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Profile

MICHAEL JOHN “JACK” VICTOR SHAVER
(1918-2001) Suffering the Question
by June Lythgoe

Jack Shaver was one of the most insightful and iconoclastic theological thinkers of his generation in Canada. His life spanned most of the twentieth century Canadian landscape; his thought reflected fundamental shifts in Canadian social consciousness; his work undoubtedly contributed to the spiritual ethos of this country. His astute analyses, penetrating interventions, iconoclastic style, and enigmatic personality left an indelible imprint on all who encountered him.

Born in 1918, just twelve days before the end of the First World War, Jack was the second son of the Rev. and Mrs. James M. Shaver. His mother, born Elizabeth Asselstine, had graduated with an M.A. (French and German) from Queens University in 1905. After completing her studies she returned to live with her family, helping out in her father’s woollen mill until she married her “dear boy Jim”, whom she adored and in whose shadow she spent the rest of her life. One of Jack’s fondest childhood memories was swinging from the rafters of his grandfather’s mill, now preserved in Upper Canada Village as a token of Canadian heritage. Both sides of the family were rooted in rural Ontario with claims to United Empire Loyalist origins.

Jack’s father, also a graduate of Queens with a theology diploma from Victoria College, was ordained by the Methodist church.

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All quotations in this piece are taken from unpublished documents, audio tapes, and personal conversations with Jack Shaver.
in 1910.\textsuperscript{2} After ten years working with immigrants in the coal docks of Fort William (Thunder Bay) James accepted a call in 1920 to succeed J.S. Woodsworth as Superintendent of All Peoples’ Mission in the north end of Winnipeg. An urban mission supported by the Methodist church, All Peoples’ was set up to serve the north end’s immigrant population, offering a comprehensive program of social, educational, and spiritual services with an aim to bridge the gulf between middle-class Canadian Christians and immigrants, often alien in language, race, religion, and social life and values.

All Peoples’ Mission was considered exemplary in its contribution to the assimilation of foreigners. As Jack later reflected, “The Christian call was to build and awaken a nation...” As a son of the manse Jack thrived in a cocoon of well-intentioned entitlement. As an adult he vehemently rejected the presumptions of Anglo-Saxon superiority that were behind the goals of the mission. “What gave them the right,” he demanded, “to go anywhere in the world and put it right?”

From the time Jack was two until the year before his ordination in 1942, he lived at home in the manse adjacent to Stella Mission, which along with Sutherland Mission was part of All Peoples’ Mission. Not just the Shaver family residence, the manse served as the hub of the mission. Staff, student ministers, Student Christian Movement volunteers, new mothers, depression bums, and a parade of immigrant parents of troubled teenagers filed through the house. The manse was an extension of the Mission. Prayer lists were as routine as filling the wood box, Sunday school as commonplace as day school, and Bible study linked to sports.

“God-talk” was bred in Jack’s bones. As a new-born he was crooned to sleep with hymn tunes. As a youngster he was plunged into the life of the Mission. “I went to church kindergarten, Sunday School, then Mission Band — then I was a Trail Ranger, and then Tuxis,” he recalled. He took piano lessons, not because he

\textsuperscript{2} Editor’s Note: Touchstone carried a profile of James Shaver written by Peter Douglas in the May, 1989, issue. It is the only instance (so far) of the journal carrying a profile of both a father and a son.

A copy of this article can be found via: http://billreimer.ca/workshop/Shaver/Documents/TouchstoneShaverArticleVol7No2_1989.pdf
wanted to but because “anyone who could play [the piano] around the Mission would be useful.” As an adolescent his summers were spent at Kirkfield Park, the Mission’s camp for disadvantaged immigrant youth, and on his brother’s summer mission field. As an adult he did theology, the only thing he felt he knew how to do, and towards the end he staved off night terrors by reciting “Jesus Loves Me” and repeating the “Kyrie”, his mantras, he confessed, to soothe the sleepless nights of old age.

