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Summer, 1996

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Introduction

After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days.

—Job 42:16-17

The this after which Job lived was the destruction of his life and the death of his first ten children. A pretty blasé reference, I'd say. Over the course of forty-odd chapters Job defied the God who ravaged his life. He cursed the day of his birth; he begged for death; he dared God to finish his evil work by killing him outright. It was not to be. The final chapter of Job is a vision of personal restoration unmatched in the Hebrew Bible. At its climax is the greatest blessing of all: not everlasting life, but a peaceful death.

Today the dream of a peaceful death is imagined in different terms, often having to do with floating painlessly toward a bright light. But it's still a dream, and the reality has never been harsher.

Dr. Joanne Lynn is the Director of the Center to Improve Care of the Dying at the George Washington University Medical Center. Her research, reported in the March 22 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, has been conducted over the last ten years and is now hitting professional journals. It tells a horrifying story: many people are dying slowly and in great pain, hooked up to a machine for no good reason. Patients either did not communicate their wishes or doctors ignored them; “do not resuscitate” orders were written only after dying men and women had endured countless, pointless medical procedures. Dr. Lynn and her colleagues are now putting together something they call “A Handbook for Mortals,” which will address the reality of death from a number of different perspectives, including the spiritual, and will offer advice for preparing for death.
It's good for the medical profession to ponder these things at long last. But it comes as a reminder to those of us in divinity: we have an equal stake in such matters, whether we minister in a hospital setting or a local congregation. Our own "handbook for mortals" could easily be compiled from vast resources in Scripture, tradition, and our own experience. Ultimately, any such handbook will turn into a theological document.

It helps to have a general idea of where we stand on general life and death issues before we tackle the outer limit of the question: suicide. But even if we are inclined to take up this onerous task, circumstances will often intrude—perhaps an elderly acquaintance, or a teenager, will get a gun and attempt to relieve the pain of depression. Then our theology will be done in the trenches, as we deal with the spouse or the parents, the friends and the congregation.

The core articles in this issue are intended to help us start thinking about a range of issues connected to suicide. Thus we have the historical writing of James Clemons, who has carefully exegeted Wesley's writings on suicide; Andrew Weaver's wise counsel on how to intervene in a potential suicide; and Laurel Arthur Burton's reflective narratives on physician-assisted suicide.

Surrounding this core are some other very challenging pieces. I call your attention particularly to Robert Neville's address to the 1995 meeting of the Board of Higher Education and Ministry. If the role of the scholar is to make useful distinctions then Dr. Neville has done us a great service. What is our creed? To what reality do we bear testimony? Neville argues persuasively that the church must foster the search for truth for its own health and continued vitality. We see the principle illustrated in Gaylord Noyce's review article on science and theology: education in science combined with personal regard for creation as the glorious handiwork of God.

I leave you with the concluding articles of this issue, which are concerned with leadership. They form a useful bridge into the world of action for ministry for many pastors. To be a complete picture, other voices must join them—from women, both white women and women of color, from men and women from non-dominant western cultures, and those from eastern cultures... all those who have responded, like Joshua, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Sharon Hels
How Far We Are from a Confession: 
Tasks for Theological Education in 
Church and Society

The Board of Higher Education and Ministry has faced few times more important than now in the life of that part of the Christian movement known as Methodism, and I have a graver responsibility than I realized when accepting Dr. Ireson's invitation to speak. In response to expensive bureaucracies that, in some instances, have developed their own cultures over against other segments of the United Methodist Church, some people within our church are organizing to bring about a radical revolution in ecclesiology, in the very conception of Church. They advocate a series of reforms that have as their basic assumption the belief that to be a Christian is to belong first and foremost to a congregation, which for them is the basic unit of Christian life. If congregations choose to affiliate with one another, on this view, that is a matter of their choice, as is the amount of support given to joint congregational efforts. In ecclesiological terms, this is congregational polity and characterizes Congregationalists, most Baptists, Pentecostal and Free churches, some Presbyterian, and many so-called Community churches.

Robert Cummings Neville is Dean of the Boston University School of Theology. This article is the text of the 1995 Annual Lecture for the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry, October 6, 1995.
Catholic Polity and Education

Traditional Methodist polity, by contrast, stemming from John Wesley and in basic agreement with Episcopalian, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox denominations, holds that to be a Christian is to belong first and foremost to the Christian church at large, extending from Jesus' time and embodied now in all the world’s cultures. According to traditional Methodist polity, a Christian participates first hand in a local congregation for much of the Christian life, as one goes to a local branch of a national bank. But just as important as the local congregations are those institutions within the church that represent the whole, that organize missions and relief work, that coordinate ministries and send them where they are needed, that engage in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue on the supposition that the Body of Christ is one even if its separated members are sometimes uncoordinated. To be a Christian according to the catholic Methodist polity (catholic with a small c) is as much to be a participant in the whole mission and life of the Church through the centuries and across the globe as it is to be a member of a local congregation, even though most of one’s activities and attention are local. The connectional system, the churchwide boards such as this one, and participation in the World Methodist Council and ecumenical and interfaith dialogues are among the ways the United Methodist Church exercises its commitment to the belief that being a Christian means belonging to the universal church, to the catholic church in the sense we affirm in the Apostles Creed.

Higher education and an educated ordained ministry are the key to the difference between the two polities, which is what makes this board so important now. There is a commonsense general reason and a much more specific historical and theological reason why this is so. The general reason is that a universal or catholic polity is possible only when there is a critical mass of people who are able to learn from the abstract literate media of research and communication that make up the stuff of higher education about people and cultures different from their own but also Christian. When, instead, the critical mass of people learn mainly through direct contact, from firsthand experience, a congregational polity is possible, but not a catholic polity requiring the ability to identify with people different in history, place, and culture from oneself. Some firsthand experience is necessary to give flesh to abstract learning, to be sure, but by itself it limits one’s sense
of identity and capacity for identification to those whom one meets
directly.

Of course, within a catholic polity there are many ministries to
people whose learning is simple and firsthand and who could not be
expected to see themselves as a continuation of the medieval church
or as brothers and sisters to Christians in South Africa, Russia, or
China. But a universal or catholic polity also institutionalizes
connections between those people, on the one hand, whose horizons
are limited to the problems of their congregation and, on the other
hand, the parts of the church that exercise responsibility for the whole
Body of Christ. Education, especially higher education, is one of the
principal institutions for sustaining those connections.

The specific historical and theological reason for the importance of
higher education and learned ministry goes back to John Wesley and
the birth of the Methodist movement at Oxford. There is nothing so
elitist as an Oxford don; I am told that Wesley refused to enter the
university town of Cambridge, England, because he did not want to
lower his educational standards. Nevertheless, Wesley’s love of
sophisticated learning was directly connected to his conviction that the
gospel must be brought to the poor and ignorant, to people who had
little self-consciousness and no orientation for their lives except the
pain of the day. He made the connections. Unlike most evangelical
preachers of his day, Wesley did not fear Enlightenment learning but
thought the Christian movement could only benefit from it.

Furthermore, Wesley bequeathed to the Methodists the conviction
that vital piety means a seamless whole of personal holiness and
action to improve the community, what we today would call the social
gospel. For Wesley, personal holiness without the fruits of social
action is fake; the social gospel without personal holiness is hollow
and will collapse into secular greed and power politics. The distinctive
Methodist emphasis on holiness with both personal and social
dimensions found its main expression in education. Wesley knew that
people’s social lives as well as their religious lives could not be
improved without education. He called his meetings classes, and his
followers in North America founded schools, colleges, and
universities across the land, as this board so well knows. More than
any other denomination, Methodists took higher education to be an
absolutely crucial means of grace.

Without the breadth of perspective higher education provides,
people find it hard to know responsibly what it means to be Christians
in the Body of Christ in the modern world. Again and again, Methodists have carried their mission to people in poverty and ignorance, turning them on to Jesus Christ, and sending them to school. Those people then become what we call middle-class and capable of participating in the universal Church with self-conscious identification. We Methodists sometimes beat ourselves up for being a middle-class church, and surely it is important always to reach out to the poor and dispossessed. But the capacity to raise the poor into the middle class through education is a sign of the relative success of the Wesleyan emphasis on the social gospel as part of personal piety.

Confessions and Methodism

Many of the people now calling for a shift to congregational polity in the United Methodist Church recognize the danger of fragmentation in that move and seek to counter it by insistence on an abstract confession. If the traditional Methodist doctrine of community solidarity with the universal Body of Christ as the means of Christian identity is abandoned, then the hope is that perhaps the minimal identity of agreement on doctrinal epitomes of belief will be sufficient to make us all Christians. Many of these people also believe that confessions are good things because they indicate seriousness of Christian commitment and define Christian identity, although this is done negatively, in terms of those who are excluded because of differences in abstract doctrine.

Methodism, however, has never been much of a confessional movement, finding its identity and unity in communal practices such as mission and the hymns of worship rather than its formally adopted Articles of Religion. Nevertheless, it is an interesting exercise to imagine what it would be like to draw up a confession or creed for contemporary Methodist Christians, which is what I propose to consider now.

Confessions or creeds are a far more serious matter than most people realize who call for a confessional test of orthodoxy. A confession is an expression of the Christian gospel that can be affirmed with one’s whole heart, or better, with a community’s whole heart. This means that the confession must appropriate and reconstruct into the language of our own real life now the doctrinal epitomes of the Christian gospel from Jesus’ time down through all its expressions to our own situation. The classic creeds of the Patristic period did this,
and so did the confessions of the early Reformation: they focused the gospel on the authentic conditions of belief for their periods. Most of the proposed confessions I read about for current United Methodists only repeat the phraseology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which are not serious matters for a contemporary confession.

Confessions in yesterday’s language can be used for political purposes or to sustain a kind of dream-language of Christian belief separate from the hearts dealing with real life. Those among us who are sophisticated historical theologians can study into the ancient confessions and reflectively approve or reject their validity for their time, and we all (regardless of theological differences) can rehearse those confessions and creeds as part of our worship to affirm solidarity with the Body of Christ. But we cannot make a genuine confession of our own until we have put the gospel into the language by which we live.

Problems for Confession

A Christian confession in our time needs to be made articulate in at least four new areas. These areas, which I shall discuss briefly in turn, are: interfaith dialogue, imaginative arts, the relation of science to religion, and the academic knowledge of religion and religions. Without more learned conviction in these areas than we now have, a confession would be fake.

Interfaith dialogue is the means by which Christianity discovers how its own identity is defined relative to other religions and to secularity. It might be that religions share many traits in common, but they also differ in important respects. Christianity is unique because of its definition as organized discipleship to Jesus, a figure of minor or no consequence in other religions. The significance of Christian identity for our time depends on dialogue with its alternatives. This has always been so. The Patristic period saw Christianity defining itself relative to pagan religions, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism. The Western Middle Ages, which produced the statements of Roman Catholic orthodoxy, involved a serious dialogue among Muslims, Christians, and Jews. The post-Reformation confessions arose out of the dialogue between Christians and emerging secular humanism and the Enlightenment and also out of the divisions within Christendom. In our own time there are serious dialogues among Christians, Jews,
Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Confucians. Those dialogues are set in the context of the contemporary world of rapid modernization and universal communication. They are not far enough along yet to state with any settledness of opinion what Christian identity has emerged. Nor has the emerging language of dialogue become part of the consciousness of the Christian churches at large, only of the representatives who participate personally in the dialogues. No one has done for our time what Thomas Aquinas did for his in the Summa contra Gentiles, his resolution of the Christian-Muslim dialogue that soon became church doctrine. Christian higher education is the cultural context in which interfaith dialogue takes place in our day.

By imaginative arts I mean the literature, poetry, drama, dance, music, visual arts, and architecture that give expression to the spiritual dimensions of life. I call them imaginative because they shape our collective imagination, even if we individually do not pay them much attention. We need a spiritually shaped imagination in order to experience spiritual things. The secular imagination does not register the spiritual things of Christianity; perhaps Buddhists and Muslims register spiritual things other than those of the Christian imagination. Christian imagination, necessary to Christian experience of the sort addressed by confessions, requires not only vigor among the imaginative arts but fairly active participation in those arts by Christians. Because most Methodists do not come from art-laden aristocratic families, higher education is their main introduction to the imaginative arts.

