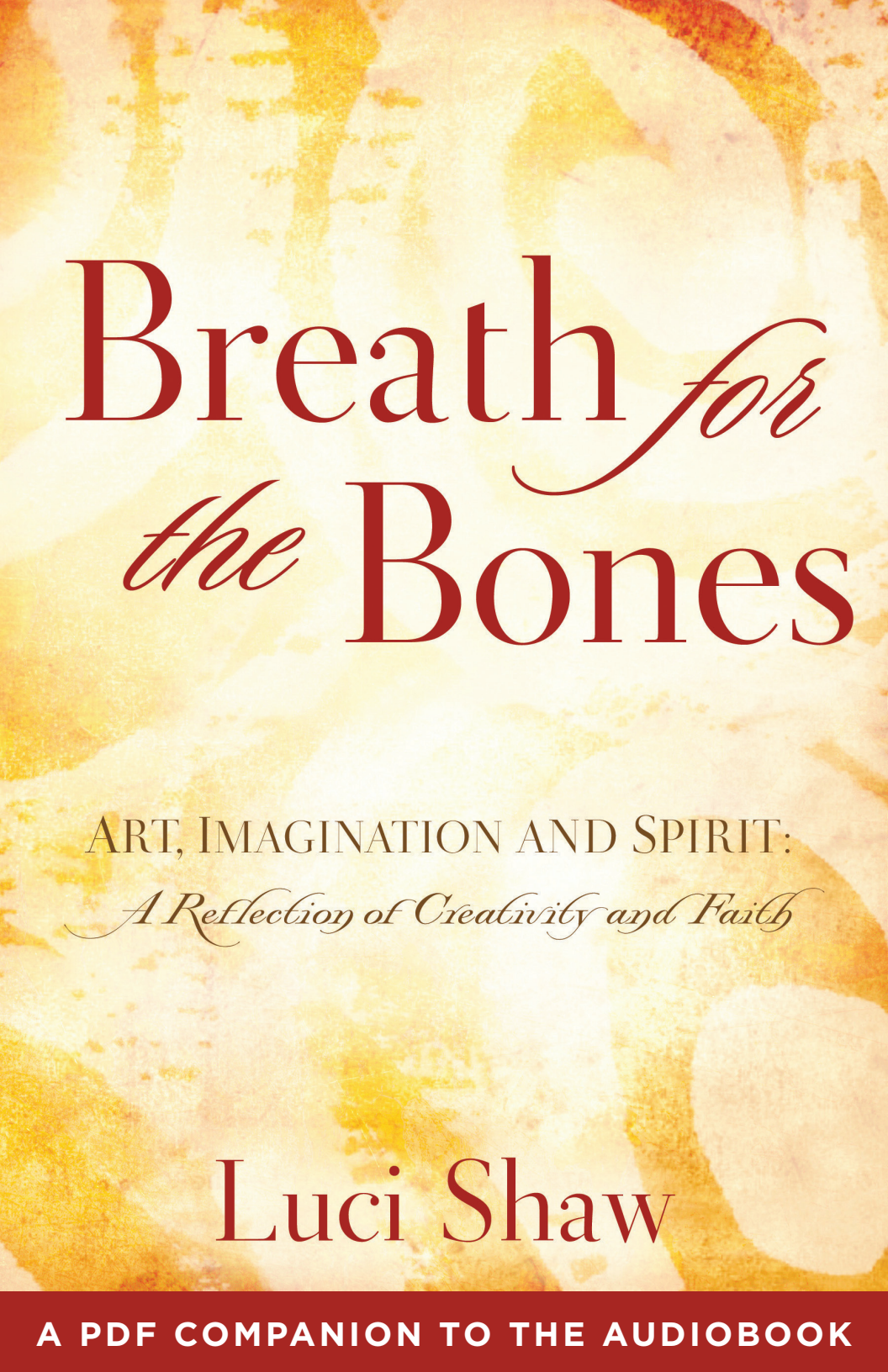




Breath *for* *the* Bones

ART, IMAGINATION AND SPIRIT:

A Reflection of Creativity and Faith

Luci Shaw

A PDF COMPANION TO THE AUDIOBOOK

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Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80920, www.alivecommunications.com.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shaw, Luci.

