



*A LETTER TO
JUDGE WYNN
Meditations on Breaking the Law*

Rose Marie Berger

by Rose Marie Berger

A LETTER TO JUDGE WYNN

Meditations on Breaking the Law

If we could split ourselves
like a crack in the cement

(children's names written when wet
a heart a flower a handprint)

like that mystical bread

(calloused hands holding up hunger
and night sweats and the one we once loved)

then we would say in our first voice: Law
and Order out of Chaos

we would listen and obey

teach our children hands up, look both ways

(pack them bubble-wrap safe
for shipping from this world to the next)

and this would be good

and called for

and proper

but sometimes we would say in our second voice:

Marcellus (age 9) breath

Marquita (age 6) breath

Titus (age 5) Regina (age 13) breath breath

a song to spark a candle

in the dark times

and when the wingéd parts of our democracy

begin to topple off the heads of pillars

to crush more than children's names

on the Rotunda's threshing floor

and when to be a citizen

is to be a fawn

caught at night in oncoming brightness

when the only hand that can reach out

is the one already reached to

in a cold creek, in a white robe

then those hands must reach out

when the mother lifts up her hands
for the life of her child
and pours out her heart like water

when the children faint for hunger
on every street corner

for what seemed all Law and Order
is surely Chaos

(it takes a delicate hand
to hold the brush that daubs

in the details of a country
a hand not weighted by weapons)

and yet with both voices we would praise
the balance:

that golden thread
is all that holds us. ∞

On Dec. 7, 1995, I was one of 39 ministers and church workers arrested in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda as an 11th hour protest against the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, the largest reform of U.S. welfare laws since the 1930s. The act was proposed by Republicans as part of their Contract with America and signed into law in 1996 by President Bill Clinton, who campaigned on a promise to “end welfare as we have come to know it.” Our protest consisted of praying in the Rotunda and reading aloud the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Woe to the legislators of infamous laws, to those who issue tyrannical decrees, who refuse justice to the unfortunate and cheat the poor among my people of their rights” (10:1-2). A week later, we appeared in the courtroom of D.C. Superior Court Judge Patricia Wynn. After pleading guilty as charged, Judge Wynn handed down an unusual sentence. Since we had argued that we broke a lesser law to enforce God’s higher law of caring for the poor, she assigned each of us the task of writing her a letter explaining the rule of law in our society, giving our justification for breaking the law, and stating why we felt our actions were different from those of Yigal Amir, the man who had assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin a month earlier. This poem was my response. Eventually, three assistant secretaries at the Department of Health and Human Services, Mary Jo Bane, Peter B. Edelman, and Wendell E. Primus, would resign to protest the law. Over the next four years, approximately 6 million people were made ineligible for government assistance in accessing food, housing, and healthcare. Twenty years later, it was estimated that severe poverty in the United States had doubled. –RMB

*Cover photo credit: U.S. Capitol Rotunda on Dec. 7, 1995.
Kneeling first row (left to right): Jim Wallis, Henri Nouwen,
Eugene F. Rivers III, Graylan Hagler, Rose Marie Berger.*



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