If Anglo-centric God talk was Jack’s first language, ethnocentric street talk was his second. Without a single Anglo-Saxon classmate until grade ten, his idiosyncratic speaking style was firmly set in his formative years. He also learned early in life that one of his roles was to laugh. During an enforced separation, his father writes his beloved Bess that all would be well, instructs Jack’s older brother about his responsibilities as deputy at the Mission and man of the house, and reminds Jack, then five, that his job was to make his mother laugh. It was an admonition Jack took to heart.

Jack did not excel in school as a child. He was lazy. In grade four he did so little homework his father convinced the teachers to hold him back. Although later he came to think of himself as always left behind, at the time he was quite happy to stay put. It meant he did not have to work so hard. When he achieved outstanding results without apparent effort in secondary school his father wrote to his teachers saying, “You must have an awful good set of teachers there because as far as I can tell this kid does no homework and yet he gets these marks!” After being caught urinating against the school wall in his graduating year Jack was not recommended for the Governor-General’s Medal.

While by his own admission Jack was lazy, when an idea or concept engaged his imagination it was immediately absorbed, stored for future reference, and could be recalled until the day he died. When he considered a matter mundane, however, he could not be bothered. He never, for example, completed his theology degree requirements. Ironically, all he needed to do was to follow the advice of Dr. Bill Taylor, then Principal of Union College, to submit his collated sermons with the promise that on doing so his
degree would be granted. This was not to be.

During adolescence Jack had been profoundly influenced by the Oxford Group Movement, which was committed to absolute standards of unselfish devotion, love, purity, and honesty. As one of the movement's "family exhibits" the Shavers strove for total surrender under the guidance of the Holy Spirit through confessional sharing and prayer. For Jack, it was an orgy of soul-baring. He later recalled with bemused chagrin "being up all night writing letters — you know this making an inventory of life with all the things you have to apologize for. Boy, what a high after one of those nights, I'm telling you! I wrote these letters all over the world. I had about four or five of those kind of highs where I'd cleaned my soul right out! And then I found I wasn't practising any of [it]. That's why I was so glad to find out the early Christians backslid also, or basically waited for the second coming before the final salvation — that even Paul only knew the first fruits!" What an enormous relief to find he was not alone in his failure to achieve ultimate righteousness.

Perhaps because of an overdose of soul-baring in his youth, as an adult he found it impossible to reveal himself to others. To many people Jack remained an enigma. In spite of his prodigious memory, names were not part of his lexicon. Even close friends were usually referred to as "Doins" or "what's a ma'call its". Few people, no matter how close, were allowed access to his inner self. He devised ways to keep his distance. Rarely did he make eye contact. When he did, his rivetting gaze was penetrating. When he preached or prayed, he stuck to his notes with his head down, accenting his comments with shrugs, grins, or frowns and punctuating his petitions with grimaces. Much as he yearned to be known, he could not risk self-exposure except in prayer. Even then, he regarded prayer as a word from God, not a word to God or words for the benefit of others.

It was not until his undergraduate years at the University of Manitoba that Jack's intellectual curiosity was finally aroused. When it was, he revelled in the experience, calling it "a love fest. I just couldn't imagine a more rewarding time. Digging into the
thought and writing of our heritage and making exciting connections and finding that we were all wrestling with the same thing.”

The discovery in English literature of the meaning of myth, metaphor and particularly the meaning of tragedy was pivotal in his thinking. “What’s tragedy”, Jack would muse, “but the affirmation of life in spite of the shit? What a nice way to say what faith is!” Even then he demonstrated an uncanny ability to make conceptual connections, cast them in theological language, and rephrase them in succinct, sparse terms. Metaphor to Jack was the essence of God-talk. How else could you say, “Whatever in the world the word is going to be, it’s going to look like a stumbling-block. Take heed how you hear”?

Although a brilliant connector, Jack was by nature reactive rather than proactive. He needed, in his words, to be acted upon. “It’s exposure to some kind of solid thinking that generates mine,” he confessed. On a personal front, too, Jack found it difficult to take initiative. Projects generally had to be driven by an external force. Once engaged, however, he was doggedly persistent in his pursuits.

