenging when I am pulled in one hundred different directions, with commitments and requirements and survival. Sometimes the only way I can connect to the Divine is to water a growing plant in a bright orange pot, or make tea in a mug that fits my hands perfectly, that reminds me of the potter who made it.

I strive to make objects that are functional and beautiful, because with so much pain, from structural to interpersonal, when it feels as though “the word of God is rare”<sup>9</sup>; using a worn, beautiful cloth to cover fresh bread is an action of prayer.

9/21/18

Two threads broke and I tied them back on. Midway through the piece the broken threads will reappear and create a small gap in the pattern. I’m glad it wasn’t more. I didn’t do a strength test on the warp threads, and the fibers aren’t tightly wound – the three strands making up the yarn can loosen and then break. I added clear tape to the edges of the loom where the thread winds over to help ease any snags to movement. One of the tensions in weaving is that the warp threads – the ones that are vertical, the ones that you wind onto the loom through the heddles that raise and lower – need to be structural. They are the foundation that holds the cloth together. Because of the warp strength, the weft – the horizontal fiber, wound onto a shuttle, passed back and forth – doesn’t need to be. The weft can be fiber, can be fabric scraps, can be the same as the warp but it doesn’t have to be. It can be delicate, fragile, and the warp holds the shape. Having a weaker warp means that I will need to be more mindful of the weft, choosing fibers that have some integrity to them, in order to compensate. I also wonder how the constant tensioning and re-tensioning will affect the warp.



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<sup>9</sup> 1 Samuel 3:1

9/22/18

Pat Allens's book *Art as a Spiritual Practice* introduced the idea of witness writing – that once a piece of (art)work is completed, it has something to give back to you in dialogue. The creation process is framed with an intention, eliminating terms like “want” since that implies a scarcity,<sup>10</sup> versus allowing space for our own inner teacher. The creation phase happens, and then before you emotionally exit the space, back into the day-to-day, you sit with the piece and ask it to share with you, and write from that. There is an ethic of ‘compassionate disinterest’, in that you don’t offer feedback to those who share the studio with you<sup>11</sup>. The witness is a time for deepening and celebration, and not trying to find the right answers or insert yourself into the narrative. It is a boundary practice. It pushes back against narratives of consumer art culture, since the piece is not immediately released into the world for sale, or trade, or decoration, but instead has another moment of intimacy with the creator, beyond the creative act itself, to offer a reflection of the process.

9/23/18

Today I thought a lot about the commodification of art and art practices. Similar to how I find it so, so hard to sustain a daily faith practice (and I keep circling through devotional intentions, small rituals), it’s hard to sustain an arts practice outside of academia, especially one based on gift and abundance rather than capitalism. That’s part of what draws me nearer to weaving and textile craft – once an initial setup is created (the loom is made and warped), it is a low-cost production at least on the material and space side. I’m thinking of weaving in contrast to pottery, which is another of my arts practices, but where I need to rent studio and kiln space, and so it’s almost necessary to commodify that practice in order for it to be sustainable. Not to mention the physical space surplus pottery takes up as opposed to surplus fabric. And that doesn’t necessarily feel faithful – the meditative and spiritual aspects of creation feel off-kilter when the layer of commodity vs. gift/craft is added. It is a pressure from outside of the energy of making. I’m glad to put intentional time into the loom, since I’m hoping the durational process of weaving, that can be picked up and left off whenever, will help integrate an arts practice and dialogue with the Divine. Where is the Divine speaking back to me through my work, through the build of object energy and process?

### **Making in Defiance of the Systems**

The systems we live in focus on production. Manufacturing is being streamlined, to be more efficient; farmers are pushed to produce more products than grocery stores can sell; jobs tie your worth as an employee to numbers above all else. We have created an economic system

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<sup>10</sup> Pat B Allen. *Art Is a Spiritual Path: Engaging the Sacred through the Practice of Art*. Shambhala Publishing, 2005. pg. 12-13

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, pg. 47

that is slowly killing us, through false scarcity, and competition, and financially ‘efficient’ but environmentally toxic methods.

We are in systems that seem set in concrete, political change inching along, needing infinite energy to keep up any momentum and copious strategies to avoid burnout. It often feels like we are surrounded by inevitabilities, structures that no matter how much we try to make them new will revert to oppression.