We, of course, should be attentive to the evangelical appeal of popular music for reaching people who participate only in popular culture. But it should be remembered that most popular music, excluding blues, jazz, and gospel, has the form of a melody sung above a series of chords that might be played on a guitar. This is the form of eighteenth-century Italian songs for voice and mandolin, and it is innocent of the musical forms of grand opera and art songs that addressed the imaginative issues of the industrial and electronic age. Eighteenth-century music, covered with a veneer of hard rock technology, can no more express the issues of sin and grace today than can eighteenth-century creeds. And the Christian movement is not only a partisan of Western culture. The imaginative arts of other cultures are crucial for the cause. Christian participation in the arts of spiritual depth requires higher education not only among the leaders but in critical mass throughout the Church.
Modern science has been a challenge to Christianity since its beginning, but the twentieth century has seen a dramatic reshaping of the contemporary imagination that produces a special dilemma for any Christian confession. We now know that the universe is far older, vaster, and more intricate at the microscopic level than anything imagined in the Christian heritage until recently, except for the splendid period of speculative thought in the first two centuries after Christ. Human history on earth, including Christian history, is a tiny part of God's cosmos; and we have no scale whatsoever on which to weigh its overall importance. Either we give fresh symbolic meaning to the Christian symbols as symbols, in explicit correlation with scientific symbols, or we separate religion from the rest of life in a carefully preserved museum of symbols. I used to live on Long Island, where many engineers in the space industry were fundamentalists who believed literally in Jesus' Second Coming on clouds of glory. But if you asked them whether he would need a ceramic nose cone to re-enter the earth's atmosphere, they were confounded. The question crossed both of their worlds, which for them had no connection. We cannot make a genuine confession until the gospel is brought to the real world in which we live. The gospel, of course, should transform our world; but it cannot do so until it enters that world. For contemporary Christians to make a serious confession requires a critical mass of higher education in which the assumptions of the scientific world are brought to consciousness and criticism and in which the symbols of Christianity can be understood in their salvific symbolic character.

Finally, any contemporary confession of faith needs to be framed around what we have come to understand about religion and religions. Our age is no different from the other periods of Christian creativity in this regard, and every age has had views about religion. But our age has seen a dramatic acceleration in the academic study of religion. Although some of the creative people in religious studies have been skeptical of or even hostile to religion, what they have discovered of The very nature of the Church as the Body of Christ depends on our ability to educate people to see beyond their congregations.
worth is surely necessary to incorporate into the context in which
confessions might be formulated. Religious studies, with all its
multifarious disciplines and approaches, is crucial for Christian higher
education and especially theological education.

My point regarding confessions is twofold. First, we simply are not
ready in these four areas, and perhaps in others, to construct a
confession that comes from the heart of Methodist Christians on the
cusp of the twenty-first century. If we insist on a confession now, it
can be only retrograde. Second, if we are to get ready to construct a
confession, higher education must play an instrumental role in the
Christian endeavor as never before.

I myself take a dim view of confessions as sources of Christian
identity and unity. They abstract the cognitive part of religion out of
the concrete community which itself is the identity that connects us to
Jesus. But I take a very sharp and positive view of Christian theology
and learning as the best strategy we have, short of the Holy Spirit
pure, to guide us into the twenty-first century with correct faith and
zeal. Only serious learning and theology can give us the knowledge,
understanding, discernment, flexibility, subtlety, imagination,
inventiveness, humility, and compassion to praise God with intelligent
holiness in the Body of Christ. This is a fearsome but bracing mandate
for Christian higher education, especially for theological education.
The very nature of the Church as the Body of Christ depends on our
ability to educate people to see beyond their congregations.

Permit me to close with a personal reflection about theological
education, in which I myself work. At least one-third of its agenda is
the education of persons for ministry in the subjects of preaching,
Bible, history, theology, philosophy, ethics, worship, and the arts of
practical ministry, all in the context of serious research projects into
the four areas I have just discussed: interfaith dialogue, imaginative
arts, science and religion, and religious studies. Without those research
projects, theological education does not bring students into the world
where our hearts lie. Another third of the agenda of theological
education is ecclesiology, the understanding of the Church through the
ages and in the contemporary day. Ecclesiology is not a specialized
topic but the encompassing topic in which the gospel is related to the
contemporary world; it is the context for the first third of the agenda
of theological education. The last third of that agenda is evangelism,
bringing the gospel to all the world, which for most of us means to the
shopping malls where popular culture has taught the worship of
money, power, sex, and the forgetfulness of anything truly religious. Methodist catholic polity has no answer to the destructive criticisms of the conservatives whose hearts have been awakened and whose faith needs to be shared until we ourselves have means to reach outside the Body of Christ to bring in those with no home in God. Evangelism is a topic for another time, but it ought not be stupid or ignorant or leave the people where they are. Evangelism must educate them into Christian ways of life, which is where the work of this board begins.
My introduction to religious studies in public education was, I have always hoped, an anomaly. Offered as a one-semester course at a tax-supported university, it consisted almost entirely of lectures and readings in astronomy! The aging professor was not so much trying to "prove" God from all this as to evoke in his young students a sense of humility and wonder before the numinous. The god so presented, if any, may have been the maker of an immense clockwork; but it was hardly the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or, we would add today, of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel.

Several years later, learning and savoring the sacred story in biblical and neo-orthodox theology, I heard so little of the natural order and its physical side that, as a former mathematics and exact science major, I felt shortchanged. There seemed little to honor in my previous absorption with molecular structures and interactions, my driving curiosity about how things work, the aesthetic satisfaction in equations well-solved—and only little in the moral disciplines of scientific inquiry. Barth, Bultmann, Kierkegaard, and the Niebuhrs were all exciting and preoccupying, as was also my pastoral work in church. But in the back of my mind, I still pondered the relation of the physical reality, with which I had been so fascinated, to this religious

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passion of the human soul in the Bible and in the church. We read part of William Temple’s *Nature, Man and God*, but otherwise, no one in my theological circles seemed to care.

The last half century has provided only partial answers to my questions. It is not that there was any science/religion conflict for me; my liberal upbringing had addressed that issue fairly well. But my other world, my scientific world, mostly seemed left outside in the cold.

The reigning scientific assumption of my generation was purely instrumental. Physical reality was merely a vehicle for supporting and enriching human life. So too, by derivation, was the biological world. Between them, they served both our physical needs and our aesthetic sensibilities. This was an anthropocentric worldview, pure and simple.

Over time, however, other perspectives nudged at this first one. I was invited to a cloistered convent’s annual week of open house and seminars. My assigned topic left me at a loss: “The Theology of the Earthworm.” That week I discovered a tradition that gave nature more credit than had my own. Nature was educative, a source of reflection and insight for the spiritual life. The sisters’ hands-on rehearsals of plowing and planting and cultivating during those pleasant days ascribed a fresh and inherent dignity to the natural order in and of itself.

A Western Definition of Nature

Most twentieth-century Westerners inherited from the Enlightenment a Newtonian view of physical reality. The physical world is like a gigantic clock. Even the widening mysteries of electromagnetic action across "empty" space failed to change this basically mechanistic image of the whole. The technology built on this foundation improved daily life so drastically that little more seemed necessary.

Now, however, Einsteinian relativity and quantum mechanics have joined the verbal landscape enough to suggest that one paradigm shift is beginning to take hold. While common sense dictates otherwise, we know the hard table and chairs are more “space” than “substance”; that their atoms and nuclear components are held in scattered array by forces we nonphysicists understand but little. Even our image of the atom has changed: electrons now appear less as Bohrian satellites orbiting around their respective nuclei than as occasional
concentrations within the energy fields, as defined by complex mathematical formulae. Moreover, we are accepting the Heisenberg conundrum that allows us knowledge of location or motion in the field but never both at once.

This revision of our material understanding of the world humbles those older mechanistic certainties and simplicities. But it does not move us far toward the integration of physics and faith.

**Beyond the Ghost in the Machine**

Biological life is different and greater than the cosmic or terrestrial machine, for we know we are a part of this reality. Because of the difference, we must address issues such as freedom and determinism. In the clockwork scheme, we thought, nature was clearly determined. It was dead. Indeed, the laws of thermodynamics meant it would be running down.

Though part and parcel of the physical universe, biology was always more than a machine. Biological life continually violated the logical laws of entropy. The evolutionary story portrayed increasing complexity and differentiation. True, on the micro-level, or using a reductionist approach, one could always cite a biochemical or environmental situation that "determined" biological outcome each step of the way. (The larger beak helped one variation of a bird survive while the other died out.) On that basis we did our research and deepened our understanding. But on the larger scale, teleological questions remained. Could we read the evolutionary story against a backdrop larger than chance mutation and the statistics of survival? After all, various plant and animal species do adapt toward increased complexity in spite of the "law" of entropy.

At the end of this development is our own human consciousness, less suited for crunching numbers than our computing machines but all the greater for having created and managed those computers and much, much more. How does it all hang together? Nature as we know it has existed for billions of years. But what, we still ask, does the human story with its trivial thousands of years amount to?

The answer to that question may push us to the verge of yet another change in our commonsense image of the world. I have in mind a revolution more subtle than that worked by Faraday's wireless or even by quantum physics. In keeping with the information age, it is a
change not in technology or research but in language and perception.
As in previous scientific revolutions, however, this new idiom requires
a certain freedom of the imagination. Because skepticism is healthy in
any good science, proponents of this new paradigm also need courage.
Most of it flies in the face of conventional wisdom; much of it sounds
flaky or even New Age.

I sampled this paradigm shift when I read The Structure of Scientific
Revolutions (University of Chicago, 1962) by Thomas Kuhn. Kuhn
argues that we must acknowledge the power of paradigms, how in
science they limit not only what we see but also the likely
interpretation of what we see. Sociologists and other cultural critics
show us how we inevitably create our own worlds of meaning and
interpretation. Successive revolutions in perception could be expected.

Not long after reading Kuhn, I studied the bold proposals of process
theologian John Cobb and biologist Charles Birch in The Liberation of
Life (Cambridge University, 1981). Here was a suggestion that "spirit"
not be limited to our human species but be seen (in appropriate ways)
as present in all created ranks, right down to inanimate nature.

Then even more recently I read Gaia by J. E. Lovelock (Oxford
University, 1984). In this slim volume, steeped in climatology and
oceanography, Lovelock cites the remarkable stabilities in such things
as ocean salinity and atmospheric gases and temperatures as evidence
that something more than mechanistic determinism is at work in the
world. Lovelock wants the earth system, the entire ecosystem, to be
seen as an active, self-regulating organism. Gaia reminds us that
scientists as well as religious people can be dissatisfied with
mechanistic language for apprehending the physical universe—hence
Lovelock’s personalizing of the global system, Gaia.

Much more recently, British biologist Rupert Sheldrake’s work has
been popularized by programs on public television and books by
Matthew Fox and Edgar Mitchell, the astronaut who founded the
Sheldrake reviews historical attitudes towards the whole natural
world. He faults the Enlightenment and modern science for
depersonalizing nature. Like Lovelock, Sheldrake sees an open-ended,
almost living quality in the natural world, even below the levels of
sentient species. He goes even further in his conjecture that the laws of
nature themselves may be evolving. Sheldrake proposes that “morphic
resonance” explains some natural phenomena. According to this
concept, an innovative action by a single organism—microbe, bird, or
beast—makes it more likely that subsequent members of the same species, whether or not they have been in any direct contact with the original perpetrator, can and will do the same. Sheldrake thinks that morphic "fields" surround us, just as the whole spectrum of electromagnetic waves surrounds the planet. Morphic fields guide evolution towards the possibilities of certain ends and not others, just as we choose from existing fields of resonance when we select one pattern or another for reception by our cordless phones or television sets.

Chaos theory, reviewed so accessibly by James Gleick in *Chaos: Making a New Science* (Viking, 1987), also seemed to open up nature. Seemingly random action may fit and even alter a broader pattern. In the example of the "butterfly effect," a single Monarch, at the straw-breaking-the-camel's-back point, may vary the entire weather system. Chaos theory insists that no human mathematics can predict all the outcomes of a natural process in the manner so naively visualized by the Newtonian worldview.

**From Here to Ecology**

The shift to a spiritual understanding of nature is undoubtedly being accelerated by the developing crisis in planetary ecology. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the so-called "Earth summit") in 1992, as well as then Senator Al Gore, Jr.'s book, *Earth in the Balance* (Dutton, 1993), convinces millions of doubters that environmental issues go much deeper than acid rain and spotted owls. In the starkest terms, we have to choose between the effort to preserve ecosystems and their inhabitants, chiefly nonhuman species, or the use of natural resources for economic development.

In thinking all this through, we are forced to reconsider the old paradigm that set the human on a plane so far above the rest of creation. We are not sure, for example, that our reasons for sustaining biodiversity, now largely based on aesthetic and medicinal benefits for humankind, are adequate. We hear more accusations that the Christian tradition has misinterpreted the word *dominion* in Gen. 1:28 (see, for example, H. Paul Sammure's *The Travail of Nature* [Fortress, 1985]). The same critics show us how we have underused biblical appreciation of the natural world in Job and the Psalms. We are wondering more often about the intrinsic worth rather than merely
instrumental value of the nonhuman world. We speak of animal rights, of a human place within rather than above the medley of species. James Nash in *Loving Nature* (Abingdon, 1991) raises with others the issues of environmental ethics, justice that acknowledges moral claims of the earth and the natural orders in their own right.

Issues such as these push us back to fundamental questions. How do we perceive biophysical reality now? What status do we give the unnumbered future human generations and the landscape, flora, and fauna of the future?