Certainly the Second World War gave him the necessary impetus to take vocational initiative. On completing his arts degree he enrolled in the theology diploma program at United College, an intensive, condensed program designed to replace clergy called to duty. From the outset, however, Jack was ambivalent about his vocational call. He loved and hated it, wanted it and didn’t want it, dreaded it and rejoiced in it. Yet he could not get away from the fact that the church was his home, nor could he ever have imagined a secular career.

Following ordination in 1942, Jack spent ten years in rural Manitoba and Ontario pastoral charges before returning to Winnipeg where he served in suburban Fort Garry for another seven. By this time he had married Dorothy Hamlet from Thunder Bay and four of their five children, Frances, Wilma, Jim, and John, were born, with Peter following in the early sixties. Jack would say that it was when two of the children were hospitalised with polio that he really learned to pray. “To a loving God, shouldn’t all praying
consist of ‘Thy Will Be Done’? ... What was worthy about saying ‘Thy Will Be Done’ on behalf of two little people? What was I proving by making only worthy prayers? ... Our experience and the New Testament are both constant witnesses to the fact that nothing is more capable of cutting us off from God than our shoulds and our shouldn’ts. God can only be met in reality. He is escaped in illusion and pretence. Desire is not innocent, but it is real. Our deep wants are not always worthy, but they are there.”

His most intensive, albeit informal, theological formation took place during this period, meeting weekly with clergy colleagues to discuss and critique the works of contemporary theologians such as Tillich, Barth, Bultmann, the Niebuhrs, and, later, Bonhoeffer. Growing up on a diet of British thinkers as he had, the critical perspectives of German theologians were revolutionary to him. The ethos of the early fifties was one of optimism and theological renewal. “I had been out of seminary for eight years when the theological revolution struck my part of the world. Theological dialogue and discussion raged creatively on all sides. The groups I participated in experienced a series of transforming events.”

One such group was a committee promoted by Jack and his clergy conferees in Manitoba Conference to examine issues of faith and order. In a paper written for a meeting of the committee in 1955, he named what was to become a life-long refrain: the theological question is the question of ultimate concern; it is the question informing all others; and the point of God-talk is to grapple with the question. Theology — indeed life itself — was the art of suffering the question.

In his interpretation of sin-bearing as the crux of suffering the question, Jack was radically orthodox. Too often, he was convinced, people “jumped on Nicaea3 like there was nothing motivating those

3 Editor’s Note: Jack Shaver is referring here to the first, and among modernist Christians over the past three centuries the much maligned, general church council, which met at Nicaea in the year 325. The council was convened chiefly to deal with an idea that was deeply dividing the church, namely that Christ the Son could not in the truest sense be identified with God; he was a divine but subordinate
guys. The big worry of orthodoxy was the heretical notion that God so loved the world he sent somebody else! To suggest that the Son is subordinate to the Father — to make out that Godness is too whoop-de-do to be a sin-bearer, is absurd. It’s exactly Godness that can be a sin-bearer! This is all that the [doctrine of the] Trinity is trying to fix — but no, no we don’t allow that. Well, so we don’t allow that people have their more literal Christology. What are we scared of losing?”

At its heart, Jack’s theological premise was that sin abounds: there is no ridding the world of it. Its chief source is self-righteousness. The remedy for sin is not its removal but dealing with it. The Word that deals with sin-bearing is found in the language of justification: justification as a gracious gift, not as self induced. “If justification is by grace,” he insisted, “then it’s by grace and not good management. If it’s a gift then it’s a gift and we will receive it together.”

The fundamental paradox of Jack’s theology was embedded in his distrust of righteousness. While this distrust of righteousness, his own included, provoked profound ambivalence, it also enabled him to embrace the world in all its fragmentation. Moreover, in his struggle to come to grips with the ambiguities of righteousness he was uniquely able to name its destructive dimensions and to raise the critical questions.