Making, in the midst of these systems, is an act of faith.

Making says that we can exist outside of those systems – that our labor isn’t inextricably tied to global economic interests, that we can create for joy, or for beauty, or for healing. We can create new things. We can imagine and make new things into being, holding history and inherited knowledge alongside new sparks.

Gifting, in the midst of our systems, is an act of faith.

I have so much tension between commodity and gift in my work. I prefer to operate off of a gift and barter system – freely sharing creative works, sometimes exchanging them, but always with a mind towards abundance. However I also live in the commoditized sphere, as do we all, and need to put prices on my creative acts in order to justify the time spent doing them, to justify the material and spatial cost.

I shouldn’t have to justify these creative acts. Making is an act of resistance, empowerment, and grace.

I am reminded of communion, a gift of bread and wine/juice from the Divine One, linking us to the cloud of witnesses, linking us to the liminal space of the crucifixion/resurrection. It is a gift freely given, and is the center of most Christian liturgical practices. This gift, this meal, brings nourishment, community, and Divine comfort. In my personal theology and practice, I strongly believe in an open communion table, since it is God’s table, not ours to set barriers around. The visceral experience of bread and wine/juice, shared between humans and each other, and humans and God, is an experience where I feel the mystic Divine embodied. Martin Luther’s writings on communion, which positioned the elements as a testament to Christ’s death and covenant with us, cracked open the liturgy to be more accessible to lay people, and shifted from communion at Easter to “when and as often as they felt the need. Communion was therefore available every Sunday for those who desired it.”<sup>12</sup>

Our creative acts, done in faith, mirrors God’s act of faith in us – we are imaginative beings, surrounded by abundance, and relationships, and community. We are given enough agency

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<sup>12</sup> Amy Nelson Burnett. "The Social History Of Communion and the Reformation of the Eucharist." *Past & Present*, no. 211 (2011): 99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23014812>.

to guide our lives, enough ritualized and gifted reminders of our tradition, and enough connection, to help us notice and embody the arc of justice moving alongside and apart from us.

9/24/18

Success! The test weave worked! And I am really happy with it. It hasn't been cut off the loom yet; instead, I added spacer yarn and then started the next piece. There is a decent amount of waste on either end of the loom, where the warp needs to wind around the tension rods, so if I am keeping the same warp, and if the pieces are relatively small and not urgent in terms of production timeline, it makes sense to keep the warp continuous, instead of cutting off and re-tensioning. One early learning – there are guide threads that run the outside edges of a woven piece of fabric that keep the edges from pulling in. This pattern didn't clearly mark the need for them, and the loom plans were a little vague in how-to/the purpose of them. So the initial piece, which is about an inch of plain weave, a patch of the pattern I warped on, and then more plain weave, has some wonky edges. I think I will be able to compensate for that in the next chunk of weave, but those two additional warp threads will be added to future projects to help make even edges. I am really happy with how the loom moves – there is no snagging or pulling that I can notice, and I already know a couple of tweaks to sanding and rubber bands and tape that I will make between warps.

What is surprising, but shouldn't necessarily be – because the initial length of threads were relatively short (once around a standard card table), when taking into account the waste thread at the beginning and end of the project, I don't think this initial warp will be the finished piece I initially envisioned. It will be a fairly quick project. I plan on weaving through the rest of the warp, experimenting with different weights of yarn and pattern combinations, and then put on a new set of strings for a more substantial piece in order to get the length on it that I want – my goal for a wall hanging is around a 2.5-3' finished length, and there isn't enough warp on the loom currently for that to happen.





## **A Practice of Firstfruits**

The communion liturgy in *This Far By Faith*, variation C, says of the elements, of bread and wine and water and juice, that: “these things were yours before they were ours”.<sup>13</sup> The abundance we receive is a gift from God, and there are many moments in the Hebrew Bible where the firstfruits are given back to God in offerings in recognition of this abundance. The first loaf of bread, the first wine, the firstfruits of the harvest.

This can be translated into arts practice. In weaving, I knew the first piece I made on my newly built loom would be a firstfruits offering, to be given to God, and arranged in a way on an altar, or on the wall, that conveyed the nature of the object.