Breath for the bones : art, imagination, and spirit / by Luci Shaw.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-8499-2964-4

1. Artists—Religious life. 2. Creation (Literary, artistic, etc.)—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Christianity and the arts. I. Title.

BV4596.A78S53 2007

261.5'7—dc22

2006100153

Printed in the United States of America

Appendix A



Writing Exercises and Questions for Discussion

PART I

CHAPTER 1: THE CREATIVE HEART OF GOD

1. Has a friend or relative ever asked you, “What good is art?” Have you wondered how to respond? In your journal or in a letter addressed to this friend or relative, respond to this question (you don’t have to send this letter unless you’d like to). You may even wish to develop this letter into an artist’s statement.
2. Have you found yourself looking at the small lights of the night sky in wonder? Have you looked at the ocean and found joy at the motion and color of waves? Has this ever moved you to try to describe this beauty? Or to interpret it in an art form? With

a group or in your journal, explore how God's creation forms our understanding of beauty.

3. The Old Testament book of Genesis and the New Testament gospel of John focus on the importance of the creative act of words—the Word. When God breathed a word in the first chapter of Genesis, his word suddenly became a created *thing*. As an artist, a writer, how does knowing this breathing Word—the Logos, Jesus—inform the way you look at creativity?

CHAPTER 2: ENTERING INTO BEAUTY

1. Think of examples of times you encountered beauty. What beautiful object, literature, experience, or landscape moves and exhilarates you? How would you define beauty? How important is it in your life?
2. In the light of church history, why do you think the contemporary Christian church has suspected, despised, or ignored art and artists to such an extent? Do you sense any change happening in church communities today?
3. What factors in the frenetic action-orientation of our society mitigate against the appreciation and pursuit of art and beauty?
4. How can we, as Christians, as artists, begin to restore beauty, the creative imagination, and art to their rightful place in the life and worship of the church?

CHAPTER 3: MEETING THE GOD OF METAPHOR

1. Start with word association. Pick one metaphor word that seems to have significance for you, that fits your personality, gifts, inclinations, and circumstances, such as, *springtime*, *rain*, *baby*, *shadow*, *seed*, *green*, *shell*, *pebble*, *ship*, *unfolding flower*, *river*, *rock*. You may wish to use an image from the Bible, such

as a *lamp, branch, vine, deer, temple, water channel, sheep, pilgrim, pearl, farmer, athlete, field*. For a few moments, allow this word or image to plant a picture in your mind. Allow your senses and your imagination to enlarge on this image. What do you feel, taste, smell, hear, or otherwise notice about it?

2. For several minutes jot down all the words and ideas that this word brings to mind, clustering them around it as the nucleus for brainstorming a web of word bubbles, all with lines attached to the circle around the main word.
3. Over the next few days, tie the most potent of these associated ideas together by building a personal psalm, a poem, an essay, a meditation, or a story around this central metaphor, which is you. Keep it personal and concrete (not abstract or generalized), and use everyday (not religious or “poetic”) language.

When this has taken shape, ask yourself: If I live out this metaphor fully, what might be the results in my personal/spiritual growth? In my attitude toward my Creator? In the lives and relationships of those around me? In my community of writers? In the world I live in? Use these questions as the basis for an essay about yourself and your personal metaphor.

4. If this is a time of decision or transition in your life, ask God to show you a personal metaphor that will inform you as you meditate, praying for wisdom and guidance.

Imagine yourself, for instance, as clay being shaped into some useful or beautiful ceramic piece. As you spin on the potter’s wheel, you may feel dizzy and weak. But remember, the Potter’s strong hands are holding you centered, shaping you into just what he has in mind for you—some useful and beautiful object or container for his house. And when he is through molding you, you may even have to go through the

kiln of struggle. But the fired pottery is worth all the steps in the process.

