Translation as an act of love

“Dolly Parton says she is singing for everybody. I am trying to translate for everybody.”

Amy Frykholm interviews Carmen Acevedo Butcher

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(Photo by Franci Lucero)

Carmen Acevedo Butcher is the author of an award-winning translation of the anonymous medieval text The Cloud of Unknowing *and a forthcoming translation of Brother Lawrence called* Practice of the Presence*. Listen to the full length version of this interview on the* In Search Of *podcast.*

How did you come to your philosophy of translation?

The editor with whom I worked on the new Brother Lawrence book asked if I had ever written up my translation philosophy. I thought, *my translation philosophy*? I hadn’t thought about it like that. But I wrote it down very quickly. I called it

“translation as embodied mysticism.”

Translation is a very elaborate sudoku; it feels like that kind of puzzle to me. Or maybe three-dimensional chess. It’s about relationships and friendships: How can I use translating to make better friends with myself, with readers, with the person who wrote the text? And how can I use this to the common good?

When I think about the “embodied” part of my philosophy, I think of my students. I have students from all different backgrounds, and I am constantly thinking: How does this make a difference to them? A lot of them come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and undocumented parents. They have real difficulties, so I am always thinking: How can this translation make a difference?

Take us into the process a little. How do you translate?

Often the first thing I do is say a little prayer: please help me. I really can’t begin translating until I know if I have a strong love for the text. Even though I had read pieces of Brother Lawrence’s work before, I wasn’t sure if what he was writing about would be fundamentally about love. So I went to the 1692 text, and I started typing it out—so that I could feel it in my fingers. I discovered the text in that kind of one-on-one dialogue.

In the next stage, when I am committed to doing the translation, I order every single solid translation available of this text. I start looking at how everyone else has ever translated it. I look at every word and every letter.

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Then when I am translating, I have about 30 tabs open at once on my computer with several dictionaries. It is quite a gourmet event. This helps with discovery. For example, I discovered that the word *foy* means “oops” in the scribal lexicon. But it is also really close to the word *foi*, which means “faith” in French, and sometimes translators thought this should be *joi* instead of *foi* because of this confusion with *foy* . So they translate “joy” instead of “faith”—when it should have been “oops.”

What do you love about the work of translation?

One of the joys of translating is spending several days over one line or even one word. I am not coming to the text as someone who thinks she knows. I am coming with a certain degree of kenosis, and I am also coming as a living, breathing human

being. I am not normally a calm person or even a peaceful person. But over time I have learned to practice something like presence—the practice of the presence of God, as Brother Lawrence says.

What drew you to the work of Brother Lawrence?

Brother Lawrence's work has been in publication continuously for over 300 years, so one of my questions is, "What keeps this coming back? Why are people so drawn to it?"

People have rarely asked about the man behind Brother Lawrence, Nicolas Herman, who became Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. He was a really confused individual, and I like genuine, confused individuals who are doing their best. I relate to them. He didn't have a privileged background. He tried many different things in his life. I've also worked at a lot of different places. I worked at Home Depot as a cashier. I worked as a secretary at a furniture company. I typed books for professors. I swept Granny's Fried Chicken's parking lot to make money to apply for college.

Nicolas Herman had a similar background. He tried being a valet. Eventually, he went into the army. We don't really know what happened to him there, but it is possible that he saw things and maybe even participated in things that shook him. He was taken as a prisoner of war. They accused him of being a spy, but he said, "Do with me what you want. I am not a spy." They let him go. Later he tried being a hermit. He is not somebody who just appeared one day as a guru. He bungled around.

He was injured during the war, and he had a limp ever after. After he became a friar, he talked about how he hated it when he was asked to go and do errands. It was hard for him to get around the market with his limp. He was very down to earth, not educated, and so genuine.

But he was also so smart—almost savant-like. He can make a sentence go on for days, and I must say it is very perplexing sometimes. Almost Faulknerian. Brother Lawrence said that sometimes when he tried to write things down, he would get so frustrated that his words didn't match the beauty of God in his head so he would tear it up. As a translator, I think, "Wow. I would really have liked to see those."

What I like most about Brother Lawrence is that he is not self-conscious. He talks about seeing a tree in winter, a tree without leaves, that gave him a sense of God in

everything and of God's love for him. I also love his writings about the kitchen. All of my favorite people are always juggling 3,000 things, and they never make you feel like they are. He wrote about how he might be in the kitchen making omelets for more than 100 friars—that's a lot of omelets—while people tried to talk to him. That was where he practiced the presence of God—right there in the ordinary and the parts of your soul that are snagged by everyday life. Those are the times when you practice.