The idée fixe of his theology was the centrality of grace, a potent proclamation to those who heard him, yet one he personally found almost impossible to hear. The assurance of grace he preached rarely reached the depths of his own guilt. While he had shaken off the spiritual rigours of the Oxford Group by the time he reached university, the bad conscience of imperfection continued to haunt him. Paradoxically, his guilt also served as grist for his theological mulling.

created entity given by God the Father to be the Saviour of the world. The council disagreed, insisting that he could indeed be identified with God. It put forward a creed, later to be known as the Nicene Creed, which affirmed that the Son was eternally of one being, or one substance, with the Father.
Without formal academic qualifications beyond a one-year post-degree diploma in theology, Jack was appointed United Church Chaplain at the University of British Columbia in 1959. As the first such appointee by a Canadian church, he gained a reputation as confidante and theological mentor to the colleagues who followed him into similar positions at other post-secondary institutions. With his help they struggled with their calling in the student context of the sixties.

By the time Jack arrived at UBC everyone knew God was dead. As a consequence, students were grasping for meaning in unprecedented ways. The problem was that with the death of God the fundamental question had been deleted, giving way to a moral crisis on campus that led to a pervasive loss of identity among students. They had lost their bearing. It was a wilderness, he concluded, and in a wilderness silence was the most appropriate response.

As chaplain, Jack’s presence on campus was both peripheral and profound. Much of his energy was directed towards, and originated from, the Student Christian Movement. In the turbulence of the times, the SCM, with its reputation for critical reflection, became a nexus for radical renewal on campus. Boundaries broke down. Academic disciplines eroded along with student discipline. The search for meaning turned inward, focusing on self-exploration and inter-personal experimentation rather than transcendence. Redemption came to mean intimacy. While Jack recognized that the campus community in which he participated was life-giving, he also realized that “its members ate one another as well as blessed one another.” The experience shook him deeply.

His close encounter with the spirit of the sixties set him apart from clergy colleagues in other settings. His theology, by then infused with the existentialism of Martin Buber and Heidegger, the psychology of Rollo May and Erik Eriksen, and the visionary scholarship of Norman O. Brown, among others, was not commonly appreciated. In his role as Campus Minister he had become increasingly distanced from the institutional church. Yet in 1969 he
accepted a position as Research and Development Officer with the newly formed Metropolitan Council of the United Church in British Columbia. In contrast to his previous position where he had been primarily concerned with individuals and conceptual analysis, here his mandate was to facilitate institutional maintenance.

Ironically, it was during this time that his impact on future political and church leaders was most pronounced. Mike Harcourt, former Premier of British Columbia, recalling Jack’s influence on the student participants of the Vancouver Inner-City Project in the early seventies, referred to him as “a ying presence in the midst of our raging yang between reform and revolution, personal change and societal transformation.” To others, as Marion Best remarked at his memorial service, he was a “pastor theologian-at-large” as well as a “beloved teacher, mentor, friend and companion on the way.”

Over time, Jack’s frustration with the soul-destroying qualities of institutional structures mounted. Repeatedly he found himself in situations where institutional preoccupations undermined individual value. In his distress he turned to sociologist son-in-law Bill Reimer for analytical perspective. Together they devised a theological framework for the cure of institutions, as distinct from the cure of souls. Individuals, they pointed out, are called to be, whereas institutions are called to function. Institutions are formed to perform particular tasks or serve specific functions. If these are unclear, or the structure is inappropriate to the task, then the structure is faulty. Faulty structures in turn damage people. To correct faulty structures remedies designed for individuals alone, such as attitudinal change, are inadequate. Rather, structural faults require structural remedies. The Christian mandate, Jack asserted, included both the cure of institutions and the cure of souls.

Despite his best intent, the tasks he was asked to perform at the Council and the lack of analysis he perceived in national structures became unbearable. After three years with Metropolitan Council he tendered his resignation. Following some time out to restore his balance, he took on a temporary position as Outreach Street
Worker with transient youth in the inner city where he spent his time, as he said, “tinking” – curing thinking by working with his hands, his mind in neutral.

The reconnection with youth and the inner city served its restorative purpose and in 1973 Jack joined the ministry team at First United Church in the downtown Vancouver east side. Here he became a fixture until his retirement in 1982, in the meantime serving the wider church in various capacities including as President of BC Conference of the United Church in 1979. Just as the “north end” of Winnipeg was Jack’s beginning, so the “east side” of Vancouver was, in a sense, where he ended his pilgrimage.