CHAPTER 4: LEARNING FROM STORY

1. Story is the way Jesus explored spiritual truths and asked spiritual questions. How might you—as a poet, writer, painter, dancer, actor—explore a story in your life in order to frame questions that relate spiritual truth?
2. How is it that stories and parables continue working on us at deeper levels, long after the story has been told?
3. *“The story of the world is imprinted everywhere—the growth rings widening in the boles of trees, the wind- and water-carved art of coastal sandstone rocks, sharp ‘young’ mountains like the Tetons.”*

Revisit some imprinted story, look to a landscape or seascape, or even watch an aging neighbor’s slow walk to the grocery store, down a city block. As you imaginatively trace their stories, watch the world unfold in a new way. If you are a visual artist, incorporate this in some way into your work.

4. Think back on this Eugene Peterson phrase: *“Story isn’t imposed on our lives; it invites us into its life.”*¹ Explore a time when you have been invited into the life of story. How did that change you, inform you? How might that change the way you view the creative process?
5. If story is the *“the most familiar and accessible way for human beings to understand the world,”* think of the ways you have understood or explored the world through story.

CHAPTER 5: CELEBRATING IMAGINATION

1. If you remember a time early in your creative life that you discovered a “widening of the imagination,” explore this developmental stage in your writing.

2. What does a “baptized imagination” look like? Consider reading a story from the Old Testament or a parable from the gospel texts, or the vivid imagery of Revelation. Ask yourself, What does the baptized imagination look like in this text? Can I read between the lines, imaginatively? Or, How does this Scripture help form a baptized imagination in me?
3. Perhaps you grew up in a family or faith culture that did not encourage *imagination*. If so, where did you first meet and recognize the power of imagination? How is imagination God’s gift for expressing spiritual truths?
4. Take a portion of a psalm or a gospel text for meditation. How would you see this differently if you brought your heart, mind (including the imagination), and soul to engage with the text? Discover how using your own name, or personal pronouns, refreshes and personalizes your understanding of the text.

If bringing imagination to prayer and meditation is intimidating, reread Chapter 4. As you read, keep your psalm or chosen Scripture text alongside for reference. Then prayerfully—and perhaps playfully—bring your imagination into this place before God as God brings imagination and play into the text of Scripture for you.

CHAPTER 6: LISTENING TO THE MUSE

1. If you keep a journal, look through pages of previous years for a passage that leaps out—such as this *knitting* and *being knit* section. Look for pages that point to spiritual understanding coming through a creative act. If you don’t keep a journal, think back to a time where a simple or creative act—painting, doing photography, washing a car, planting an herb garden—sud-

denly informed all of your senses, teaching you anew about creativity or faith.

2. We are often afraid of silence, of being alone. Yet we know from the mystics and the contemplatives that this silence before God is often meaningful, rich, and creative. It may also be challenging and raw. What are ways that we might develop an open silence before God, a listening silence? What are possible barriers in our lives to this creative silence?
3. Read again the short section from which this quote is taken: *"Spirituality is very like the creative impulse toward art—often fickle and unpredictable. We have an untamable, undomesticated Spirit."*

Have you ever wanted to tame or to domesticate the Holy Spirit? Tame your art? Why do we often desire to bring the Holy Spirit and art into the realm of understanding and quantifying? What spiritual disciplines or tools might you explore that could help you keep hands and hearts open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, wherever that may lead you?

4. Like Denise Levertov, have you ever experienced the process of writing a poem or creating a piece of art that brought about your transformation—even a conversion? What are the places in your art and in your life that you have been changed by the work itself?

PART II

CHAPTER 7: BEGINNING WITH JOURNAL WRITING

1. Consider keeping a daily reflective journal for images, ideas, wonderments, questions. If a commitment to journal keeping over a long stretch of time sounds daunting, give yourself only

a week or a month to explore this new form. Start with simple questions like these: What made me glad, today? Or sad? Or mad? Or afraid?

