

# CONVERSATIONS

## A Newsletter of the Sophia Center

No. 5 September 2001

### From the Director

In order to develop ongoing programs, the Sophia Center has named *Fellows* who will have planning responsibilities in each of the areas of interest in which projects are organized.

We introduce three of the *Fellows* in this issue of CONVERSATIONS and a fourth will be named later in the Fall. If you wish to contact one of the *Fellows*, you can do so through the Center website: [www.sophiacenter.net](http://www.sophiacenter.net).

#### Fellow for Projects in Creative Writing, Visual Arts and Film:

Ralph Nazareth, Ph.D.  
Nassau Community College

#### Fellow for Projects in Science and Religion:

Eric Drier, Ph.D.  
Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory

#### Fellow for Projects in Spiritual Traditions:

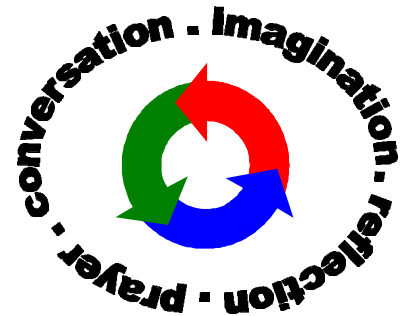
Mary Fritz, C.S.J.  
Bethany House of Prayer  
Bay Shore, New York

(continued on p. 2)

THE SOPHIA CENTER INVITES YOU TO A READING BY ALICIA SUSKIN OSTRIKER ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 21, 1 PM AT THE HUNTINGTON JEWISH CENTER, 510 PARK AVENUE, HUNTINGTON, NEW YORK

Alicia Suskin Ostriker, a major American poet and critic, is the author of nine volumes of poetry, including *The Imagery Lover*, which won the 1986 William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America, and *The Crack in Everything* (1996), which was a National Book Award finalist and won both the Paterson Poetry Prize and the San Francisco State Poetry Center Award. Her most recent book, *The Little Space: Poems Selected and New, 1968-1998*, was also a National Book Award finalist and a finalist for the Lenore Marshall Award of the Academy of American Poets.

Ostriker's critical works include *Stealing the Language: the Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986), *Feminist Revision and the Bible* (1992), and *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (1994). Ostriker has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New Jersey Arts Council, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation; and has performed her poetry at many universities and festivals in this country and abroad – in England, Italy, Japan and Israel. She lives in Princeton, NJ and teaches English and Creative Writing at Rutgers University.



## Mary Fritz, C.S.J.

"I have been asked to be a Fellow of the Sophia Center for Projects exploring Contemplation and the Search for Justice. I began my ministry of spiritual direction and teaching various forms of spirituality in St. Patrick's parish, Bay Shore, when Msgr. James F. Coffey became pastor. I found people hungry to learn and to be listened to. At that time I gave courses and lectures on various aspects of the spiritual journey as well as retreats, both directed and using other resources and speakers. After ten years I took a sabbatical for spiritual renewal. I returned to the Parish and began Bethany House of Prayer with the encouragement of Msgr. Emmet Fagan, our new pastor.

The backbone of the house is the regular prayer schedule, which we established, including morning and evening prayer and an hour of meditation before the Blessed Sacrament. The prayer was open to anyone who wished to participate. We continued spiritual direction and occasional retreat days and other special events. Gradually, we began to develop the dimension of justice and peace-making as a natural development of a contemplative stance. The Persian Gulf War was a time of intense prayer and activity for peace, and it was during this painful time that I met Pax Christi Long Island. Here my feelings of horror and sadness over the war were understood, and I welcomed the support of like-minded people.

Sometime later I was approached by members of Pax Christi Long Island and asked to be their new coordinator. I spent some retreat time discerning this decision and accepted. It was a wonderful experience to pray and work with a group of committed peacemakers for a period of eight years. The work seemed to complement and enhance the prayer, while the prayer gave perspective and direction to the peace work. Several years ago I relinquished my position as Coordinator of Pax Christi Long Island although I am still an active member.

As life in Bethany continues to support and nourish me and others, the needs of the poor in the community call out to us. And so, a small group of "regulars" at Bethany are working on a project to help the homeless in the area, especially during the winter months. So we continue to seek God in prayer and to be impelled to reach out to our vulnerable and abandoned sisters and brothers.