Once into his “sabbatical era” (as he justified retirement), Jack gradually retreated from the world he had once loved so much. The last time he had a thought, he said, was in 1986. Prodded by an article I had come across in *The London Times*, he revisited the notion of “suffering the question”. The contemporary challenge, he concluded, was not so much to suffer the question as to frame the question to be suffered.

While he remained active as a member of the congregation at West Point Grey United Church, he was adamant about wanting nothing more to do with the courts of the church. He especially did not want to be subjected to visioning processes. “I just can’t listen to vision! We grin and rejoice in how great we are! How can the church be great? The church militant was never great — what a funny image to be scrambling for! What you can rejoice in is that you’re forgiven!”

In the end there was no need for Jack to have completed his theology degree requirements. The award of two honorary doctorates, one from the University of Winnipeg in 1980 and another from the Vancouver School of Theology in 1982, more than made up for any academic deficit. As Mac Watts confirmed in his citation when presenting Jack as recipient in Winnipeg, he had the “uncanny talent for seeing below the surface of things... and put his finger on the point at issue with such unerring accuracy that the deliberations have then to move on a different dimension.”
Whether Jack Shaver was by definition a memorable theologian is open to question. What is not in question is that he was a profound and radical theological thinker who left his mark on a generation of Canadians. In the true sense of the word, Jack was a mystic. He distilled the language of transcendence, fertilizing the incarnation, never more so than in his annual Christmas greeting, like this one in 1979:

The Christian World’s most winsome festival draws near,
Anything that winsome is bound to get used in offensive ways.
Something that promising is going to encourage make-believe
Which is sure to disintegrate into bitterness.
Only God’s own coming in the flesh will enable us to keep the
feast of God’s coming in the flesh,
Not make-believe, but made-to-believe.
Not won by glitter but God’s love of the world,
That’s what’s in store for broken believers
As the festival of Christmas draws near.
God bless us everyone.

Not long before Jack died I grilled him about his personal faith. After forty years of knowing him, I said, I still did not know what or whether he really believed. His reply was swift and firm. “I do when I pray!” And the praying goes on.

Prayer Offered at West Point Grey United Church
October 25, 1997, by Jack Shaver

God of All, we know lots of words about you; we USE lots of words about you. But all these become vain unless we hear a word from you. Your word is living and active; that’s the word we need.

We’ve been told often enough that nothing can separate us from your love. But God, we find that all manner of things manage to separate us from you, both trivial and overwhelming.
Each one of us here, whatever we are going through, whatever we face, needs to hear YOU say, “Nothing can separate you from the love of God.”

Gracious God, Lord of life and death, YOU tell us that neither death nor life, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from your love. God, in your mercy....

Gracious God, you have given us to each other in this congregation. Along with this gift came differences of opinion, frustrations, disappointments, and a great deal of trivial business. These sour the spirit. Renew a right spirit amongst us. Open our hearts to each other so that we bear with one another, and bear each other’s burdens, and rediscover what a blessing we are to each other. God, in your mercy....

God, we’re tired of the life-destroying burdens and dreads that we seem determined to cling to. Empower us to gladly give them up in exchange for your light yoke and easy burden. Find us, O God, under the uplifting burden of your love of the world.

Hear our prayers for the nations and peoples of the world. Break the vicious circle of terror and strife. Drive out the spirit of revenge with the spirit of reconciliation. Drive out the spirit of greed with the spirit of sharing. Hear the cry of the homeless, the hungry and the tyrannized. Dear God, hear especially the cries of the children. God, in your mercy....

Lord of the universe, so infinite in the size of its expanses, and wondrous in its order, yet containing our tiny planet with its atmosphere sustaining manifold forms of life and beauty. How readily we forget the miracle of creation. How much of the time we live as though we weren’t the receivers of the miraculous gift of life. Dear God, our lives are unimaginably different when our hearts are grateful. Help us to keep them that way. God in your mercy....

Amen.