

Scribe to the Prophet

by

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As a writer, I learned something very consoling from Harriet Graesser, a wise woman in Iowa and a member of The Community of True Inspiration. She was talking to a group of writers — we had intruded on the historic meeting house at Amana where she was a volunteer to deal with tourists — and she began telling us about the custom in her tradition of the *werkzeug*, the “instrument” of God. In the last few centuries of her tradition of belief, she said, there had been seventeen *werkzeuge*, men and women both — prophets who spoke in the voice of God, delivering essential doctrine to the community. Community worship services, she explained, derived largely from reading the thousands of utterances that had come through these prophets, with each listener, young or old, woman or man, searching as they listened for understanding and practical insight toward right living.

It was when she described how these utterances were recorded that my writer’s radar began to go wild. According to Mrs. Graesser, each prophet, once identified, would acquire a scribe, whose life-duty it then was, both night and day for as long as the prophet lived, to stand ready with pen and paper to take dictation should the Voice arise. In the middle of the night, the scribe, asleep in a room adjacent to the *werkzeug*, might be wakened by the Voice beginning to speak. The scribe must then rise quickly, light the lantern, and begin writing what that Voice, through voice of the *wertzeug*, was saying.

In that moment, I understood my role as a writer in a new and comforting way. I am not the prophet, but scribe to the prophet. It is not my work so much to invent as to record the stories of the world. And the prophet? My prophet may be the voice of anyone I overhear, or the particular witness of anything I see. The prophet could be a child, a bus passenger, a dream, or a cloud. The prophet could be the day’s last light, falling with eloquence on some simple place. It is not my job to be wise, to be profound in my own creation, but only to be completely alert. My aptitude is attention, recognition, and humility. When the spirit moves in the world about me, I am not called to be that spirit, but to be its secretary.

My father’s first job after World War II, as I understand it, was to be secretary to the director of an organization called Church World Service. What a clear beginning for a writer’s career. As I sat in the meeting house at Amana, listening to the gentle voice of Mrs. Graesser describe the lifelong work of the scribe to the prophet, I felt the greatness of the smallness of my task.