It is an intentional practice of thanksgiving, leaning into narratives of abundance and grace, which is so counter to the scarcity and fear narratives we are surrounded by. I hope that, by practicing firstfruits offerings as part of my faith and artistic practice, I am in fact practicing a new way of being in the world, where I can freely give without fear and practice deep, abounding kindness and generosity.

**9/30/18**

I have started scrap balls of both knit-weight yarn and 3/2 weaving yarn. This is a practice that is meant to reduce waste – when there are long lengths of thread left over, from the end of a spindle, or the inevitable front and rear waste on a warp, they are tied together with an overhand knot, and used for kitchen-sink projects, usually fully utilitarian as opposed to a standard creative ethic, since there is a lack of control over what the piece looks like – the knots add texture, the color pattern varies. Making things for everyday use that have beauty feels like an honoring of those domestic, everyday spaces and interactions that are the foundation of how we build our lives together.

## **Queer Domesticity**

A thread in this project is reclamation. Reclaiming ancient combinations of prayer and weaving, reclaiming manual traditions in an age of automation, reclaiming the domestic from a place of dismissal. To queer and reclaim the domestic is to say that domestic, homemaking activities, making things beautiful, making things functional, is holy work.

A blessing for the weaver:

May your breath fall in rhythm with the shuttle and reed.  
May you imagine into being vast geographies of patterns,  
Recognizing the hope and transformation in creation,  
And in repetition, find prayer and rest.

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<sup>13</sup> *This Far By Faith: An African American Resource for Worship*. Augsburg Fortress, 1999. Communion Liturgy, Variation C.

A blessing for the homemaker:  
You who offer welcome are holy.  
You who offer flowers are holy.  
You who offer space are holy.  
You who offer open doors and abundant food are holy.  
You who offer and make community are holy.

A blessing for chosen family:  
As we are one in the body of Jesus Christ, as we are one in all of Creation, as we are one with the seedlings and the tadpoles and the redwoods, so we are one with each other.

A blessing for the healer:  
Allow the energy of the Spirit to move through you, around you, breathe with you. The communion of saints, and all of the ancestors, are with you. Their wisdom and their strength is in the soil and your bones. You are whole wherever you are, whether your bodymind is considered whole by others or not, you are made in the image of a healing, restoring, rejuvenating God.

**TO-DO:**

~~Finish building loom, tie up~~  
~~Initial warp—Scandinavian crosses~~  
~~(Guide thread weights)~~  
~~(Scrap spools)~~  
Measuring ribbons – ~~stoles~~, general  
Fine-grit and steel wool sand, ~~check packing tape~~  
~~Back warp tension—two more rubber bands?—no~~

10/27/18

In the month since I have last written, I did not weave much. I completed a few to-do's and improvements for the looms quality (adding more tape over the wood that hadn't been completely sanded), and finished the smaller wall hanging in addition to the firstfruits sample. I cut both of those projects off of the loom today, and am using the leftover warp to continue making scrap spools. I was mainly working on the academic side of this process, thinking about weavings theological implications, prayer, and about embodiment.

**Weaving as a Liminal Prayer Object**

Is prayer a vehicle to sink deeply into a story, patterning your life after what you experience? Is it a transitory action, moving towards an imageless Divine experience? The contrast of these two prayer-views can be witnessed in the difference between a church filled with icons and the Rothko chapel. In the difference between the Jesus prayer and wordless prayer. Two mystics in these traditions are Bonaventure for image-based practices, and

Evagrius for contemplative practices. I am not positioning either kind of prayer practice as superior, for they influence each other, and resonate with different souls in different ways.

One of Bonaventure's well-known writings is the retelling of St. Francis' stigmata. This was an experience where St. Francis of Assisi, in prayer, had a vision of a six-winged seraph, and a man crucified. He received the stigmata (the wounds of Christ), and, in Bonaventure's account:

“[Francis] understood by a revelation from the Lord that divine providence had shown him this vision so that, as Christ's lover, he might learn in advance that he was to be totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified... by the fire of love consuming his soul. As the vision disappeared, it left in his heart a marvelous ardor and imprinted on his body markings that were no less marvelous.”<sup>14</sup>

Bonaventure did not consider this image, this experience, the journey it maps (as Christ's lover) to be for Francis alone, instead, that it mapped a pathway towards unity with God in “heaven's ecstatic peace”.<sup>15</sup> The core of this journey is an image, that we can pattern our lives and prayers on, turning to a figure and event that can be experienced and reproduced in artwork and minds-eye.