During the coming years, I will work with members of the Sophia Center to develop interfaith projects that will allow people to experience in their own religious tradition the life-giving connection of contemplation and the struggle for justice.

---

---

## Ralph Nazareth

I was born and raised as a Catholic in predominantly Hindu India. The intermingling of worlds and sensibilities marked my life from the start. This process has continued for the last three decades as I have lived and worked in this country. After I finished my graduate work in English at Stony Brook in the early 70s, I taught at UT Austin in Texas as well as SUNY Purchase and other colleges in the tri-state area. I am at present an Associate Professor of English at Nassau Community College. As a teacher, one of the projects close to my heart is to find ways of unveiling the contemplative dimension of life with the hope of inviting our students to consider the learning process as something more than the pursuit of an academic degree.

I am also the Managing Editor of Yuganta Press in Stamford, a small enterprise whose avowed goal is to publish books that make a "movement between worlds." Among the writers we've published are Croatian poet Mario Susko, displaced by the war in Bosnia, whose poetry explores language as his last refuge in exile, and Suzanne Ironbiter, who in her long poem, *Devi*, searches in the midst of personal confusion and pain for a symbol of wholeness and finds it in the Indian Goddess.

My association with Fr. Smith has been continuous since my days in Stony Brook when I heard him almost every week developing his insights into the religious life and imagination. I had the honor eventually of publishing his reflections, *In the Image of God*. More recently, I have participated in his wide array of offerings at the Sophia Center on various aspects of contemporary religious consciousness. I am most pleased now to accept his invitation to serve as a fellow of the Sophia Center and help explore the uses of imagination and the creative arts in expressing the deeper dimensions of our lives. I, in turn, would appreciate your ideas for extending and enriching the imaginative "conversation" that is heart of the Sophia project.

I am excited that Father Smith has asked me to become a Fellow of the Sophia Center. I have enjoyed the group discussions I have attended so far, and am looking forward to continuing the various themes that have begun to develop in them. I have been interested in the relationship between science and religion for quite a while now. My father is a Lutheran Pastor, and I thus grew up with Christianity. I am now a scientist at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, and although I often hate the endless subdivisions of science, I guess I'm a neurobiologist.

I grew up in Minnesota, and attended the University of Minnesota, from which I earned my B.S. in Biochemistry. After teaching for a bit and working at a biotech company outside of Boston, I decided to go to graduate school. I attended Princeton University, where I studied developmental biology, and received my Ph.D. in 1997. I have been here at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory since. My interests and research efforts now focus on fundamental mechanisms of learning and memory.

I have always been interested in thinking. I often say that I spend a good deal of time thinking about Thinking. What is thinking? What is learning? What is memory? And perhaps my favorite, what is guessing? I hope that some or all of these subjects will be woven into our future group conversations.

Although we can certainly discuss any topic the group considers valuable and interesting (please feel free to e-mail me suggestions!), I would like to develop two themes, which I see as fundamentally linked: Evolution and Consciousness. These topics provide ideal starting points for discussions concerning both religion and science, since they cut to the central issues of Creation and the Soul, respectively.

I will focus on the scientific angle of these topics, as I see my role in this group to provide some idea of how scientists approach these questions, and indeed, what science is. Jaques Monod (who won the Nobel Prize for his contributions toward understanding how genes are regulated) sums up some of my thoughts.

“Biology occupies a position among the sciences at once marginal and central. Marginal because – the living world constituting but a thin and very ‘special’ part of the universe – it does not seem likely that the study of living beings will ever uncover general laws applicable outside the biosphere. But if the ultimate aim of the whole of science is indeed, as I believe, to clarify man’s relationship to the universe, then biology must be accorded a central position, since of all the disciplines it is the one that endeavors to go most directly to the heart of the problems that must be resolved before that of ‘human nature’ can even be framed in other than metaphysical terms.” (Chance and Necessity)

Finally, I want to stress that I do *not* see our discussions as debates. The goal will *not* be for a “side” to “win” but for all to gain an increased understanding of both the questions and their potential answers. Towards that end, I am very excited about taking up Father Smith’s offer and look forward to continuing (as he says) to “talk as friends talk with friends.”