The feminist movement probably plays a significant role in this emerging scene. In common speech, loving, caring for, and nurturing the earth has been a “feminine” emphasis (and “Mother Earth” reciprocates); exploiting the earth for both human need and greed has been a “masculine” pursuit. As the feminist consciousness waxes strong, so too emerges a new respect for the natural world. Sallie McFague proposes an experiment. Try thinking of the biophysical universe as God’s body, she says. This idea subverts the hierarchical perspective and brings nature to life, giving it radically new worth. In her reading, God retains transcendence, just as you and I transcend our physical bodies. At the same time, our understanding that God suffers from human sin, as on the cross, is remythologized and renewed.

**The Recovery of Awe**

In spite of my early instructor’s love of astronomy, my response to all this, like that of our theological leadership, has been slow in developing. The church has been concerned with stewardship of nature for human good for a long time. But a full discussion of the theological place of nature—which might shed light on the debates between “preservationists,” as John Passmore calls them (*Man’s Responsibility for Nature*, Duckworth, 1974), and the animal rights people on the left and the conservative (not conservationist) folk on the right—has yet to reach enough of our campuses and pulpits. The church’s record has not been monolithic, as Nash and Santmire show. St. Francis is a case in point. But we need fresh thought.

The shift appears to be on the way in the minds of both some science-oriented people and the public. Our theological task is to integrate critically the changed scientific paradigm of “world” with Christian perspectives.
But how is this accomplished? To my mind we err if we attempt to use new scientific paradigms and information in order to prove the existence of God. Apologetics of this kind is a dead-end road, whether we employ the "anthropic principle" (i.e., since the universe produced the human, it must be a purposive system), the Gaia hypothesis, or any other current theory.

However, we may use our new scientific paradigms legitimately to find new joy in nature. We can celebrate the bright goodness of the biophysical aspect of all that is. This ever-mysterious givenness encompasses the dark, predatory side of nature as well, "red in tooth and claw." And we may take satisfaction in a paradigm shift that seems to bring nature back from deterministic mechanics to open-ended evolving life and liveliness.

I would risk summarizing the change by saying it humbles human pride by showing that nature possesses an intrinsic worth beyond its instrumental ordering in service to the human. Like the writers of Psalm 104 or Job 38, we can celebrate both the ordered interrelational dimensions of the natural world (including the ways our own species is served) and the good earth in its own right. Genesis rehearses the goodness of creation before Adam appears on the scene. In the psalms and the wisdom literature we hear such approbation. In this view, utility for human ends cannot be the only test of human decisions about the world.

Nash suggests repentance as part of our posture. It is a legitimate proposal. Like Augustine, who regretted his theft and needless waste of pears earlier in his life, I have my own memory to deplore and confess. At age fourteen, proud of a new bow I had made in a recreational program, I aimed an arrow at a rabbit some twenty-five yards away. It was a summer evening and my family was looking on. To their amazement and mine, the arrow found its mark, protruding equally from each side of the horribly wounded animal, which struggled painfully from view. Human pride, needlessly and appallingly destructive! The ethics of hunting should be one of our current assignments for the Christian pulpit and classroom. We must reread the Genesis creation texts and examine thoughtfully the "rights" of nature, biodiversity, and the claims of future generations.

Our work in all this will involve reflection on the source of value for the natural order. We cannot avoid conflict between natural habitats and the human need for food and living space. Nature itself is predatory, conflictual, and often violent. Isaiah's vision of the lion and...
the lamb is, after all, eschatological. The prophetic opposition to fertility cults reminds us of the dangers of nature worship. Human consciousness and well-being will yet claim a unique place in the natural order, even as we condemn the idea that the human alone has moral worth.

We love the earth because God loves it. If we love it for its value to us alone, we remain wrongly anthropocentric, guilty of hubris. If we love it for itself alone, we make of it an idol, important but out of true proportion. Our task is to see nature whole, cherished by God now and in future time, and to seek out right and just relationships within that frame.

And the earthworm? I am still coming around, on mosquitoes in particular. A natural scientist daughter helps the process. But already I know how I would append my talk to the imaginative sisters. First I would conjure spiritual analogies to the humble and persistent works of the earthworm. But I would also say that, in its own way, the divine ground of all that is affirms and loves the earthworm, too. And I would make apology and amends to my victimized rabbit if I could.
James T. Clemons

John Wesley’s View of Suicide in Its Cultural Context

Comments on John Wesley’s view of suicide focus almost exclusively on his “Thoughts on Suicide,” which appeared in the Arminian Magazine (April 8, 1790). In the one-page statement, he offered his atrocious solution to the “horrid crime” then sweeping England:

Only let a law be made and rigorously executed, that the body of every self-murderer, Lord or peasant, shall be hanged in chains, and the English fury will cease at once.

E. Brooks Holifield was a model of charity when he referred to this simply as one of Wesley’s “less attractive moments.”

It is unfortunate that this one comment has dominated our understanding of Wesley’s view of the subject. A more helpful grasp of Wesley’s thoughts on suicide demands a much broader investigation, one which includes: 1) the historical and literary background of suicide in England and Continental Europe; 2) Wesley’s other statements and comments on suicide and related topics; and 3) a closer, exegetical look at his published “Thoughts” of 1790.

From this more inclusive survey we may grasp not only a clearer sense of Wesley’s overall view of the subject but also insights that can

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be of practical help to those in the Wesleyan tradition who seek to address this tragedy today.

**Historical and Literary Backgrounds**

In its early modern period (1500–1660), England enforced rigid laws against those who took their own lives or attempted to do so. The bodies of suicides were often dragged through the streets to receive public abuse before being left exposed at the crossroads outside town. Their families, besides having to bear this horrible social stigma, were often denied any inheritance on the grounds that the monarch had lost a useful citizen and was therefore entitled to be compensated. Attempted suicides were tried, and if found guilty, were sometimes condemned to be hung.

These extreme social responses grew in large measure out of folk traditions, superstition, stringent reforms under the Tudor monarchies, and long-held teachings of the church, which were designed to prevent anyone from committing the sin for which there could be no forgiveness. Several works document this sordid history and the close relationship between church and state on the matter, the most thorough of these being *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England*, by Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy.

In Elizabethan England, there was a growing sense of discontent with the legal inequities based on social class. As Henry Fedden notes in his early classic, *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study*, there are more than a dozen self-chosen deaths in no less than eight of Shakespeare's tragedies.

Shakespeare's plays employed this behavior with a variety of methods and motives, from the stabbing and poisoning deaths of Romeo and Juliet, to Cassius's order to his captured slave Pindarus to run him through, to fair Ophelia's drowning. There is even that poignant but somewhat humorous failed attempt at suicide on the part of the blinded Gloucester in a scheme planned and executed by his loving son Edgar.

We should keep in mind that Shakespeare not only relied on self-chosen death as an important part of the plot in several of his plays but also did this at a time when both church and state were adamantly opposed to suicide. This evidence demonstrates clearly that public opinion, at least among the many who flocked to see his plays, did not fully support either the law or the church in condemning self-chosen death.
suicide. In none of the plays is there any public outrage against the deed. In fact, most of the characters who died by their own hand are treated sympathetically.

One final comment on Shakespeare: Contrary to what some have argued, he was not always entirely neutral in expressing his views, any more than playwrights are today. Apart from the fact that he never condemned suicide in his plays, in *Hamlet* he included the well-known monologue of philosophical reflection, “To be or not to be” (III, 1). In the same play, he even wrote one clear-cut social criticism. As the two clowns are preparing a grave in the churchyard, after Ophelia had been declared innocent of *se offendendo* by the coroner, they discuss why it is that some suicides are permitted to receive Christian burial and others are not. In sum, they agree it is a matter of class distinction. One says to the other,

> Will you ha' the truth on't?  
> If this had not been a gentlewoman,  
> she should have been buried out o'  
> Christian burial. (V, 1)

To go one step further, he had Laertes severely chastise the priest who sought to deny her all due Christian burial rites:

> I tell thee, churlish priest.  
> a ministering angel shall my sister be,  
> When thou liest howling. (V, 2)

Samuel Pepys, the seventeenth-century London resident whose diary recorded the minute details of life through the Restoration, the Great Plague, and the Great Fire, also reflects the individual protest against English laws on suicide. Pepys wrote that he had personally influenced the king on behalf of his widowed cousin, whose husband had died from an earlier suicide effort. The satisfied tone frequently adopted by Pepys appears justified in this case, because he successfully prevented his cousin from losing her inheritance.

In his survey of suicide, Fedden writes that social and economic changes taking place in this century led to different attitudes.

> With the rise of commercialism and the breakdown of the medieval framework there came a drastic change in the attitude
of society towards the poor. Social relationships came to be regarded by purely economic standards; the sense of responsibility toward one's fellowmen disappeared, leaving in its place an energetic but ruthless individualism.

We shall note below more of this relationship between attitudes toward poverty and suicide.

The literature of the eighteenth century offers insights into Wesley's England and into contemporary attitudes in Europe which further clarify the cultural background of Wesley's published thoughts.

Among prominent English writers who opposed either the laws against suicide or the indignities they caused were Blackstone, Walpole, and Hume. Fedden notes that the stringent application of these laws was more the exception than the rule as early as the late thirteenth century. But it was not until 1860 that the law regarding forfeiture of property was changed, and well into the twentieth century an unsuccessful suicide could still be imprisoned if found guilty.

Although suicide was very widespread in France, there was considerable opposition to punishing such offenders. The classic work in this area is John McManners's *Death and the Enlightenment: Changing Attitudes to Death among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France*. A keen sense of nationalism crept into much of the discussion of suicide in France. One Dominican priest wrote that the problem had come over from England, a view apparently held by many at the time. Some French claimed that the malady came because the Reformation had done away with the confessional, while others blamed the English climate and even scurvy, presumably caused by the uncivilized English diet. One writer reported that in England in the space of fifteen days, three young women had hanged themselves because of unhappy love affairs. But, he wrote, the English townsfolk were upset not so much by the manner of their deaths but because of the fact that two of the three had been in love with Irishmen.

French intellectuals questioned the church's underlying position on suicide. The philosopher Rousseau, for example, was among those who pointed out that theologians could not come up with a single biblical text that explicitly prohibited suicide.

Undoubtedly the most widely publicized suicide in Europe occurred on October 30, 1772, in Wetzlar, Germany. Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem was a clerk of the city's Supreme Court who became despondent when
his love for the wife of a colleague was unrequited. The young romantic's death by a pistol shot was immortalized in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, later the basis of a major opera by Jules Massenet.

Goethe believed that his novel had "galvanized an age," that being the age of *Sturm und Drang* in Germany, where many, especially young men, felt the "weariness of the world," or *Weltschmerz*. The Romantic spirit, with its emphasis on human feeling, independence, and individualism was yielding to the insistent demands of reason, discipline, and social order being imposed by the Enlightenment. On the other hand, Alfred Alvarez, in his important study of suicide titled *The Savage God*, has insisted that the suicide of young Karl Jerusalem and Goethe's popularization of it were the direct cause of an enormous increase in suicides. Jerusalem became a hero, in spite of widespread condemnation of Goethe's enormously popular novel from the pulpit.

The reference to *Weltschmerz* brings us to another important point for understanding Wesley's several comments: the growing recognition in his time that psychological factors were closely associated with suicide. While Wesley followed earlier writers in using the terms *lunacy* and *madness*, they and he spoke frequently of *melancholia*. In his explanatory note on Matt. 11:18, he suggested this condition might be "the influence of an evil Spirit." Robert Burton's influential work, *The Anatomy of Melancholia*, was written in 1621; it went through eight editions in 65 years.

Other frequently used terms for what we today would refer to as depression were "heaviness" and "lowness of spirit," "moroseness," and even "giddiness." (*Giddiness* has a long and fascinating history, and was even used in the Jerusalem Bible as a description of Saul's condition at the time of his self-chosen death in 2 Sam. 1:9.) Both Ben Johnson and the Oxford English Dictionary defined "heaviness" as a dejection or dejectedness of mind. Johnson added "depression of spirit," to equate with "lowness." Wesley defined Jesus' "deep anguish" in Matt. 26:37 as being a state wherein he was "quite depressed, and almost overwhelmed with the load."

Thus, along with a public that opposed gross indignities to the bodies of suicides and which was reluctant to render guilty verdicts against known "criminals," there was also a clear recognition that causes other than mere individual sinfulness lay behind the act. (It was this broader medical understanding that played a large role in Roman
Catholicism’s 1983 change in canon law that allowed known suicides to receive Christian burial.)

In Wesley’s century, social conditions including poverty and religion were still affecting attitudes toward suicide. Between 1770 and 1830 almost one quarter of the suicides in London were directly related to poverty. Apart from the decreased importance of the Confessional, there was a widely held opinion that Methodists were predisposed to a gloomy outlook and demeanor. But these early notions of social influence on individual behavior with regard to suicide were not systematically spelled out until the seminal work of Emil Durkheim, the French founder of sociology, at the end of the nineteenth century.