Evagrius positioned that “pure prayer” was imageless and unceasing. He was a fourth century desert mystic who engaged with eight “thoughts” that kept us separated from God, focusing on prayer practice as antidote. For Evagrius, God was beyond and within and too expansive to try to nail down with a specific imaging. “Prayer in its higher forms meant not simply moving beyond words; it meant “laying aside mental representations””.<sup>16</sup> The goal of prayer for Evagrius was to move beyond the way humans encounter the world, into a timeless space with God. Even in this discussion, though, Evagrius describes this state with an image, an image of divine light – “Prayer is the state of the mind that comes to be from the Holy Trinity's singular light”.<sup>17</sup> In this transformative state, humans are both deeply embodied in the experience and also transcending beyond the just-physical state, luminous, not tied to any one image or idea of the Divine. He positioned this as a rigorous spiritual practice, one similar to the undertakings of athletes,<sup>18</sup> with a core of the practice being unceasing prayer.

Both connect us to God, and both are helpful at different points in faith, one can lead to the other, but how does arts practice fit in? How does weaving fit in?

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<sup>14</sup> Bonaventure in Harmless. “Mystic as Cartographer”. pg. 86

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, pg. 87

<sup>16</sup> Evagrius in Harmless. “Mystic as Desert Calligrapher” in *Mystics*. pg. 151

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, pg. 153

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, pg. 145

Hildegard of Bingen was a 12<sup>th</sup> century mystic who bridged the two prayer practices in her spiritual life. She was an artist, and so made physical, concrete objects that interpreted prayer and life. She also had “visionary experiences” of a sapphire light, which was an experience that she processed both through contemplative prayer and creative practices.<sup>19</sup> Her faith deeply engaged with diverse prayer traditions, as well as diverse artistic traditions, and can act as an early model for the weaving together of those practices. I propose that weaving acts as a transitional, liminal object, allowing people to engage in a middle form of prayer, in the same tradition as Hildegard.

Weaving is aligned with image-based prayer because there is a physical object you are witnessing. This is rooted in the flesh – you can experience the object with different senses, and participate in different levels of the creation. It can be an object of prayer, an object of decoration. There is a concrete image that you are focusing on in prayer, which can remind you of other objects/images, stories of creation, the color pattern evoking feelings and memories. Some weavings have explicit descriptive images, many more have abstract, repetitive patterns.

Weaving is aligned with contemplative prayer because abstract patterns don’t dictate how you view them – there is no implicit bias in the image. Many of the repeating patterns are geometric, closely aligned with the Islamic art tradition, where most public, religious artwork is non-representational. This is in order to facilitate prayer towards the Divine, with all attention going to God, and not getting caught up in the story or the visual image, towards contemplation. Additionally, there is a fear of idolatry, where representational art is viewed as imperfect renderings of Divine creation.<sup>20</sup>

And it’s true that having an object at all can risk idolatry. In the Lutheran tradition, there has been a separation from saints and idols, due to the risk of elevating those objects and people to Christ-like status. However, what have we lost in mitigating that risk? In “Risking Idolatry”, by Jeffrey Hocking, engages with the tension inherent in the fear of idolatry and arts practice. His conclusion is that art and physical representations can be an “embodiment of God’s desires for the future of the world.”<sup>21</sup> Calling back to earlier in this document, creation viscerally proves that things can still be created, and that our existence is one of creative possibility.

I personally have a strong affinity for religious artwork and objects as tools to focus prayer. The reality is, we live in a world saturated with images and words and distractions, which

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<sup>19</sup> Harmless. “Mystic as Multimedia Artist” in *Mystics*. pg. 62-3

<sup>20</sup> Department of Islamic Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Figural Representation in Islamic Art”, digitally accessed [https://www.metmuseum.org/TOAH/hd/figs/hd\\_figs.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/TOAH/hd/figs/hd_figs.htm), 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey S. Hocking. “Risking Idolatry: Theopoetics and the Promise of Embodiment”, in *Theopoetics*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015.

makes it that much harder to practice contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer is already a challenge, because we are embodied creatures, who move and breathe and itch.