I was able to see that the main message is "God is love." That's it.

How did you come to be a translator?

One day, when I was a master's student at the University of Georgia, a professor showed me a book of the sermons of Ælfric of Eynsham. They were beautiful. At the end of the day, I am just a sucker for beautiful language. His whole corpus is all about love. Oddly, translating from the Old English—talk about embodiment—reminded me of the time I had spent in Germany and all of my friends there. So as I translated, my love for them was very present to me. Beauty, rhythm, and love are all central to me.

Later I ran into The *Cloud of Unknowing* during some really difficult days in graduate school. It reached out to me. One of the things that I was struggling with was having been raised with some really punitive theology that centered on fear. The peace that was in *The Cloud* and living with the text in Middle English (or Old English in the case of Ælfric) is really healing for me.

You've said that the best words bring us together in community. What do you mean by that? And what are some examples?

Think about the way we say that someone is "bound" to a wheelchair. This is not person-first language. That's very different than saying that someone is "using" a wheelchair. We might ask the person how they would like to refer to this aspect of their reality.

Or think about the difference between saying "This is my adopted child" and "This is my child, whom I adopted."

I ask students during one of my courses to write an ethno-autobiographical essay to struggle with the kinds of words and concepts they might apply to their own

experience and identity. It isn't easy. Are they Black, African American, or something else? Are they Indigenous, or is there another word that better suits?

I guess what I am saying is that it starts with language a person chooses for himself or herself. And then others can learn to use language with empathy. For example, as a professor, I learn to pronounce my students' names. Sometimes my mouth can't make the sounds, which is not an excuse for not trying. We could all do more to think about how this or that word feels or sounds from the perspective of someone else. This takes work—to decenter ourselves. I have a colleague who prefers Mx. instead of Mr. or Ms. I think these kinds of conversations are very important because we honor another person's essence and voice as much as we can.

Let's take that idea back to the ancient texts, because you've written about how we carry certain concepts forward when we translate that might be better left in the past. How do we discern that in translating? How do we listen both forward and backward with empathy?

I have to handle that on a case-by-case basis. I am a bit like Dolly Parton in this way. She says that she is singing for everybody, and I am trying to translate for everybody. If God is love, what does that really mean? While I am translating, I have my students in the back of my mind, my family, my friends. What does it mean if God is love to my students?

Sometimes it is straightforward. Translators sometimes take a word like *tous* in French in Brother Lawrence, which means "all people," and they change it to "men" or to "Christians" or to some other more exclusive category. But the text actually says "all people." Let's go with that.

What I run into mostly in the ancient texts and in the translations is a binary: right/wrong, evil/good, in/out. These are not always necessary to underscore. Wherever there is a binary, there is also a hierarchy, and it takes the language out of relationship. To me, as a translator, I don't want to lose my connection with my reader.

Look, for example, at the French word *bontée*. Translators will often use the word "good." Good immediately implies bad and introduces a binary. I use "kind." God is kind. Kind has an opposite, of course, but it isn't as strong a binary as good/bad. You can feel the difference.

I often think about Jesus' words, "Don't put new wine in old wineskins." We don't want to put the ever-new wine of God's love into the old wineskins of old theology. Our theology can become much more caring of those on the margins and of the poor. The reason I am so passionate about this is because of my students, who have overcome so many difficulties that are systemic. I want these texts to be available to them.

What in your translation of Brother Lawrence do you think will surprise readers?

In my first 100 or so rounds of the translation, I couldn't eliminate masculine pronouns for God. There were just so many references to God and all of them masculine. It bothered me, for all of the reasons that I've described, but I decided just to let it go. I went for a walk one day, and I was thinking about my students and all that they had gone through with the pandemic. I walked through the marsh and looked at the snowy egrets. All of this was working on my soul.

Then I went to bed, and when I woke up in the morning, I thought, *I could use They/Themself/Theirs for God*. And then I thought, *Could I*? I sat down at the computer. You can't do some kind of global "find and replace" for this. A change like this is more atomic—or like phytoplankton. Pronouns are like that: no one notices them, but they are big. Language reveals us.

In this case, if I'm going to be really honest about it, my heart has been broken by watching people not being loved. And so for me, this is not just a translation. This is about love and how words really do change how we love each other.

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