Wesley’s Early References to Suicide

My research on Wesley’s writings before 1790 has revealed a larger number of references to suicide and related matters than are listed in current indices to his works. We trust that the indices of the Bicentennial edition of Wesley’s Works will correct these deficiencies.

References to suicide in his Explanatory Notes. The first of Wesley’s writings prior to 1790 to be examined here are his Explanatory Notes on the Old and New Testaments. In my own study of the Bible and suicide, I discussed the specific accounts of suicide, plus two suicide attempts. I also commented on more than seventy other canonical texts, plus several more from Jewish literature of the Second Temple period and from early church writers. Each of these I examined in Wesley’s Notes to see what he said that might give further insight into his views on suicide at the time of their publication. To date I have not had time to check for changes in the several editions or to examine the dissertation of Michael Casto to see whether or not at these specific texts Wesley altered the work of Matthew Henry and William Poole, on whom he relied so heavily for his Notes on the Old Testament.

What do the texts tell us? Not surprisingly the large majority of the texts that others have used either to condemn or to condone suicide simply were not used by Wesley as an opportunity for comment on the deed. Thus, he was by no means so intent on pursuing this matter that he had to find some prohibition under every available text.
At the same time, he would occasionally skirt the issue when he came upon a problematic text, either by omitting any comment at all on it or by what comes close to downright waffling. For example, he makes no specific comment on the self-inflicted death chosen by Saul and his armor-bearer, who took their own lives by falling on the sword (1 Sam. 31:1-13; 2 Sam. 1:1-16). As for Samson's death following his prayer for God's help to end his life (Judg. 16:28-31), Wesley said, "This prayer was not an act of malice and revenge, but of faith and zeal for God . . . ." It was Samson's duty as a way to honor God. From this, however, Wesley is led to state his view against suicide most emphatically. (See below, Judg. 16:30.)

Wesley's effort to harmonize different biblical texts was well intentioned, but at times it bordered on a tortured exegesis worthy of Procrustes. Only Matthew's Gospel has the account of Judas's death by hanging, and Acts refers only to his having fallen down and his abdomen split open. Wesley's comment in his notes on the Acts account was, "It seems the rope broke . . . ." (See also Acts 20:24; Rom. 5:7; Phil. 2:22-24.) A few texts, however, did provide occasion for him to make his position unequivocally clear. To cite but a few examples:

Exod. 20:13: "Thou shalt not kill. "Thou shalt not do any thing hurtful to the health or life of your own body or any other's."

Deut. 5:17: (His comment on this second account of the commandment is a series of questions to the reader.) "Have you not tempted any one to what might shorten his life? . . . Are you guilty of no degree of self-murder? Do you never eat or drink because you like it, although you have reason to believe it is prejudicial to your health?"

Acts 16:28: (Paul's cry to the Philippian jailer.) "Do thyself no harm. Although the Christian faith opens the prospect to another life, yet it absolutely forbids, and effectually prevents, a man's discharging himself from this one." (Note: Wesley here refers to Christian faith, but not to Scripture.)

Judg. 16:30: "Let me die. "This is no encouragement to those who wickedly murder themselves. . . . Samson did this by divine direction, as God's answer to him manifests, that he might be a type of Christ, who by voluntarily undergoing death destroyed the enemies of God and of his people."

It is not difficult to see in this last instance how a strong focus on typology can lead to questionable exegesis. A similar use of typology, though perhaps not so extreme, is his comment on Jonah 1:16: "Perhaps Jonah's casting overboard was a type of Christ's death, so
the effect it had upon the mariners might be a type of the conversion of the heathen from idols unto God."

But for all this, there is in Wesley's final note on Jonah (4:11) one of the most poignant, compassionate statements to be found anywhere in his writings. In commenting on God's use of the personal pronoun I, he simply identified the antecedent as "The God of infinite compassion and goodness." He concluded with words spoken by this God directly to Jonah, who some, including Elie Wiesel, consider to have been an attempted suicide:

Besides men, women, and children who are in Nineveh there are many other of my creatures that are not sinful, and my tender mercies are and shall be over all my works. If you would be their butcher, yet I will be their God. Go Jonah, rest yourself content and be thankful. That goodness which spared Nineveh has spared you in this your inexcusable frowardness. I will be to repenting Nineveh what I am to you, a God gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and I will turn from the evil which you and they deserve.

Wesley probably never considered Jonah as an attempted suicide, but we are left with the questions: Had he considered Jonah this kind of sinner as well, would he have refused to say what he did about God's grace and mercy toward him? Or would he have suggested that Jonah was no longer a "type of Christ"? I often prefer to think of surviving suicide attempters as sons and daughters of Jonah, who are still capable of doing great things for God and others.

References to Suicide in Wesley's Journal. On several occasions in his Journal, Wesley gave accounts of suicides. As early as November 19, 1738, he recorded a public suicide by use of a pistol. On September 5, 1755, he referred to a minister of Breage who had castigated him quite unjustly some seven years before. This pastor later was observed to be "thoughtful and melancholy." Some nine months before the Journal entry, the minister "went out to his necessary house and hanged himself."

Other Journal accounts tell of attempted suicides, from which, for different reasons, the person was eventually restored to a healthy and productive life. One woman, on her way to throw herself into the New River, happened to pass by Foundry Church, where she heard singing,
She turned in and began to listen, whereupon God spoke to her heart so that she no longer desired to end her life (October 28, 1747).

Another woman, after several years of suffering, attempted to kill herself several times. Not being able to complete the task, she "repented" and went on to live a healthy and peaceful life (June 22, 1756; see also entry for May 21, 1761, a long story he translated from Ephraim Syrus—whether from the original Syriac he does not say—about yet another suicidal woman).

Wesley wrote of having called upon or spoken with both of these women, which suggests that there was no strong stigma against them for having made attempts to end their lives. While he makes mention of various types of sufferings they had endured (one had a daughter who married without her consent, which he took to have been the start of all her problems), he seems never to have used these as justification for the self-destructive deed.

Somewhat surprisingly, Wesley also recorded his own thoughts about death in a way that was very close to what we today would call suicidal ideation. His journal entry for December 12, 1755, includes such an idea:

As I was returning from Zoor, I came as well as usual to Moorfields; but there my strength entirely failed, and such a faintness and weariness seized me, that it was with difficulty I got home. I could not but think how happy it would be (suppose we were ready for the Bridegroom) to sink down and steal away at once, without any of the hurry and pomp of dying! Yet it is happier still to glorify God in our death, as well as our life.

It is of interest here that he neither chides himself for having had such thoughts nor shows any reluctance in sharing them, even though he goes on to say, with Paul, that it is better not to hasten the end, with or without the "hurry and pomp."

References to Suicide in Wesley's Sermons. One of the most caustic comments against suicide in the Sermons appears in the "The Reward of Righteousness," which was delivered at a meeting of the Royal Humane Society on November 23, 1777. After detailing some of the many cases in which men and women considered dead had been restored to life, he commended those ministers and messengers of mercy, particularly a group of Dutch physicians who were making a study of this phenomenon. He came within a hair's breath of calling
these restorations to life miracles, but even with his hesitancy to do so, he said they were things "neither we of the present generation, nor our fathers had known." He then observed,

Many of those who have been restored to life (no less than eleven out of the fourteen that were saved in a few months) were in the number of those that are a reproach to our nation—wilful self-murderers.

Four other references from the Sermons provide "overtones" regarding Wesley's views on suicide. These speak in a somewhat indirect way about his views on the subject without mentioning it by name.

One such overtone lies in the "Sermon on the Mount," number VII, from his early period of ministry. Wesley used the occasion to speak against excessive fasting which could harm the body.

Yea, the body may sometimes be afflicted too much, so as to be unfit for the works of our calling. This also we are diligently to guard against; for we ought to preserve our health, as a good gift of God. Therefore care is to be taken, whenever we fast, to proportion the fast to our strength. For we may not offer God murder for sacrifice or destroy our bodies to help our souls.

The point is clearly made. Wesley had a high regard for our God-given bodies, even with all their frailties, because it is through them that we accomplish God's will. The point is that we must guard against doing unintentional harm to ourselves—especially the ultimate harm, self-murder—in the pursuit of religious duties.

Even worse is any intentional harm to our bodies. Self-mutilation for religious purposes has a long history. It was common in the Middle Ages but later fell distinctly out of favor. Earlier in the same sermon, Wesley noted that the apostles and those with them did not "eat or tear their own flesh."

The gods of the heathens were but devils; and it was doubtless acceptable to their devil-god when his priests "cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner, till the blood gushed out upon them." But it cannot be pleasing to him, nor become his followers, who "came not to destroy men's lives, but to save them."
There is no difficulty in seeing how the same notion would easily carry over to be another argument against suicide.

A second overtone is in "Heavenly Treasure in Earthen Vessels," which Albert Outler categorized as an essay. It was dated June 17, 1790, only a few weeks after his less attractive "Thoughts on Suicide" had been published. Wesley's chief concern at this point was to justify human suffering, which is accomplished when our frailties, and indeed our sufferings, teach us humility:

... whatever we suffer hereby, we are well repaid if it be a means of "hiding pride from man"; of laying us low in the dust...

In this we see that physical suffering would not be a reason Wesley could accept as a reason for choosing to depart this life.

A third overtone is in one of Wesley's general guidelines for how the Bible is to be used in the formation of one's ethics. With others of his day, he accepted the notion that any act or mode of behavior not strictly forbidden in Scripture was to be evaluated on other grounds. In "The Witness of Our Own Spirit," Wesley focused on the conscience of the Christian and succinctly stated his ethical guideline:

Whatever the Scripture neither forbids nor enjoins (either directly or by plain consequence) he believes to be of an indifferent nature, to be in itself neither good nor evil: this being the whole and sole outward rule whereby his conscience is to be directed in all things.

In "The Rewards of Righteousness," Wesley gave a fourth overtone, this dealing with the notion that suicides could not be forgiven of their last sin. In this address to the Royal Humane Society, he commented on those cases where persons had been restored after appearing to be dead. (The Latin motto on the Society's medals referred to "the Recovery of Persons Still Hanging between Life and Death.") Wesley noted that not a few of these were in a state of drunkenness.

And at that very instant (which is frequently the case) they totally lost their senses. Here therefore was no place for, no possibility of, repentance. They had not time, they had not sense, so much as to cry out, "Lord, have mercy!"
In time questions were raised as to whether or not in the process of taking his or her own life a person might have a change of heart at the last moment, therefore "repenting" of the act without anyone else knowing of it. This led to the ruling that a death could be declared a suicide only if a note had been left.

These references to suicide and their overtones show that Wesley considered suicide to be wrong on the basis of "plain consequence," on reason and tradition, rather than on direct scriptural prohibition. He could not have refuted Rousseau’s statement that theologians could offer not a single biblical text that condemned the act. For Wesley suicide was a sin, a crime, and a national disgrace. But those who attempted it, and perhaps even those who succeeded, were not beyond the wideness of God’s mercy.

Wesley’s 1790 Condemnation of Suicide

With this background we turn again, this time with a more critical eye, to Wesley’s well-known statement of 1790. What can we note there besides the bizarre “final solution” to the madness of his day?

First, the statement shows his keen awareness of social issues in his day, particularly through his wide reading of newspapers and magazines. His writings in the popular press include numerous letters to editors and extended published conversations with other readers. Fedden cited one commentator who said in 1788, "scarce a publication of the day in town or country, but what... shocks our senses with true self-murderous proceedings."14

The response of today’s media to the more sordid cases has changed little in the last 200 years, which in itself raises for us another set of ethical problems related to suicide. On a more wholesome note, it was at the turn of the century, when the "fury" was again sweeping England, that a group of London newspaper editors approached General William Booth to use his personal skills and the resources of the Salvation Army to stop the rampage. Booth accepted the challenge, and for over four decades thereafter, suicide prevention was a major task for his Army.

Wesley’s response to the overwhelming numbers of suicides came out of a genuine social concern. The massive surge of suicides simply had to be quelled, regardless of how preposterous the solution. Even more than Shakespeare, his “Thoughts” call for equal treatment for suicides, regardless of class standing.
Wesley also was aware of shifts in public thinking that, in his eyes, were undermining the criminal justice system and thereby contributing to the spread of the tragedy.

As we have seen in several of his writings, he knew that psychological effects were significant factors in suicides but also that they were not determinative in every case. Wesley considered coroners and juries totally irresponsible when they invariably brought in a ruling of “lunacy” in order to exonerate suicides and attempted suicides. Likewise in this century the idea has been widely held that any suicide was automatically a sign of mental illness, but suicidologists and others now recognize rational suicide as a practice.