## FALL PROGRAMS

### ALICIA SUSKIN OSTRIKER

*Sunday, Oct. 21, 1 p.m.  
Huntington Jewish Center*

*“Ostriker writes poems born of tragedy and illness...poems of sheer joy...fresh, brave, unself-pitying...one of our finest poets.”*

—Hudson Review

*“Stunning, unforgettable poems.”*

—San Francisco Chronicle

*“Alicia Ostriker has become one of those brilliantly provocative and imaginatively gifted contemporaries whose iconoclastic expression, whether in prose or poetry, is essential to our understanding of American selves.”*

—Joyce Carol Oates

### WEDNESDAY EVENING FILM DISCUSSIONS

*October 3<sup>rd</sup>, November 7<sup>th</sup>, December 5<sup>th</sup>*

*7 PM to 9:30 PM*

*Auditorium*

*The Seminary of the Immaculate Conception*

*440 West Neck Road*

*Huntington, New York*

*(631)423-0483, Ext. 100/136*

The Fall series, “As We See Ourselves: American Directors on America”, will present visions of American life through the work of major American directors. Following the viewing of the film, we will continue the conversation about American life which is begun in the work of each director. Among the directors who will “begin” our conversations, we will see works of Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen.

## INVITED ESSAY

When Fr. Smith asked me to reflect on imagination, I was surprised to note the number and variety of fields of human experience to which the term imagination is routinely applied or tacked on. I shouldn't have been. My surprise may have partly stemmed from my literary background and my assumption (desperate, I suspect,) that the literary imagination is the only kind there is, and that we and our world are nothing but the stuff of words. Crazy as this assumption surely is, it underlies some of the most influential intellectual trends of our times, which might say something deep, as well as something deeply troubling, about our culture.

This point is worth pondering. But even as we make note of it as an idea that cannot be just wished away, all these other brands of imagination—the religious, sociological, cultural, and political imagination, the univocal and equivocal, the analogical and dialectical, the liberal and conservative imagination, the apocalyptic and ecological, the sacred and secular imagination—demand attention, each in its own often deluded and sometimes harmful way claiming to possess the absolute truth about what it means to be human.

As for my scientist friends, always careful to state clearly what it is they do, (I can't ask them who or what they are!) I have noticed that they are more comfortable talking about the "scientific mind" rather than the "scientific imagination." They are trained to stay within the boundaries of their area of interest, expertise and method. Catch them off guard, or at a rare expansive moment, and they might let down their hair and expound on the metaphysics of physics. And we know that the best among them even venture privately to invoke "faith" and "mystery"!

The scientists, on whose Promethean shoulders we ride into the future, might present us with one of the best kept secrets of our time. Through an incredible alchemical move, they've been able to separate what they do from what they are—except when they teeter on the edge of cosmic, cellular, or subatomic space, or discover in the foundations of their theoretical universe traces of what ordinary folk have always known as faith. This is a moment when the sci-

entific mind may be said to enter the realm of imagination. It is a moment marked by a vulnerability, an openness, a letting go of long-held disciplinary commitments in the service of understanding human reality in its widest sense. It involves entering a space one does not control. It suggests a way of being that has as much to do with not knowing as knowing. Uncertainty rises within it—beyond a quizzical principle to a profoundly creative force.

I speak at length of my scientist friends because they form the cutting edge of our lives and consciousness. Their carefulness in outlining their project is instructive: the scientific method and mindset, as well as the other brands of imagination I mentioned above, are, by and large, not the same as imagination which cannot be

**Imagination cannot be "used" ... It is the element within which we know and thrive, a medium in which we breathe and live**

"used"—not in any utilitarian sense. Imagination is, if not larger, something other than these diverse uses of it as well as our objective lives. It is the element within which we know and thrive, a medium in which we breathe and live and have our being.

Imagination is a mystery of sorts and, as such, it is open to mystification. While we resist the temptation to mystify it, we must also try not to confuse it with the merely imaginary. It's not only the scientist who is wary of this danger. Plato was deeply suspicious of the poet, the artificer, the one who, as he alleged, retailed imaginary distortions or mere copies of the real thing. Even Shakespeare had one of his characters refer to imagination as issuing from "seething brains." Pascal, ascribing duplicity to imagination, called it the "mistress of the world," and his equally brilliant 20<sup>th</sup> century compatriot visionary, Simone Weil, declared that the imagination was "essentially a liar."

