I work and rework my sculpture and poetry in a manner which is almost agrarian, like seed planted for a later harvest. It is a journey by stages even as Abraham moved across the Negeb. Every work, every poem is a prayer of thanks, an assertion of the present, a shortwave means for speaking with both the past and the future, and a hope to be relevant in one's own age.

Every work too is a first edition informed by ancestral stories, meta-narratives that still resonate with comedy and tragedy, romance and loss, tears and humor. I’m aiming for an honesty in the manner which Simon Shava speaks of Rembrandt: “the greatest [artist] about telling you what it’s like to be a human being.”

I am not trying to be a contemporary priest of the culture; simply trying to make the work speak. And speak to what, or to whom? To speak through materials—words, stones—that reflect ourselves: the stuff of the earth, straining to reach upward while simultaneously accepting our own mass and weight. Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote, “If you and I carve wood, apply paint to canvas, pile stone on stone or inscribe marks on paper, we are dealing with things which bear to us the most intimate of relations.”

In this is the conscious nodding toward the lengthy tradition one is working in, not a denial of it. It is a recognition, a humble admission that hands like these have preceded our own, and it is for us to take up the task with our own unique authentic marks. To be truly human is to assent to a dynamic which one does not force onto the paper, stone, or canvas, but must cooperate with and step back from.

My House

My clothes are a white splatter from the roller’s backwash and my hands curl late at night with memory of saw and plane. Walls, the clean plane space, newly fashioned, the mantle, smooth, black, has taken out my back and taken me to task for it is not perfect, and banishes me to dreams where I must make and remake it.

Like a washerwoman on hands and knees the rubber-gloved Penelope scraped every drop of paint, scrubbed from the hardwood the odors of cats to make a kingdom for the kid muses now wrapped in regal robes whose trains dust the palace floors.

On some lintel a geometrical’s lost theorem remains, some figuring equation left unresolved. What stone chips and paper scrolls will be my legacy within this box? What glyph left inscribed, clues to puzzle over for the casual speculator or looters trading for some rusty tool?

A box to serve a welcome need and offer bread and vessel, a place complete with odd ‘n end hung and set to study, eye, or handle, We’ll take the moment to flip through the pages weighty on lower shelves. I will make the coffee, the queen will serve her best bread, and the kid comics come to restore your natural color.

—from Taken to Task, a collection of poems by James Zingarelli, Stone’s Throw Press, 2001.

To order, contact Gordon College Bookstore, ext. 4282, or e-mail jzingarelli@faith.gordon.edu.
The bishop and local clergy were assembled at a dedication ceremony for young men discerning their call to the priesthood. My stepson was one of the group, and I was examining the program before the ceremony. A small graphic of a censer with curling puffs of smoke caught my attention. In its simple, dynamic lines it seemed to express the excitement and drama of worship and the beauty of the act of consecration. I took the program home with me, tucked it into my journal and prayed daily that God would give me an opportunity to create similar work.

Six months later my prayers were answered with a commission from Augsburg Fortress, publishers for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I was to create a collection of graphics for use within a liturgical setting. Icon: Visual Images for Every Sunday is a collection of 600 images based on the church year and ecumenical lectionary gospel readings for use in congregational bulletins, newsletters and other self-published materials.

Each image was handcut from a single sheet of silhouette paper, a folk art technique that creates images with easily read, incisive lines and bold contrasts. This style is also reminiscent of woodcut illustrations for Bibles printed in the 16th century. Symbols and subjects were drawn from a variety of sources, including early Christian catacomb paintings, Byzantine icons and medieval manuscripts, and interpreted in a fresh, contemporary style.

Since childhood I have dreamed of illustrating a Bible. For 25 years my oil paintings have dealt with biblical narrative themes, and I have been privileged to see these paintings hung in a worship setting and integrated into the liturgy. It’s particularly exciting to think of my work in Icon being used to illustrate the weekly gospel readings within the Sunday morning worship service. It is my prayer the graphics will enhance the hearing and reception of the Word they image.

Icon: Visual Images for Every Sunday
by Tanja Butler

Tanja Butler has been teaching visual arts at Gordon since 2000. Her work has been exhibited nationally and featured in various publications including Christianity Today. She holds a B.A. and an M.A. from the University at Albany, State University of New York. For information about ordering Icon contact Augsburg Fortress at www.worshipsourceonline.com

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