Two points not made by Wesley are worth noting. First, no life, no matter how degraded and socially outcast, is expendable. Neither here, nor in any other place I can find, did Wesley allow that human poverty, loss of property, or one’s general social condition were justifiable reasons for taking one’s life. Second, he nowhere acknowledged that the threat of poverty for one’s surviving heirs actually prevented suicide.

A final word on the context of Wesley’s totally unacceptable “Thoughts” of 1790. God intends the preservation of every human life, and Wesley’s anthropology saw each soul as having received God’s mercy. He could never agree with Voltaire, who said we are only “rats on a ship, mice in a castle, sentries at a post that God will not miss if we desert” or with Hume, who wrote, “the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster.” Nor would his belief in the freedom of the will go so far as to allow any harm to be done to the gift of life God alone had given.

Wesley and Contemporary Views of Suicide

Those in the Methodist tradition who are concerned with the widespread occurrence of suicide today, whether from the standpoint of theology, pastoral care, litigation, or personal or social ethics, can gain some practical guidelines from this survey of the cultural context in which Wesley expressed his views.

We are reminded first of the need for valid facts, to know what is really going on in research and statistics, and to dispel the lingering myths that work against prevention, intervention, and postvention. Also, we are reminded of the necessity to know the impact of self-chosen deaths on the judicial and law enforcement agencies.
Directly related to legal matters is the awareness of changes in public opinion, from states such as Michigan, which, until the recent Kervorkian episodes, had no real law against assisted suicide, to states like New York, which have laws against assisted suicide on the books but do not really enforce them. Attitudes affect laws, and religious communities and institutions can still play significant roles in changing or perpetuating what people think.

With Wesley, we must keep the issue of social justice for all citizens ever before us. Some of these issues are spelled out in the recent work by Droge and Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity.*

The United Methodist *Book of Resolutions* specifically calls for a health delivery system that is available to all suicidal persons, whether attempters or survivors, regardless of ability to pay. This resolution goes beyond Wesley’s stated views in calling for the removal of all stigma and punitive measures. The church is also urged to change societal attitudes and the social environment that increase the likelihood of suicide. But even this is only a step in the right direction. Suicide is still an issue of deep religious as well as social concern. If we cannot accept John Wesley’s solution to the problem, we are under obligation to move beyond it.

**Notes**

5. MacDonald and Murphy, op. cit., 78–79.
6. Fedden, 201.
7. Ibid., 227.
9. Ibid., 84
12. Ibid., 189f.
13. Fedden’s conclusion, based on his own research. See Suicide, 203.
17. Fedden, 234.
18. Quoted in Alvarez, 189f.

JOHN WESLEY’S VIEW OF SUICIDE IN ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT
Elderly Suicide Prevention: What Pastors Need to Know

... increase your sympathy with the afflicted, your benevolence, and all social affections ... you could not gain increase in lowliness, in patience, in tenderness of spirit, in sympathy with the afflicted, which you might have gained, if you had assisted them in person.

John Wesley, *On Visiting the Sick*

By seizing on something so apparently simple as visiting the sick, Wesley has provided the Methodists with a practical grounding for what can become radical praxis. In visiting the marginalized, we invite them to transform us, to transform our hearts, to transform our understanding, to transform us into instruments of the divine mercy and justice.

Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*

Pastors need to be better informed regarding the assessment of suicide potential in the elderly. Levels of suicide among older...
persons are on the rise, and it is clergy who are increasingly expected to provide expertise in crisis intervention. The reason for this is clear: a recent Gallup survey found that elders are more willing to turn to their pastor than to their medical doctor or a mental health specialist for help when a friend is contemplating suicide.¹

Whether or not they realize it, United Methodist pastors work on the front lines of mental health. Multiple studies over several decades have demonstrated that tens of millions of Americans seek clergy counsel for personal problems.² A National Institute of Mental Health study found that a severely mentally distressed person is just as likely to ask a pastor, priest, or rabbi for assistance as a mental health specialist—and is more likely if he or she is 65 or over.³

The mental health needs of older persons is increasingly becoming the central pastoral care concern for Christian and Jewish clergy. Presently, those age 65 and over constitute about 12 percent of the U.S. population, a figure that will nearly double by the year 2030. Eight out of ten elders are presently members of a church or synagogue, and over half attend worship at least once a week.⁴ In the United Methodist Church, 50 percent of the membership will be age 60 or older by the year 2000.⁵ A similar demographic pattern is developing within all mainline Protestant churches and in U.S. Judaism.⁶

The threat of suicide may emerge from a number of different factors. Experts estimate that from 10 to 30 percent of all seniors have emotional problems, such as depression, that are readily reversible when recognized and treated promptly. Most elders, however, never receive professional mental health care, which often results in the steady deterioration of mental health.⁷ Older persons are more likely to experience chronic, disabling illness that inevitably leads to death. They fear becoming a burden or tire of considering themselves a burden. Diseases such as Alzheimer’s disease, diabetes, and stroke, given their adverse impact upon families, causes some older persons to justify suicide. Other older persons feel that they have lived most of their lives, have accomplished what they are here for, and think (often irrationally) that they have little more to contribute.

But whatever gives rise to thoughts of suicide among older persons, the rates of actual suicide should raise an alarm. People over 65 comprise about 12 percent of the general population, yet they account for between 18 and 21 percent of the 30,000 annually reported suicides. The suicide rate among North Americans 65 and over is 50
percent higher than in the rest of the population. It rose precipitously (25 percent) between 1981 and 1986 among white males and African-American males particularly. If the present trends hold, it is estimated that the suicide rate among seniors will double by the year 2030.4

**Clergy Need Training to Evaluate Those Seeking Their Help**

Unfortunately, clergy are often woefully unprepared to recognize the suicide potential of persons at risk. In five separate research studies between 1980 and 1992, clergy were discovered to have inadequate skills to recognize suicide lethality.5 In the most recent of these studies, involving 160 midwestern clergy, only one in four was aware that the suicide rate was higher among seniors than younger persons.10

Using a geographically representative sample of U.S. clergy, researchers at the University of Arizona found that Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy demonstrated a level of knowledge about the symptoms of emotional distress (such as depression and anxiety) largely comparable to that of a group of college undergraduates in an introductory psychology class.11

United Methodist clergy have reported that they feel inadequately prepared to respond to the serious emotional problems they encounter in ministry. In a comprehensive national study of almost 2,000 United Methodist pastors, 95 percent indicated having some pastoral counseling training in seminary. Only one in four regarded their seminary training as a significant contributing factor to their competence in the area of pastoral counseling. Over a third of these pastors agreed “that the overall quality of pastoral counseling [in the United Methodist Church] is poor.”12 When a national representative sample of 758 United Methodist parishioners was asked to name the essential skills for effective ministry, pastoral care ranked third, behind preaching and administration.13 It is critical to the mission of the Church that we train pastors and other religious caregivers to recognize mental health emergencies among the young and old, including warning signs of suicide potential, depression, domestic violence, abuse, and psychological trauma.14
Clergy Strengths as Counselor

Despite limitations that clergy have in clinical evaluative skills, the majority of people who seek pastoral counsel report that they find clergy effective when offering emotional support and encouragement, an invaluable skill when working with the troubled.15 When persons are asked to compare clergy to psychologists and psychiatrists on several attributes, the clergy were rated significantly higher in interpersonal skills including warmth, caring, stability, and professionalism and were viewed similarly on listening skills.16 In a Gallup study, 66 percent of the general population indicated they “would prefer a professional counselor who is religious.”17

Sadly, there is a history of negative attitudes among some mental health professionals toward religion and spirituality18 and the clergy19 that is not helpful to the task of building a spirit of cooperation and collegiality between the communities. Moreover, although the great majority of clergy receive some training in counseling,20 very few mental health specialists, 5 to 12 percent, receive training in any aspect of religion.21 It is not surprising that psychiatrists refer patients to clergy less frequently than do other medical specialties or that referrals from psychologists to clergy are rare.22 Mental health professions, with some exceptions, have primarily wanted to “medicalize” the significant existential/spiritual crisis that severe mental distress presents. Pastors have much to teach mental health professionals about helping people whose faith and trust in a benign universe has been shattered by traumatic experiences. There is a need to open much more of a dialogue between clinicians and spiritual healers regarding all mental health issues, including suicide prevention.

Most Suicides Are Preventable

Suicide is the voluntary ending of one’s life. This act is not necessarily proof of mental illness, but it is commonly associated with serious mental health problems.23 In any case, being suicidal is a transient psychological state that leads to a decrease in range of feelings and ability to think. The suicidal person thinks in a dichotomous fashion: either there is a solution to life’s problems or life should be ended. In this mental state, alternative solutions cannot be conceived or considered. This condition may be brought on by intense, intolerable
psychological pain, frustration, or anger that leads to a sense of hopelessness. These feelings of hopelessness and helplessness drive the person to consider the cessation of all consciousness as the only possible solution.

More than 80 percent of elderly suicides give “warning clues” prior to ending their life. Mental health scholars argue that up to half of all suicides may be preventable if those, including clergy, who work with troubled persons are trained to see the warning signs of suicide and have the resources for appropriate intervention and treatment. The majority of a diverse group of congregation-based Christian and Jewish clergy recognize they need additional training in depression assessment and suicide prevention skills. Research indicates that training clergy in clinical evaluative skills considerably enhances their ability to assist those who come to them in emotional distress.

The Risk Factors for Suicide among the Elderly

**Having an Organized Plan.** Not only do elders kill themselves at a greater rate than any other group in society but, they tend to be more determined and purposeful than younger persons. Most fatal suicides among seniors are not impulsive acts; they are planned. The more specific the plan, the greater the danger. An organized plan with available means places a person at very high risk and demands immediate attention. The majority of elderly males who take their lives use a gun. Older women, on the other hand, are more likely to use less lethal means such as drugs or poisons to attempt to end their lives. Therefore, an older person who purchases a firearm during a life crisis is a serious candidate for suicide.

**Previous Attempts.** A history of suicidal attempts is a strong indicator of suicide potential.

**Depression.** Most seniors, perhaps 80 percent, are significantly depressed when they take their life. A major depression is usually associated with a sad or irritable mood, hopeless feelings, pessimistic thinking, fatigue, poor sleep and appetite, and loss of self-worth. Suicidal thoughts are present in 75 percent of individuals who have a major depression. Without treatment, 15 percent of depressed persons will eventually kill themselves. Intense feelings of hopelessness are strongly associated with suicide in the elderly. There is increasing
evidence that depression and suicide may have a biological component for many people; in other words, there may be an imbalance in brain chemicals that affect mood. Decreased levels of the brain chemical serotonin have been repeatedly found in the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord of persons who have attempted or committed suicide. Decreased levels of serotonin have also been associated with increased levels of aggression and impulsiveness that may precipitate suicide.33 The treatment of choice for most depression is a combination of counseling and medication, which is successful about 80 percent of the time.34

Loss of Rational Thinking. Suicidal individuals often develop “tunnel vision” thinking. As noted above, they are usually constricted in their thought processes, unable to see alternate options to suicide and generally exercise poor judgment. In about 10 percent of the severe forms of depression the person will lose contact with reality and become psychotic. The risk of suicide among psychotic depressives is five to six times greater than for other forms of depression.35 In this state of mind, the person may experience delusions—rigid, extremely unrealistic beliefs held despite of strong evidence to the contrary (e.g., “I believe I am the suffering Christ who must kill myself for the sins of the world”). Sometimes people in acute depression have hallucinations—the experience of sensation without an external cause (e.g., “I hear the devil telling me I must kill myself”). Pastoral counselors, clergy, and other church-related counselors may be particularly sought out by persons with religious delusions.36 These persons usually require emergency mental health care.

Gender. White males over 65 have a suicide rate that is four times the national average. By age 85 the ratio of male suicides to female suicides is 12 to 1.37

Alcohol and Drug Abuse. Approximately 15 percent of persons suffering the disease of alcoholism take their life. The combination of depression and alcohol/drug abuse places an older person at high risk for suicide.38

Sickness. Long-term, incurable illness, particularly those illnesses which involve intractable pain, is a high risk factor for suicide among the elderly. One study found that about half of elderly persons who attempt suicide suffered from chronic illness.39
Lack of Social Support. Older persons who are socially isolated and suffer loneliness and alienation are at greater risk for suicide. Forced retirement or an unwanted move to a nursing home places some elders at greater risk for suicide. Older persons who are living alone because of divorce or death of a spouse are at a greater risk for suicide than the general population. The risk of suicide greatly increases among elderly males six months after the death of their wives.40

The Mental Health Benefits of Faith Commitment

More than 50 studies over the last 15 years demonstrate a strong association between traditional faith practices—regular church attendance, scripture reading, and prayer—and mental health.41 These studies indicate that one-quarter to one-third of older adults find religion the most important factor that enables them to cope with physical illness and other stresses. Persons who practice their faith frequently have lower blood pressure and fewer strokes; lower rates of depression, anxiety, and alcoholism; they have higher life satisfaction and greater well-being and are better adapted to the rigors of physical illness and disability. Furthermore, religious persons perceive themselves as less disabled and experience less pain than do those with similar health problems but without a strong faith in God.