There is delicious irony in the most poetic of our philosophers warning us against the poets, the users of imagination. However, perhaps there is more here than just a warning against falsehood. Their trenchant critique hints at their deep sense of the real power of imagination, its ability to transform reality. The "magician" slouches at its very core, as it were, threatening to displace the enshrined God. The imagination is tied to the power of the image, the power to make idols in one's own image. How else explain T.E. Hulme's furious attack on the Romantics who in seemingly apotheosizing imagination had signaled the disappearance of God? They fly, he said, "higher and higher into circumambient gas." And Eavan Boland, the great Irish poet and our last poet-guest at the Sophia Center, carried on a relentless polemic against the Romantic glorification of imagination ("...the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" Coleridge.) She was too gracious to say openly

that it was a bunch of English poppycock, (perhaps because she knows that Coleridge and the English Romantics were trailing stalwart continental shadows,) but her drift was unambiguous. We need protection from the pretensions of imagination, its putative power

to transform, to re-create, and more seriously, to create out of nothing.

So far my reflection on imagination has had the shape of a cautionary tale—against megalomania, Faustian ambition, sorcery. How then do we approach imagination? Perhaps as a portal through which we pass to discover a valley full of surprises and revelations. In the least, we approach it as not something that we use and manipulate to enhance our own image but as a current that drifts around us invisibly, one that is as capable of nurturing us with the rhythm of its movement as overwhelming us with its powerful undertow.

Recently, poet Jimmy Santiago Baca, out after serving a prison term, was asked about what writing meant to him. He said, "Ah, it's what the dawn is to the bird." He could easily have been describing my sense of imagination, that intimate world within which there is an awakening, a soaring, a singing. One steps out of prison,

out of darkness into its enabling freedom.

What I believe imagination to be is summed up best by the experience of a close friend of mine. His newly acquired puppy, a Yellow Labrador, saw the water for the first time in his young life on an early morning walk by the Sound in Stony Brook. It approached the water as one approaches something one is made for, something deeply familiar. And, naturally, took to it. I said to my friend that it must have been a beautiful sight. He agreed. "It was," he said, "a blossoming of instinct."

What even non-religious people would simply understand as faith and grace are illustrated in the entrancing image of a dog easing into water and being upheld by it. A little fragment of sentient life floats within a larger, embracing, vivifying body. This is how we enter the life of imagination. And with it the life of incredible and infinite possibilities.

Let me not get carried away with this ecstatic language. I don't mean that imagination makes anything and everything possible. That would be misleading and dangerous because it doesn't. I mean that it reveals the infinity that resides and moves in time, in our time. It opens up my time to designs not fully apprehended by me, to directions I could not easily or fully anticipate or chart.

What is crucial here, I believe, is the relationship, the sense of deep connection between myself and imagination. I move within my imagination as a child would in the ambit of his mother. I am not constrained by this relationship, rather I am rendered whole and given the possibility for growth and far-seeing. I see, as it were, through her eyes. This is why I am able to see beyond my difference, my discrete and potentially alienated self, and come to know myself as part of a community open to the future. The implications of this for me are serious and wide-ranging. We will fail morally and, ultimately, practically if we are cut off from an imagination that helps us see that we are joint stewards of precious gifts, that only in sharing these gifts in love will we be assured of a future worth working and waiting for.

A scientist friend from MIT told me that the prime use of the imagination for him is the ability to see similarities in disparate things. Of course, he had in mind the surprise and thrill of a sudden perception of commonality in seemingly different physical entities. The way he described it made it clear to me that what he had in mind was quite different from the violent yoking together of heterogeneous elements that Samuel Johnson asserted was the driving force behind wit. My friend's intuition has to do with the unveiling of hidden patterns—of connections, of inter-relationships—underlying our reality, while the old doctor's idea derives from the language of rape.

Imagination, as I see it, goes way beyond witty, shocking, attention-grabbing juxtapositions. This is why buck-toothed, darling Sister Wendy, somberly dismissed Serrano's "Piss Christ" as a work that revolves around a merely ephemeral idea. It could not induce her to revisit it because,

**Here is a species of thinking/being which sees the world as a community of shared interests and commitments.**

although planting Jesus, the friend of the downtrodden, in human waste held for her the right socio-political reading of an aspect of Jesus' mission and meaning, she felt there were no depths there to be plumbed. It was a fanciful work, but lacking in imagination. It riveted you with a puzzle, and once you figured it out, there was little there for ongoing wonderment.