By making, by weaving, we pay honor to both the image-based and contemplative traditions, and the form of weaving points towards “unceasing prayer”<sup>22</sup> in the creation, towards God in our practice, and towards our role as creative earth-creatures. It is a beautiful, practical, liminal space.

10/28/18

Today I went back to the loom and weaving in lament. This week has been extremely hard. The federal government has introduced a memo to erase transgender people from legal existence, bombs were sent to left-leaning politicians, a white supremacist murdered two people in a Kroger, and a mass shooting happened at a Jewish Temple during a bris. Everything is heavy, and too much, and so I am creating, because it feels like the only thing I can do.

I started on two stoles for dear friends and colleagues, and will be working through those. The first steps were to measure the length of the pieces, to set up the warping board, calculating the pattern of threads to create both horizontal and vertical variation, and start wrapping 52 threads, twice, to form the warp.

### **Things Can Be Made, Even Now.**

Objects affirm the maker’s existence. The paper or screen you are reading this on passed through many hands to get to yours. Those makers exist. When you cook dinner, you affirm your existence through an act of creation. Your creation exists because you exist. The meal is a reflection of your presence, as nature and relationship are reflections of God’s presence.

Can things still be made new in the face of structural sin? Can Western (White) Christianity be wrenched and reclaimed from violent colonial roots? Can we collectively decide that people and the planet matter more than profit?

I don’t know.

But I know that I can take thread, pass it through my hands, weave it together, to make something new. And some days, that’s all I can do. And hope that I am co-creating alongside God.

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<sup>22</sup> Harmless. “Mystic as Desert Calligrapher” in *Mystics*. pg. 136

11/1/18

Using the warping board and the weaver's cross made the warping on-process so much better. This system keeps the threads aligned, so there is less tangling. When threads get tangled as they are being wound onto the loom, you don't comb through them, but instead ask the second person (because warping a loom is a two-person job) to pull and give tension, allowing the threads to re-align themselves.

The weaver's cross forms on the warping board – a full loop from beginning to central to end is actually twice the ultimate length of the warp. It crosses over, and allows you to grasp all of the threads when you slide the warp off. When you grasp the cross, the threads remain in order – again minimizing tangles.

You need a second person in order to keep the tension during the process. If the thread is wound on loosely, or unevenly, then the cloth will be uneven, and won't set the pattern correctly. To keep the threads from falling in-between each other, you wind paper or sticks in-between the layers of threads.

11/5/18

The tension on the stoles is off. When I did the initial short length of warp, a few cardboard inserts were enough to keep the threads from falling in-between each other. With the longer stole warp, the few cardboard inserts still caused the threads to intertwine, and the tension is uneven. The threads fell between each other, creating a mound instead of an even surface. This means that every horizontal thread needs adjustment for the weave to be even, which is not sustainable over a long project. I will have to undo the length of the warp (which is fairly easy), and re-do it with paper to keep the layers of threads separate. I watched some videos about this process, and noticed an interesting design for the reed pivot point, that might make sense to do as a long-term adjustment – instead of having a nail in a larger hole go all the way through the design, it rests with a U-shape, allowing for different heights of reeds, and different depths in the loom.

## **Warp and Weft**

The very structure of weaving speaks to community.

The vertical threads, the warp, has to be structural. The vertical threads need to have enough tensile strength to support being tensioned and re-tensioned, to support the horizontal threads, to support distortion as the pattern is created.

The horizontal threads, the weft, can be more vulnerable, more fragile. They are supported by the warp threads, so they can be fiber, or fabric, or delicate, or the same as the warp. They only need a small amount of tensile strength, and the fabric will still hold together. You can play here, with texture and image and colors.

I think about community in that sense, and how we each shift from warp to weft and back and forth – providing support, guidance, receiving the same. We don't need to be strong all the time because we can be interdependent on each other. God, too, is like the warp – a supporting foundation that allows us to be tender.