Faith commitment appears to provide a buffer against many of the hardships and losses of aging. Faith is a rich source of hope and emotional sustenance in the "desert places" of life, lowering the risk of depression and alcoholism. Faith communities diminish loneliness and isolation by providing an active support network and meaningful voluntary work that lift the human spirit.42 One comprehensive study found that those who did not attend church were four times more likely to take their lives than people who attended church regularly.43 In the high risk group of older men who experienced "the death of someone close," membership in a synagogue or church was a good predictor of much lower levels of depression.44 For older Americans (particularly older African-Americans) the local church represents a vital source of support and companionship.45 Frequent church attendance has been shown to reduce mortality among elderly African Americans and elderly non-African Americans.46 Despite social and economic hardships, elderly African-American women have one of
the lowest rates of suicide, along with the highest rate of church involvement, of any group in U.S. society.47

Pastors Can Make Early Interventions

Pastors are in a particularly useful position to recognize the early signs of suicidal risk. We are often in long-term relationships with individuals and their families, enabling us to observe changes in behavior that may indicate suicidal thinking or depression. We are often called upon in times of crisis where emotional distress and suicidal thoughts may have their origins. Researchers have discovered that clergy are most often sought for counseling in crisis situations associated with grief and traumatic loss "... personal illness or injury, death of spouse, death of a close family member, divorce or marital separation, change in health of a family member, or death of a close friend."48

Clergy are leaders of communities that offer a language and experience of renewal and hope. We are visible and available caregivers in communities that offer a sense of continuity with centuries of human history, a feeling of being a part of something greater than oneself, and an established pattern of responding to crises. Undoubtedly, persons in distress go to clergy in large numbers because emotional pain prompts questions of meaning and purpose. These questions are uniquely addressed by the resources of the community of faith.49

Pastoral Response to Suicidal Elders

Be Attentive. The church member who says things like "I'm not sure I want to go on," "I have nothing worth living for," "Sometimes I wish God would take me off to heaven," or "I don't think God cares for me anymore," is giving the pastor a message that needs to be heard and explored. Some suicidal persons will express their intention to take their life with their actions. Sometimes persons begin to give away personal possessions, plan a funeral "out of the blue," suddenly make out a will, or quit a job without a future plan.50 Remember, most people express their intention to take their life before they do so. Be attentive to cries for help.
Ask Questions. One of the biggest myths about suicide is that asking a person if she is suicidal will encourage her to take her life. The very opposite is true. Bringing the subject out into the open will diminish the danger that the person will act on their thoughts and feelings. Asking a person about his feelings communicates to that person that someone cares and that he is not alone in his struggle.

If you suspect a person is contemplating suicide, ask a gentle, gradual progression of direct questions, such as: "I can see that you are upset. How are you feeling?" "How badly are you hurting?" "Have you ever felt bad enough to consider harming yourself?" "Do you feel suicidal now?" Don't hesitate to ask caring questions.

If a person tells you they are contemplating harming themselves, you need to ask about their plan. "How will you do it?" "When will you do it?" "Where will you do it?" The more detailed the plan, the greater the risk. Do not leave a person alone who has a plan of action and a means to commit suicide. Separate the person from the means of suicide if at all possible.

Referral. Before an emergency situation arises, develop a working relationship with at least one mental health professional who has a comprehensive knowledge of the mental health services in your community. Find a mental health specialist who is open to your expression of faith and willing to work with you collaboratively. Suicide is both a mental health and spiritual crisis. A referral is in order anytime a serious threat of self-harm is present based on the risk factors we have noted (such as a plan or method, prior attempts, significant depression, alcohol or drug abuse, impaired thinking, hopelessness, or chronic illness). A referral is always appropriate when a pastor feels "in over her or his head." The essential help clergy can offer a suicidal person is the support they need until assistance is secured.

The primary goal with a suicidal patient is safety. Treatment may involve hospitalization or nonhospitalization (outpatient care). Inpatient, or hospitalized, treatment is indicated when a high risk of suicide exists; when the person is psychotic, intoxicated, or has a brain disorder; and/or when their social support system is inadequate. Voluntary hospitalization is preferable to involuntary placement, although the latter is often necessary to ensure safety. Outpatient care is indicated when the risk of suicide is determined to be low or the crisis that precipitated suicidal thinking has diminished.
When Suicides Occur

Although many suicides can be prevented by early recognition of warning signs and referral to mental health specialists, the fact remains that suicides do occur. Suicide is the ninth leading cause of death in the United States. Sooner or later this tragic event will happen in most congregations, with devastating impact on the family, the clergy, and the congregation as a whole.

It is very important to underscore that a number of individuals who ultimately take their life have been suffering from serious mental illness for a number of years. In a real sense the factors that lead to the eventual suicide have been set in motion years and years before. One analogy often shared with mental health therapists in training is both true and in some ways comforting, should these professionals experience the loss of a patient to suicide. Preventing a suicide in an individual who has suffered from serious mental illness (e.g., major depression) for a number of years is a bit like trying to stop a runaway train coming down a mountain. As the train reaches the bottom of the mountain it races at excessive speed, making the odds of aborting tragedy slim. Many therapists and the clergy alike are encountering suicidal people who have been in deep anguish for years. At times, despite the best efforts of family, friends, pastors, and mental health workers, such individuals do commit suicide.

Many individuals who have made attempts to reach out and help people who eventually commit suicide are overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and regret. At the heart of the guilt feelings are thoughts such as, "I should have done more," or "Oh my God ... I didn't think he would actually kill himself." People involved with suicidal individuals must face the simple fact that there are limits to what can be done to help others. Very severe depressive illness, oftentimes driven by seriously abnormal brain chemistry, alcohol abuse, and overwhelmingly painful life events, at times presents insurmountable obstacles for even the most loving and skillful of healers. It is guilt which takes the greatest toll on survivors of a suicide ... family, friends, and those who tried to help.

One tremendously important message that can be conveyed to the family and (if appropriate) to the congregation following a suicide is that most suicides are the result of serious emotional illness (not personal weakness, lack of faith, cowardliness, or failure for loved
ones to be supportive). Just as no one should be blamed for losing a battle with cancer, likewise grave mental illness also claims victims.

Pastors counseling the family survivors of a suicide also can be helpful by listening to and allowing family members to express feelings of guilt and regret. Inner feelings often haunt and torment people, and the opportunity to speak out loud with another about such feelings is crucial to the healing process. Often pastors can listen and say, “I believe you...it is understandable that you feel this way.” At some point share your perspective on suicide and mental illness; such compassionate understanding can facilitate what almost always is a lengthy and very difficult healing process.

Self-Care and Shared Responsibility Is Important

It is essential to practice good self-care when working with those suffering emotional pain. Keep in place a strong support network. Consult with colleagues. Recognize your limitations. Take time to nurture your soul. Participate in regular exercise. Working with people in emotional distress in isolation without good self-care practices will place a pastor at high risk of “helper burnout.” The average United Methodist pastor works 56.2 hours a week, nearly 50 percent higher than the workweek in industry. It is a matter of concern that one out of ten United Methodist pastors reports high levels of psychological isolation, abandonment, and loneliness. Plan to continue your education in pastoral counseling. Research indicates that United Methodist pastors who feel competent in pastoral counseling are more likely to seek outside assistance for their personal and family problems in times of need.51

It is vital that pastors do not attempt to take on the entire burden of counseling. Instead, just as Moses was advised by Jethro (Exod. 18:13-23), clergy need to identify gifted and sensitive persons within the community to nurture others as lay counselors. After receiving training in problem identification and counseling techniques, these persons can lead small home-based groups that provide guidance, prayer, and support to those in distress. In much the same manner, John Wesley used small groups in the Methodist revival in Britain to lift up and encourage the community of faith. John Wesley, who lived to be 88, and Philip Otterbein, who lived to be 87, preached and
practiced good self-care skills and delegated responsibility in their caring for others.

**Suicide Prevention Resources for the Local Church**

Recently, the U.S. Navy completed a two-year study of suicide prevention among their personnel. They implemented a comprehensive training program among supervisory staff. The study demonstrated that suicide prevention training significantly reduced rates of suicidal behavior.\(^5\) The United Methodist Church has a congregation in 94 percent of all U.S. counties, a percentage equaled only by the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, the majority of United Methodist churches are in rural or small community settings, where mental health services for the elderly are the most sparse.\(^5\) Increased communication between the mental health community and the United Methodist Church would make a significant contribution to preventive mental health in the United States. Suicide prevention training should be required during seminary. Here is a sample of organizations that offer assistance and information regarding various suicide prevention programs useful in the local church.\(^5\)

American Association of Suicidology  
2429 South Ash  
Denver, CO 80222

International Association for Suicide Prevention  
Suicide Prevention and Crisis Center  
1811 Trousdale Drive  
Burlingame, CA 94010

National Save-A-Life League  
44520 Fourth Ave., Suite MH3  
New York, NY 11220

The Samaritans  
500 Commonwealth Ave.  
Kenmore Square  
Boston, MA 02215
Selected Bibliography


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Notes


Association, the noted Yale University psychologist Seymour B. Sarason lamented the absence of "transcendence" in the discipline of modern psychology. He forthrightly spoke to the bias against religion among many of his peers:

"I think I am safe in assuming that the bulk of the membership of the American Psychological Association would, if asked, describe themselves as agnostic or atheist. I am also safe in assuming that any one or all of the ingredients of the religious worldview are of neither personal nor professional interest to most psychologists. And there are more than a few psychologists who not only have difficulty identifying with any of those ingredients but who also regard adherence to any of them as a reflection of irrationality, of superstition, of immaturity, of a neurosis. Indeed, if we learn that someone is devoutly religious, or even tends in that direction, we look upon that person with puzzlement, often concluding that that psychologist obviously had or has personal problems" (Sarason, 1993, p. 187)

This research may also help explain the fact that Duke University Hospital (founded and supported by The United Methodist Church) until only recently required the written permission of a medical doctor before the person under care in several of its psychiatric units could see a chaplain or their pastor (see note 22).

19. J. F. Schumaker, "The Mental Health of Atheists. (Is Religion a Form of Insanity?)" Free Inquiry 13/3 (1994): 13-16. Psychiatrist John Schumaker laments in this article: "If religion is generally beneficial to psychological health, that is unfortunate." This article is a reminder that non-theists can be as self-righteous as theists; J. R. Meloy, "Narcissistic Psychopathology and the Clergy," Pastoral Psychology 35/1 (1986): 50-55. (This is a particularly egregious example of unsubstantiated psychological speculation used to support a personal bias. Dr. Meloy's hypothesis was empirically tested and found to lack scientific support.) See J. Patrick, "Assessment of Narcissistic Psychopathology in the Clergy," Pastoral Psychology 38/3 (1990): 173-180.

20. A. J. Weaver, "Has There Been a Failure to Prepare and Support?" Orthner, Pastoral Counseling.


39. Frierson, “Suicide Attempts,”


44. J. M. Siegel and D. H. Kaykendall, “Loss, Widowhood, and Psychological Stress"


Laurel Arthur Burton

Negotiating the Faith: A United Methodist Chaplain’s Perspective on Euthanasia and Doctor-Assisted Suicide

I had seen people die before, but never had I witnessed a death that was planned, purposeful, and perfectly legal. The person lying in the hospital bed had a keen and alert mind. Her body, however, had been damaged beyond repair in a terrible accident, leaving her once athletic limbs limp and without sensation. A ventilator breathed for her. She had been furious when she discovered that the paramedics had saved her life. Instead of moving toward rehabilitation, she demanded a court hearing. “Turn this damned thing off,” she mouthed. Neither her doctor nor I felt this was the right thing to do. We spent several hours talking with the patient, her family, and each other. “Don’t you get it?” I asked, trying to match her gruff style. “You’ve got a mind. You have so much to contribute.” I felt then, as I feel now, that it isn’t just a matter of life owing us something. We owe something back to life itself.

It was no good. We argued—as best we could given the circumstances—but the judge handed down an order that permitted her to do what she wanted. So there I was, in a private hospital room where another doctor—her first physician withdrew from the case because he had profound moral objections—would help to end her life.

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life. She wasn't angry anymore. She seemed at peace. (I wasn't, I can tell you.) Her mother stroked her hair, and I held her hand. The doctor was young and obviously nervous. We prayed—she was a very spiritual woman, if not actively religious—and then the sedative was administered, the ventilator turned off. At her death, we all cried.

Why was I there? She asked and I said yes. Simple as that. I wanted to be a sign of God's faithfulness amidst the most tragic situation I had ever encountered. I wanted to "be with" this angry, wrongheaded, strong-minded, and perhaps ultimately faithful woman as she made this final act of will before God. I'll never forget it.