Perhaps symbol and metaphor, with their movement between qualitatively different worlds and their tendency toward embodiment, come closer to grasping the inner reality of imagination. They move beyond the superficial aspect of the artful simile to a place of radical inter-relatedness—Thich Nat Hanh's "interbeing"—in which we share with our brothers and sisters our darkness as well as our light. Compassion, reconciliation, charity and mercy become the leading threads in the tapestry of our imagination. McVeigh's execution, in all its complexity, as well as the state-sanctioned murder of a disproportionate number of our minority brothers points to a grievous failure of the imagination in our

public policy. And, as is the case with any such corporate failure, it stains our very soul. Retributive justice does not go far enough in understanding the meaning of our shared lives. It is essentially violent and leads to the death of imagination.

In her poem titled "Rant," Diane di Prima writes:

The only war that matters is the war against the imagination.

And this war results, I believe, from our inability to give up our entrenched positions and enter the communal freedom of imagination. The Pope's recent journeys of reconciliation—to the Wailing Wall, to a mosque in Syria, to the heart of Russian Orthodoxy are ultimately imaginative journeys, not unlike those of Sadat and Rabin at crucial moments in the past. He seems to point the way out of our desperate and destructive clinging to our root metaphors—of home, ownership, supremacy—in his reaching out across "enemy lines." Imagination is the ground of our root metaphors but for it to serve as a germinal and luminous space, we will

have to untangle these root metaphors, perhaps uproot them and even become, in a sense, rootless. In light of this, the Pope's travels create for me the image of exilic movement—out of one's home-bound, even hidebound, positions. His work has just begun—there are other hands to reach out to—women and gays, for instance—but he has taken the first difficult steps towards reconciliation and a returning to health of the life of imagination.

I was just reading Michael Lerner's interview with the Israeli novelist David Grossman in a recent issue of *Tikkun*. They both know the Palestinian problem deeply and the vicious circularity of the violence there. And therefore they also realize the urgent need to re-examine the metaphors of home and exile that lie at the root of the agony of those people.

However, this sort of re-appraisal cannot be carried out in a climate of violence and mutual recrimination. The imagination requires a lasting cease fire and an acknowledgment of our

(Invited Essay, continued from p. 5)

tenuous claims on the earth. Only then can we dare to give up our root metaphors and extend a hand to our brothers on the other side of the trench. The Pope, I believe, has moved, however falteringly, in this direction. I see the imagination at work in his journeying. And with it the possibility of hope.

The univocal and the ecological imaginations, two of the many types I listed at the beginning, will help me, I believe, to clarify the core of what I've been trying to get at in this reflection. The contrast between the two is instructive and illuminating.

The univocal imagination is essentially an oxymoron, internally contradictory. That is, in light of my idea of imagination as a capacious, embracing, mothering element, it makes no sense to ascribe to it a narrow perspective. William Lynch SJ says that it tends "to reduce everything, every difference and particularity in images, to the unity of a sameness which destroys or eliminates the variety and detail of existence." Or, in the disturb-

ing words of Richard Wilbur in his poem "On the Eyes of the SSOfficer," it devises "foul purities." That way lies control, absolutism, racism, genocide, madness.

Contrast this with the ecological imagination, a benign redundancy. Here is a species of thinking/being which sees the world as a community of shared interests and commitments. I've been suggesting throughout that the imagination is by nature ecological. It pulses with connections, large and small. To be imaginative, in this sense, is to be attentive to Hopkins' "pied beauty," a sense of ourselves as part of a vibrant and diverse global household.

The struggle between the univocal and ecological marks our daily lives. In what new guise will Sophia show up to mediate? Or, as an Indian, shall I invite you, dear reader, at least momentarily to look to the East, the place of perpetual dawning?!

**Ralph Nazareth**

Nassau Community College

*Fellow for Projects in Creative Writing, Visual Arts and Film:*

email: [SophiaRVC@aol.com](mailto:SophiaRVC@aol.com)

mailing: PO Box 525, Huntington, NY 11743

website: [www.sophiacenter.net](http://www.sophiacenter.net)

Sophia Center  
PO Box 525  
Huntington, NY 11743