Tension in weaving is critical – there needs to be enough tension to hold the threads together, to create the weave. Not enough, and the fabric is uneven. Too much, and threads snap. It needs to stay consistent over the course of the weave. Productive tension is necessary for creation.

This structural reflection of community is why I feel weaving is such a common metaphor in theological and church circles. It demonstrates a necessary tension of interdependence, holding disparate elements together into a cohesive weave. There is consistency and also natural variation, when human hands create. The warp and weft can be very different, vulnerable on their own, coming together at the intersections to form crosses, and to support each other.

**11/6/18**

There is such a learning curve, a getting-to-know-you process, with the loom. The loom doesn't have a name yet, and I can't tell if using a feminine name is playing into the idea that objects that we possess are feminine (boats, for example), or honoring the Divine Spirit as she breathes through the space. A name hasn't come forth yet.

Undoing the length of the warp and re-doing it with paper was a much harder than I anticipated, and I lost the 5" of fabric that I had already woven. There's an unfortunate guessing-game going on, because I think the warp is still long enough, but I won't know until I get to the end of the project, where it will either be able to be completed, or it will be shorter and asymmetric in a way that I'm not sure how I would work around (though I would need to). There are so many delicate balances to keep in the body of the loom, from heddle frames to tension rods to the threads themselves. And I am feeling unbalanced lately, which is energy that is absorbed by the loom.

### **Holden Village: Craft Cave**

I learned to weave at Holden Village, a religious retreat center in the Cascades. It was during the class "Liturgy and the Cycles of Creation", taught by Dr. Ben Stewart, structured in a way that gave equal time to academic work and immersive practice. As we went through the pattern of daily prayer, thought through the liturgical cycle, we also were in the rhythm of Holden, and I spent much of my free time in the rhythm of the craft cave. Fiber, and named looms, and patient weavers showing us the craft surrounded us. There's a heartbeat to the space, reeds beating weft thread, war[s] being cooperatively wound on, people tying scrap balls if they want to be in the space but not weave.

In the middle of an extremely overwhelming first year of seminary, the repetitive pattern of weaving calmed my brain, re-centered me, and awakened a deep mourning/yearning in my soul for cultivating an arts practice again, which I had allowed to fall off because of work and then grad school.

Here is a reproduced summary of my final essay, which sparked the idea for this independent study, to explore weaving and theopoetics (though I didn't know the term at the time!) more in depth. The original was handwritten.

I engaged with the relationship between arts practice and the ritual of confession and forgiveness. The practice of confession speaks to the truth that we are imperfect, flawed beings. We are not God, but God-images. In arts practice, too, there needs to be some level of acceptance that the finished product will never be perfect. We are not machines. There will be snags and divots and discoloration, and that is all part of the beauty. God forgives us our imperfections, for we were made to care and be cared for, to continue becoming.

Deeply engaging with an arts practice is an embodiment of confession and forgiveness. It is impossible to create and not have failures. And that doesn't mean that you are a bad person, or a bad artist, simply, that you exist in your bodymind on this earth.

**11/16/18**

I am past the halfway point in the stoles. The patterned ombré wove beautifully, and I am close to starting the second panel in the design. Adjusting the tension helped a lot, and they are weaving through well. I am trying to be gentle with myself in the speed that I'm going, since I was extremely enthusiastic about how many projects I would be able to complete in a semester. I don't think I will warp on a third project – the sample, the initial wall hanging, and the two stoles seem to be a reasonable amount to complete in a semester, and there have been a variety of styles and textures as I got to know the energy and functionality of the loom. Looking forward, I am excited to re-sand the loom and replace the taped areas with finer grit sanding, which will limit plastic that has a higher chance of deteriorating and needing to be replaced. My loom and I, we are still in the getting-to-know-you-phase, filled with curiosity and openness to the learning. I am hoping that I will be able to do enough tweaks and upgrades (to tension system) for this to be a permanent object, and not a stepping stone.

**11/24/18**

One of the challenging aspects for me in vocational ministry is the distancing from full arts integration. I need to carve out specific time, balance functionality and whimsy, wrestle with the way capitalism and survival impacts creation, and often the external structures and requirements of my vocational path impact what type of arts I can do. I've lately been missing theater, and have wanted to be weaving more, but often need to set it aside to complete other homework. Honestly, my personal arts practice feels in line with my



personal faith practice – I have had to fight to make time for it, even though it is life-giving and in line with my long-term dreams, and even then there is usually stress attached because it means I am not doing something else that is also a priority.