Though I Walk Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death

The move from professional decision-making (paternalism) to patient entitlement (autonomy) set off an explosive power shift in healthcare, culminating, some of us thought, with the Patient Self-Determination Act of 1990 (PSDA).

Despite some of the theological issues attendant to patient autonomy (questions about the nature of divine authority and human faithfulness; responsibility vs. autonomy; quality vs. quantity of life, etc.), there has been a widespread support of the principle in medical decision-making. Some Roman Catholic and Orthodox Jewish groups have even proposed so-called "Religious Advance Directives" to ensure that established religious principles are used in interpreting a believer's wishes. At the same time people like Derek Humphry and Dr. Jack Kevorkian have argued for the logical extension of autonomy to include euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide.

People of faith and goodwill have weighed in on both sides of this controversial, but intensely practical, concern. Somewhere in the middle is United Methodism, or at least this United Methodist chaplain, who those many years ago had his first real encounter with active, voluntary euthanasia.

Though the legal (not to mention religio-ethical?) standing of euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide has yet to be fully determined, the practice does occur. From the well-publicized assistance of Dr. Kevorkian to the less-well known story of Timothy Quill, M.D., patients and physicians are considering these alternatives to protracted dying.

As a chaplain, one of my tasks is to help people find the voice to tell their stories. These stories often have to do with the fear of losing
important connections, the power to influence their own lives, and the loss of meaning. Often I am called to help patients and families tell about their past losses and to express their anxiety that they will lose their capacity to have any say over their lives—or deaths.

I experience my task in such situations as one of conducting or orchestrating the voices and stories of the patients I serve with the stories of faith traditions, medical and nursing personnel, and the larger community. In the midst of all this, of course, is my own story (my fears of loss, my anxiety about losing control utterly, my encounters with meaninglessness); the great Gospel Story of connection, grace, and forgiveness; and the ultimate meaning that I represent as a United Methodist Christian. These things are given. But the paradigms (with apologies to Bob Dylan), they are 'a changin'.

A Story

My heart skipped a beat. It always does when my pager goes off. I recognized the number displayed on the device’s lighted readout. "This is Dr. Bailey" the voice said when she answered my call. "Hi, Mary. This is Larry Burton. Did you page me?" "Oh boy, did I. Got a minute?"

Mary Bailey is one of the finest internists in the city, a woman known as much for her caring and compassion as for her medical expertise. In the next few minutes she recounted the story of one of her patients. "Mildred Carlson is a 57-year-old, married, white female with end-stage metastatic disease," the physician began. "She’s been battling cancer for several years. Even though she’s had two remissions, now she’s debilitated and weak; and her pain is difficult to manage. There are no new treatments available, and Mrs. Carlson and her family know she will soon die. And that’s where you come in." "That’s where I come in?" I responded in my best professional style.

“You’ve got to see her. Since she’s going to die anyway, she says she wants something to help speed things up. She says she doesn’t want to suffer anymore. What’s more, her husband and children all agree with her. We talked the other day, and I sent them away to think about it some more. Today when she came in, she said they had thought it all over and she was sure she wanted to end her life now. She is in terrible pain, and it is hard to manage. I’ve known her for
several years, and she’s a very thoughtful person. So is her husband. I
know they’ve been active in their church, too. They even talked with
their minister. He told them it was their decision. Now she says it’s up
to me. I don’t know what to do. Sometimes it seems like the line
between relieving pain and suffering and helping someone to die is
pretty thin. Will you talk with them?”

“What do you want out of this, Mary,” I asked. “I don’t really
know,” she replied. “Maybe I want you to talk her out of it. Maybe I
want you to say it’s okay. I don’t know. I hope it’s all right, I told them
you’d call,” I said I would. Having heard the doctor’s story, I now
called the Carlsons to arrange to hear theirs.

A Theoretical Stance

The Relevance of Stories. Telling the story was a central task of the
eyearly Methodists. John Wesley’s early “preachers” were mostly
laymen and so emphasized the sermon, with its evangelical message
preached at public worship. The practice of sharing personal
testimony about God’s activity in one’s daily life in smaller groups
also gives witness to the power of narrative in the heritage of all those
who are known as United Methodist.

The late Harry Goolishian has written, “The nature of self [is] an
intersubjective phenomena—a product of telling stories to each other
about ourselves. In this postmodern view we are as many potential
selves as we are creative story makers and tellers.” Goolishian goes on
to observe that “this delicate interdependence of constructed narratives
suggests that a fundamental aspect of social life is a reciprocity in the
negotiation of meaning.” A significant portion of the chaplain’s task
is to help people sort through their stories in relation to the larger story
of the faith community.

We construct meaning through the exchange of stories. Persons in
the healthcare system tell stories not just about the medical event but
about their personal, social, and cultural history; their spiritual and
moral beliefs; and their psychosocial stressors. Where these stories
converge observers/listeners can begin to discern what family
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these as “a patterned and often sequenced set of responses to a given
life crisis which has been found to be typical within a given culture or

A Theoretical Stance

The Relevance of Stories. Telling the story was a central task of the
eyearly Methodists. John Wesley’s early “preachers” were mostly
laymen and so emphasized the sermon, with its evangelical message
preached at public worship. The practice of sharing personal
testimony about God’s activity in one’s daily life in smaller groups
also gives witness to the power of narrative in the heritage of all those
who are known as United Methodist.

The late Harry Goolishian has written, “The nature of self [is] an
intersubjective phenomena—a product of telling stories to each other
about ourselves. In this postmodern view we are as many potential
selves as we are creative story makers and tellers.” Goolishian goes on
to observe that “this delicate interdependence of constructed narratives
suggests that a fundamental aspect of social life is a reciprocity in the
negotiation of meaning.” A significant portion of the chaplain’s task
is to help people sort through their stories in relation to the larger story
of the faith community.

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the healthcare system tell stories not just about the medical event but
about their personal, social, and cultural history; their spiritual and
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these as “a patterned and often sequenced set of responses to a given
life crisis which has been found to be typical within a given culture or
Alan Parry, another therapist and theorist, says that people's behavior

... gets defined and prescribed by larger stories. Because humans narrate the very world into being, we invent stories for every category of living to which we relate ourselves. Since all but the most isolated are members of a community, local as well as national, the story of that community has a defining capacity of what behavior is permissible or expected. 10

Both Fraser and Parry are describing what I call “generic narrative patterns.” I use these generic narrative patterns as a way to better understand the stories individual people tell.

A field research study11 identified three generalized structures of U.S. families. I believe these structures accurately describe elements of “generic narrative patterns.” They express, in a stereotypical way, the negotiated meanings about the nature of the cosmos, human agency, and hope, in the context of which patients—and others—author their moral narratives.12

The importance of this idea is articulated well—though in a slightly different context—by Rivka Grundstein-Amado, who writes:

Authentic choices are rooted deeply in the patient's character and flow from past history as well as from present information. To arrive at a responsible valid statement (the chosen course of action), one has to go back to previous experience (i.e. long-term memory), retrieve relevant information, bring it forward and then link it to the present situation (i.e., the current information provided. [Decisions are] related strongly to the patient's interactive value system, which needs to be explored and clarified.13

Of course, it is not just the patient's values that need exploring. The values of the larger system, of the faith community, and of the chaplain him, or herself require attention as well.

Elements of Generic Narratives Patterns. In using the idea of generic narrative patterns, Alan Parry's warning must be heeded:

It needs to be realized that a story is not a life, only a selection of events about a life as influenced by that person's beliefs.
about herself and others... the person might now choose her own course according to current emerging beliefs about herself, others, and life itself.¹⁴

So far from being the life, the generic narrative patterns I am going to describe are not even the story, but elements from which individual stories are constructed. As such, these stories may vary from person to person.

The three generic narrative patterns are (1) traditional, grounded in the hermeneutics of trust, (2) individualistic, grounded in the hermeneutics of suspicion, and (3) negotiating, grounded in the hermeneutics of collaboration. Each of these generic narrative patterns has its own structural elements and a preferred ethical component and epistemology.

Whether traditionalists, individualists, or negotiators, faithful people seek to tell their stories—especially around issues of such moral significance as assisted suicide—by drawing on the multiple faith resources. Indeed, for people from the United Methodist tradition (with not a little credit to the Anglicans) these faith resources are the heart of theological reflection. The primary resource for most United Methodists is reference to sacred texts.

These “stories of Jesus” and others, are usually, but not always, mediated by religious tradition, those generations of storytellers who have lived out and lived through the old stories and often recast them slightly. Then our faith tradition places significant emphasis on informed reason and faith experience. The “stories of Jesus” don’t just hang out there, like wash on a line, flapping in the breeze, waiting to be taken down. They simply must make sense given scientific, philosophic, and psychological understandings; and the experience of faith has to connect with them somehow. I have yet to talk with a patient, family member, student, or staff member (or a parishioner when I was a local church pastor) for whom this interactive model wasn’t evident in some way in their deliberations about life and living. As will be seen in the chart below, however, each of these faith resources is influenced by the generic narrative pattern as well.

The generic narrative patterns and their preferred ways of dealing with organization, story sources, decision-making, and ethics are presented in outline form below.¹⁵
Table 1. The first generic narrative pattern, the Traditional, is formed using the hermeneutics of trust, or status quo antebellum. That is, events are interpreted through the lens of the way they were. Here the past is both prologue to and model for the present. The narrative theme is “stability through tradition.” The construction of this story is organized in terms of a hierarchy which serves to maintain the accepted tradition. It preserves the territory of the one in power and can be self-protective. It employs Kenneth Boulding’s system “organizer” of threat; that is, the one with power says to the others, “You tell the story this way or you’ll be punished.” Alternatives to the accepted story line are either altered or discarded.

The traditional story tends to be highly disciplined, controlled, and predictable. The epistemology of this story is deductive, presuming a fixed moral order containing certain, immutable values that require strict adherence. Sacred texts—such as the Bible—are understood to contain sufficient knowledge to inform human life and behavior. This is the source of structural organization and religious tradition. Reason is used to articulate the established meaning of the text and tradition.

“Traditionalists” expect people in authority to exercise power while others follow; that is, they tend to defer in decision-making (or in authority roles, they expect to be followed). This is true in the
Divine-human relationship as well. The “rules”-oriented (or priestly) formalist or deontological approaches to moral decision-making are usually expressed in this story.¹⁸

Healthcare providers may encounter “traditionalists” as persons who wish life-sustaining measures to be continued no matter what. Interestingly, some Rules-Utilitarian folks may appear here as well. It is most likely that in the doctor-assisted suicide controversy, physicians will be the ones to express this narrative pattern as they respond to patient requests or public pressure to participate in ending a life. Among patients and families, this story is heard from those who believe that life is a gift from God and must not be voluntarily ended by any mortal being.

At the opposite end of an imaginary continuum, the Individualistic generic narrative pattern interprets experience through the lens of suspicion. The story evolves, in part at least, as a questioning or deconstructing of the more traditional story. It is focused on the idiosyncratic experience of the individual, and the narrative theme is “variety through innovation.” It is thus, structurally, more anarchy than hierarchy. Neither sacred texts nor tradition hold sway. At best both are “interesting” but relative to many other texts and traditions. It is the present moment that counts, and past or future considerations are not necessarily of great importance. Boulding’s organizer here is that of exchange, or what folks in my hometown called “scratching backs.” It is contractual.

Tellers of this story are always free to change the story in ways that are individually meaningful, and so there is little predictability. The epistemology here is reductive, with reasonable knowledge emerging from what the individual experiences rather than from anything externally handed down or received. When decisions must be made, “individualists” will make them in a self-directing manner. Values are relative to individual experience and preference. It is primarily egoist theories that relativize ethical decision-making that are the preference here.

Derek Humphry (author of Final Exit) or the group Concern for Dying, Inc. are good examples of people who employ this narrative pattern. I hear the voice of this story most often in the midst of personal, sometimes hushed, conversations I have after a presentation at a local church or in consultation in my office or at the bedside. It is clearly spoken by some faithful United Methodists, just as the Traditional story is.
Finally, the Negotiating generic narrative pattern is authored in relation to elements of the other two. Appropriately, the narrative theme is “adaptability through negotiation.” Structurally, this way of storytelling is conversational (not just dialectical), with an emphasis on collaboration. The story acknowledges authority and history (both in terms of sacred text and religious tradition) and at the same time values individuality (an understanding of God, perhaps, that clashes with religious tradition) and the present. Integration is the organizer of this narrative. It has to do with shared interests and a sense of the common good. Tellers of this story seek an authentic voice to speak with other authentic voices. The epistemology here is inductive, integrating personal experience with tradition and reasonable suspicion.

When it comes to making decisions, “negotiators” prefer to collaborate not just with other people but with God as well. The ethical system of this story is communitarian with consequentialist undercurrents. The idea of covenant is present here. I believe this is the “master story” of United Methodists, holding the tension between the various elements of the Quadrilateral (sacred texts, religious tradition, informed reason, and faith experience), while always seeking to remain in a relationship with the community, proclaiming that only God is God, and so standing ready to be judged with mercy by God.