2. If you already keep a journal, how have you discovered that writing through emotional issues or pain has allowed you to see these hurts in a new way?
3. Henri Nouwen wrote about the necessity of writing to explore our deepest interior places: "I do not yet know what I carry in my heart, but I trust that it will emerge as I write."

If there is some question you have been pondering, some joy you have wanted to explore more fully through writing, give voice to that question or joy. Write about it in the open spaces of your journal paper. Observe what emerges from your heart. Note any surprising conclusions.

4. If you don't know how to begin keeping a journal but you'd like to try, you might start out by "reading, reading, reading" until a line of a poem or a word from a psalm speaks out in a profound way.

Capture that line by copying it into your journal, then respond to it with your own thoughts by describing how that line affected you, or how that image reminded you of a forgotten memory.

CHAPTER 8: LEARNING TO RISK

1. Write in your journal about a time when you took a great risk in "charting a course"—a risk that challenged you to your core—yet in which you discovered something amazing about yourself or God in the process. Write about this experience and what it taught you about risk, about creativity, about faith.

2. If you *want* to move toward risk in your creativity but don't know where to begin, write openly about the possible sources for your hesitancy. You might also want to brainstorm for creative approaches to risk, which help you say yes to new ideas, a new path.
3. List three "risk-taking" goals in faith and in creative life that you'd like to explore. The list may be as simple as listening to a new kind of music. Or taking an art class. Or, if you're a visual artist, maybe the risk would be to take a writing course.

Think imaginatively about your three risks, and develop a course of action to begin each one.

4. Do you find yourself always "coloring inside the lines"? Look at the life of Jesus in the Gospels. Find one or two stories in the life of Jesus that contain examples of coloring outside the lines. How might you be challenged to look anew at your own life of faith, your own creative life, in light of these stories?

CHAPTER 9: PAYING ATTENTION

1. If you are writing in a group, free-write for about fifteen minutes about something "small but significant" about yourself. Regather and share what you have learned with the larger group.

Remember: *We must learn to be still; we can't see our true reflections in running water.*

2. Write a letter to God telling him that you are deliberately setting aside the large and heavy responsibilities that dominate your everyday life in order to listen to God and his "still, small voice." (List your "life baggage," your burdens, and then give them to God to care for, for the remainder of the week.) As you listen, can you hear God saying anything to you? Write it down.

CHAPTER 10: CULTIVATING CREATIVITY

1. What does your creative process look like? Where do your “seed ideas” come from? And how do you transform these seed ideas into larger creative art forms?
2. How do you develop your skills and craft? If you’re a painter, do you work alongside of other painters? If you work as a photographer, what disciplines help shore up your composition? Your darkroom skills?

This coming month challenge yourself with three goals for your art milestones that will help you move to the next level of fluency or skill.

3. *“For the Christian artist there will always be some attempt, also in nonverbal art forms (such as sculpture, dance, mime, or instrumental music), to reduce anarchy to order; to reflect reality and moral/spiritual values, however indirectly; to contrast light with darkness, discord with harmony; to achieve a kind of balance.”*

In your art, what are the ways you move toward order and reflect reality? Does this come naturally, as the result of a life lived in faith? Or do you intentionally develop this in your art?

4. Do you have a group from your church, or a local arts group that supports your creative work? If so, list the ways in which this group is collaborative and assists you in avenues of art. Bring that list of gifts of support to God, thanking him for the abundance.

If you are not part of an arts group, consider forming one. No need to start large. One or two people may begin meeting in a coffee shop, joining in conversations about artistic challenges and creative ideas.

5. If your church group is supportive, consider organizing an arts day at your church, for local artists to show their work; or con-

sider finding a sponsor for a coffeehouse, where poems can be read or musicians invited to participate.