**11/26/18**

The rhythm of the loom is soothing. I am starting to feel in my body the patterns of tension and design, which allows my mind to be both focused on the task and also expansive.

**11/30/18**

Weaving, and creative practice in general, force me to come to terms with boundaries and limitations. The stoles are not going to be done by this weekend, which is originally when I had hoped to have them. But they will be done in time, before Advent ends. I cannot force my body to work beyond its capacity. Doing so would be unfaithful to engaging with weaving as a spiritual practice, but would instead be engaging with weaving as only productive labor. It is a practice of being gentle with myself. Deepening my weaving and pottery practices with more active awareness of my bodymind, more active awareness of Divine energy, has also enabled me to sustain more of a daily practice – before bed, reading a confession and forgiveness litany, the next psalm, and a closing prayer from the compline liturgy. I often do this fairly soon after completing a section of weaving. The creative practice allows me to distance myself from the (often hectic and overwhelming) events of the day, putting my body into a different state of being, one that is more aligned physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

**12/7/18**

It feels fitting and okay to end this archive document with an unfinished project on the loom. Creation is ever-flowing forth and is a force that moves outside of our constructed notions of time. In one way, finishing a project is an end point – cutting a project off of the loom, tying up the ends, removing the extra warp, tying that into scrap balls, gifting or using the fabric made. In another way, finishing a project simply means there is space for a new project, carrying forth learning's from previous projects. I have given myself a lot of grace in this process, more than I sometimes do. There were times that I had to go back and fix things, to adjust, to start over, to make choices. I allowed space for the work to take the time it took, without pressuring it. The loom has an energy now – it is no longer new wood, smelling of sawdust. Creation has happened, and snags, and mistakes. It moves more instinctively, I have to think less when weaving even the pattern, allowing my brain and focus to expand into the Divine presence that is always moving with, in, and around us. Time is a funny thing while weaving – it feels like I am in a different space, and I can't judge how much time has passed by how much fabric was made.

**TO-DO:**

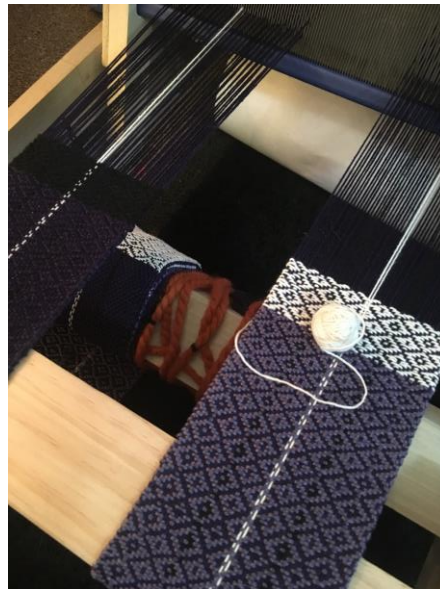
Add tension wheels  
New heddle rods? / reinforce  
Tie more heddles  
Sand through to steel wool

**Weaving as Care**

In “Weaving the World” by Marjorie Suchocki, the question that stuck with me is: is your theology like a crystal or a garment? Is it full of sharp edges, reflective, mysterious, rigid? Is it something you can “wear and test and wash and mend”,<sup>23</sup> that forms to your body, like a second skin, rough fibers softened with use and love? Is your theology something that allows you to stay tender and vulnerable, even when it hurts?

Weaving embodies disparate things coming together. Stray threads being brought back in. Creating something new, healing, healing with a physical remnant of the memory. Practicing care for self, our energetic souls, and community. By creating we are mending the divide between word and flesh.<sup>24</sup> By reclaiming these practices we are acknowledging that we are in a fallen order, moving towards God, always becoming.

And that is holy, care-filled work.



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<sup>23</sup> Marjorie Suchocki. “Weaving the World”, in *Process Studies*, vol. 14, is. 2, 1985.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Tripp. “Scripted Bodies and the Poet’s Word: Theopoetics and Pastoral Care”, in *Theopoetics*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015.

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