CHAPTER 11: UNDERSTANDING THE SHADOW SIDE OF CREATIVITY

1. There are many of us who struggle with the question, Is God capricious? And that question mark may continue through our lives. If you keep a journal, write about an experience of the hiddenness of God. Looking back, what discoveries did you make during that dark time?
2. If you are a visual artist, explore through painting or photography how *chiaroscuro* works. Explore how light reveals the darkness, how darkness reveals light.
3. C. S. Lewis wrote, “best havings are wantings.” This is an unusual way to see our desires. Indeed, we often find ourselves disappointed when desires are left unfulfilled.

What areas of your life speak to the *best havings* being seen as *wantings*?

4. For artists, delving into mystery and fathomlessness sometimes opens into epiphany—as with the Eucharist. Where have you met this mystery and epiphany lately?

CHAPTER 12: TRACING THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF POETS AND POEMS

1. Even if your form of creativity is not poetry, there are ways of listening to the multitude of language and sounds. These bring awareness to any form of creativity. Visit a place of noise and bustle or even of great silence, and journal about an unusual sound that you hear for the first time—or some old sound or a way of silence that affects you anew.

2. *"A great poet adds steadily to a body of work growing to significant proportions over the years."*

If you are a poet or a fiction writer or a visual artist, give yourself the chance to tour your work over the years. Trace in your journal the ebbs and flows, the growth spurts, the joys, the detours, the change of directions. As you observe these places of growth and change, write in your journal about the changes in your work, perhaps analyzing how it has become more complex or more mature.

3. *"Encounters.—Experiences. Observations. Impulses. Emotions. Exuberance. A sense of rhythm or music. Resonant phrases. Surprises. Impressions. Significant details."*

This list describes some characteristics of a good poem. Yet this might also suggest standards of excellence in other art forms. In reading a poem or looking at a painting or listening to a sonata, have you ever met the joining of all these characteristics? Write about how you recognized this combination of characteristics as a profound gathering of riches or how you sensed you were in the presence of greatness.

Appendix B



Creativity Books—A Reading List

I. PROSE WRITERS AND BOOKS ON CREATIVITY

These books are all good introductions to the creative process or the formation and nurturing of creativity. All provide a way to begin, to see the creative process as an essential value.

David Bayles and Ted Orland, *Art and Fear*

Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, and *The Prophetic Imagination*

Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* and *The Writing Life*

Janice Elsheimer, *The Creative Call*

Brewster Ghiselin, ed., *The Creative Process*

Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*

Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water*

Denise Levertov, *Light Up the Cave* and *New and Selected Essays*

Gerald May, *The Wisdom of Wilderness*

Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*

Leyland Ryken, *The Christian Imagination*

Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*
Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*
Gene Edward Veith, *The Gift of Art*

II. POETS AND POETRY BOOKS

I encourage you to begin with the classical poets, particularly the metaphysical poets, such as John Donne and George Herbert. Read Shakespeare aloud. Or Milton. Anthologies bring together poetry of a certain period or with a common theme. Check out books from the library, or buy books of contemporary poetry at general bookstores. Read the poems aloud more than once. Let the sound of the words sink into your mind.

Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir*
Emily Dickinson, *Collected Poems*
Robert Frost, *Collected Poems*
Jeanine Hathaway, *The Self as Constellation*
Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level*
George Herbert, *Collected Poems*
Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems*
Andrew Hudgins, *Saints and Strangers* and *Babylon in a Jar*
Mark Jarman, *The Green Man*, *Questions for Ecclesiastes*, and *Unholy Sonnets*
Jane Kenyon, *Let Evening Come* and *Otherwise*
Galway Kinnell, *Imperfect Thirst*
Madeleine L'Engle *The Weather of the Heart* and *The Ordering of Love*
Paul Mariani *Deaths and Transfigurations*
Sharon Olds, *The Father*
Mary Oliver, *Why I Wake Early* and *Thirst*
Linda Pastan, *Heroes in Disguise*
Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*
Rumi, *The Soul of Rumi* (translated by Coleman Barks)
Gjertrud Schnackenberg, *The Lamplit Answer*
R. S. Thomas, *Counterpoint*
Jeanne Murray Walker, *A Deed to the Light*
Richard Wilbur, *Mayflies* and *The Things of This World*