Psychosocial Stressors and Narratives. United Methodism has historically shown concern for both inner and outer contexts. “The concept of sympathy was basic to Wesley’s holistic perspective. For Wesley, the well-working of the body was critical to the individual’s emotional well-being. As Wesley quoted on numerous occasions, a ‘corruptible body presses down on the soul.’”\(^{19}\) To this a contemporary United Methodist might add, “...and vice versa.” So, to enlarge our understanding of how generic narrative patterns are impacted by context, we turn to family systems theorists who remind us that individual and family stories (including stories about faith) are affected by two dimensions of stressors: vertical and horizontal.\(^ {20}\)
The Influence of Psychosocial Stressors on Narratives

**Vertical Stressors**

personal/community myths:
- power/authority, connection, explanation

**Horizontal Stressors**

1. developmental — life-cycle transitions
2. unpredictable — chronic illness, accidents, untimely deaths, etc.

**Traditional Generic Narrative Patterns:** Negotiating: Stories about moral decisions, etc. —> Individualistic

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Table 2. The Horizontal stressors include events that are both relatively predictable (such as individual developmental history and the family life cycle) and events that are totally unpredictable (such as major and/or chronic illnesses, accidents, and untimely death). Based on the little information I had, I hypothesized that, among the predictable stressors, Mrs. Carlson was still dealing with what Erikson called generativity. In the family life cycle, the Carlsons had completed the launching of children and were engaged in the reconstituting of the couple relationship. The primary unpredictable stressor I knew about was, of course, Mrs. Carlson’s struggle with cancer.

The vertical stressor dimension includes myths from the past that affect the present, stories that tell people how to deal with the horizontal dimension. 1) Myths about power and authority tell us about who or what is in charge; they tell us about our own roles in life, about how much freedom we have—if indeed we have any—and the degree to which our lives/destinies are determined, etc. 2) Myths about connection tell us how we are related; how safe this or that relationship is, what must be done to maintain it, what happens if it ends, how we must act in the midst of our relationships, how close or distant we should be, etc. 3) Myths of explanation tell us what it all means, the degree to which things do or do not cohere. They provide an overall scheme for understanding life’s events. We care providers such as chaplains have our own myths of power and authority, connection, and explanation as well; and these interact with those of the others in the system.

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I wanted to learn about the Carlsons' myths of God's authority, about persons in authority, about how one's own authority might affect the way the experience of power was being experienced in the present. Their family patterns of communication, legends, secrets, legacies, etc. are examples of the myths of connection I might explore. Here it can be especially important to listen for clues about the image of God, formal (Thou Shalt Not's, for instance) or informal (Good Christians Never Complain.) moral injunctions, as well as distinctive family material ("It was terrible the way your uncle used up all his savings caring for Aunt Maude.") Finally, I would look for the Carlsons' way of explaining things. The story is told that Albert Einstein was once asked "What is the most important question a person can ask?" His answer was simple: "Is the Universe a friendly place?" How friendly was the Carlsons' universe? I felt it was my role as a United Methodist chaplain to give some testimony to that friendly universe, but I didn't know how that witness would affect the Carlsons.

Narratives and Moral Decisions. Alan Parry says, "While each of us is the central character in our own stories, we are also characters in the stories of all those others with whom we are connected whether by marriage, family, friendship, or simply by being an inhabitant of the earth." He also observes,

such mutuality of involvement in each other's stories gives us a stake in one another, one we simply cannot escape. For this reason, the stories we make up to make sense of our lives can only go forward to the precise extent that each participant plays a supportive role in the other's stories.21

This is an expression of the construction of morality. The word entered the English language in the 14th century from the Latin word moral, meaning custom. Some say it comes from Cicero's translation of the Greek ethikos, meaning "typical or proper behavior of human beings in society." In this reading, then, people know about or derive their sense of morality from the supportive confluence of stories. The last entry in each of the generic narratives in Table 1 suggests the preferred moral "format" for each story.

In a pluralistic culture, when individual authors use different generic narrative patterns and these intersect with vertical and horizontal psychosocial stressors, moral dilemmas may result. Tom
Beauchamp and Jim Childress say that "moral dilemmas arise when one can appeal to moral considerations for taking each of two opposing courses of action." That is to say that when the patient's story does not receive the support it needs because there is a narrative clash with the other's story—whether physician, nurse, allied health provider, or clergy—neither can go forward in a creative way. The sense of "typical or proper behavior of human beings in society" cannot be ascertained.

If Dr. Bailey had said, "Good doctors do not do such things; it's against professional and religious codes," it is unlikely that she and the Carlsons would have engaged in any further moral discourse. The Carlsons might, in fact, have sought the help of someone they didn't know in pursuit of their own moral ends. If Dr. Bailey had simply said, "It's up to you; whatever you want," there might not have been a moral dilemma in the more formal sense, but the Carlsons might not have considered their moral decision quite as deeply. Here is an important place for the work of the chaplain, who has been described as "servant of health, value-committed cultural anthropologist, negotiator of worldviews, stimulator of ethical deliberation, and stimulator of spiritual growth."

I believe that the Negotiating stance, grounded in the narrative structures presented above, is consistent with the overall approach of Wesley, given his commitment to both a reliance on God and personal responsibility.

Negotiating Faith Stories

These descriptions of generic narratives are meant to invite healthcare providers to risk hearing the narratives of their patients and to risk the conversation between/among those narratives and one's own. My own story, in all its complexity and richness, is also important in the negotiating process. While there is a theoretical relativity to these stories, I as a chaplain, no less than others in the healthcare system, have my own particular, deeply held faith stance, which I bring to my conversations with patients and others. Central to our training as chaplains, however, are the principles of listening, presence, and compassion. Most often this translates into a stance of faithful, nonjudgmental responsiveness, so that the patient (or other to/with whom we minister) is free to express her/his own story and have it
heard and valued and to encounter the version of the gospel story we tell.

People operating within the structures of the traditional generic narrative most often understand the issue of euthanasia and/or doctor-assisted suicide in terms of the quantity of life where death is the evil to be avoided. On the other hand, those who tell a more individualistic generic narrative tend to focus on quality of life concerns where suffering is evil. Sometimes, says William May, the attempt to eliminate suffering leads to the elimination of the sufferer.

My physician colleague certainly wanted to relieve suffering but appeared to be uncomfortable with the prospect of helping to end her patient’s life. Further, it sounded to me as if the physician did not see this as only a patient decision. The physician was being asked to participate in the intentional ending of a patient’s life. A spouse and children were also involved. Others would be affected as well. Would helping to end the life of this patient remove the suffering of the entire system? I doubted it. Might it change the context of the suffering? That was possible, I thought.

Mrs. Carlson and her husband responded warmly to my call. They agreed to meet me in my office the following week when they were coming to the medical center for an appointment with Dr. Bailey. When we met it was clear that Mrs. Carlson was suffering great discomfort. She smiled at me graciously, but her face was pale and her voice was pinched with the tension that comes from fighting intractable pain. Her husband assisted her to a chair. She apologized for her slow movements and appearance but qualified the remark by saying, “But I guess you know by now that it just goes with the territory.” Mr. Carlson was attentive to his wife’s needs and sat close by her side. I thanked them both for coming. “When I exhausted my own sick leave, I took a leave of absence to be with Mildred,” Mr. Carlson explained. “I go everywhere with her.” “We go nowhere, these days,” his wife corrected. “I just can’t take it. It’s too much.” “I understand,” I said, “that’s some of what you’ve been talking about with Dr. Bailey.”

Their story sang like a duet, with Mrs. Carlson taking the melody and Mr. Carlson offering both harmony and counterpoint. The text included concerns about finances and focused on Mrs. Carlson’s “right to die” when and how she wanted. Throughout, they stressed what they called “deliverance.” They even referred to the Hebrews’ exodus from Egypt as the metaphor for the proposed doctor-assisted
death of Mrs. Carlson. “God doesn’t ask people to live under insufferable conditions,” Mrs. Carlson concluded. “He shows the way over. I’m no more afraid of dying than the Hebrews were of crossing the Red Sea. I know that on the other side there is a land of milk and honey waiting for me, where I can wait for Fred, too.” She patted her husband’s hand and looked at him fondly. Mrs. Carlson then turned to me sharply. “Oh my goodness. It never occurred to me you might not understand. Do you? Do you understand how we feel?”

I told the Carlsons that I thought I did indeed understand. “But,” I added, “not all Christians would agree with you. Some would argue that since only God creates life, only God should take it, and that it’s not acceptable for people to make such decisions for themselves. Deliverance is God’s alone to determine. It wasn’t the Hebrews who decided to leave Egypt; it was God who called them out. What would you say to that?”

“Other people can believe what they want. It’s what I believe that’s finally important,” Mrs. Carlson responded. “The Hebrews responded to God, all right; and I am, too. I know what’s best for me, and I know about my relationship with God.” She was silent then. “And how does Dr. Bailey feel about this?” I asked. After awhile Mrs. Carlson sighed and smiled. “She’s so wonderful. Been with us every step of the way. I don’t think she’s prepared to make this last step, though. That’s why she wanted us to talk with you. Isn’t that right?”

I said that while I couldn’t speak for Dr. Bailey, I thought it might be something like that. I went on to say that many doctors were opposed to anything that would hasten the death of someone who was conscious and competent. They’ve been trained to do good and to avoid harm, I added.

“Of course there’s Dr. Kevorkian,” I continued. “Pisssssh,” exclaimed the Carlsons together. The hissing sound they emitted was like steam releasing from an old-fashioned radiator. “People hire him because their own doctors won’t listen. Nobody really wants him!”
He's a stranger. He doesn't really know those people. He's no answer," declared Mrs. Carlson. "If Dr. Bailey absolutely says she won't help, I'm not sure what we'll do. I guess it would make a difference if she was really opposed."

I couldn't help but be struck by the observation that this part of the Carlsons' reasoning was similar to that of three doctors writing in The New England Journal of Medicine. These practicing physicians proposed several "tests" to be applied to requests for doctor-assisted suicide. Among these were: the patient must have an incurable condition associated with severe, unrelenting suffering, and the patient must understand the medical problem. The first task should always be to control the pain and suffering. Requests for assistance in dying must be "clearly and repeatedly" made, and the doctor must ensure that the patient is exercising sound judgment and is not afflicted by a treatable depression. The patient's own physician should be involved to ensure that there is a relationship that spans time. An independent doctor should give a second opinion, however; and everyone should sign some sort of informed consent. It is interesting to note that Wesley, in an essay "Thoughts on Nervous Disorders," was also concerned about the impact of illness on the mind. He wrote:

"Does not this imply that a kind of faintness, weariness, and listlessness affects the whole body, so that he is disinclined to any motion, and hardly cares to move hand or foot? But the mind seems chiefly to be affected, having lost its relish of everything, and being no longer capable of enjoying the things it once delighted in most. Nay, everything round about is not only flat and insipid, but dreary and uncomfortable. It is not strange if, to one in this state, life itself is become a burden; yea so intsupportable a burden, that many who have all this world can give, desperately rush into an unknown world, rather than bear it any longer."

This emphasis on wholeness and on the way body, mind, and spirit affect each other was central to Wesley's approach to health and medicine and therefore influences the approach of many United Methodists. The absence of clinical depression and the presence of an active spirituality, were important pieces of the overall story.

"What are you going to say to Dr. Bailey?" Mr. Carlson asked then. "What do you think?"
Indeed, I wondered. What would I do in their situation? What rules or guidelines would I use? "Well," I began, "I don't think there is a clear right or wrong answer. Like most Christians, I believe in the sacredness of life. I also believe that God gave us the power and strength to make responsible decisions. I can even imagine situations when I might not want to live or when I might pray for the strength to end someone's suffering. Frankly, if I were in your situation I don't know what I would choose, Mrs. Carlson. But right now I don't think I would make the choice you seem to have made."

I believe that the reluctant, careful, but compassionate and prayerful consideration of the guidelines for doctor-assisted suicide such as those suggested by Cassels and others can lead to faithful decisions. In light of that possibility, I continued: "You both have given this much thought and consideration. Others need to be included, too. I know you’ve talked with your children, but I think you need to spend some time with your own pastor. That is no less important than the time with your doctor, I think. I understand that you’ve prayed and waited and listened. A little more knitting together of the network can only serve to ground any decision more deeply. That's what I'll say to Dr. Bailey." They smiled. "Thank you for your honesty, and for talking the time to talk this through. May we stay in touch?" I said I would like that very much. We prayed together and they left.

I called my friend and asked her to have lunch with me. "Before I tell you about my conversation with the Carlsons," I began, "I want to hear more from you. As I recall, when you called me you said something about its being a thin line between relieving pain and suffering and helping someone die. Tell me more about that thin line."

"Thanks for asking," she began. "Around here it's not so easy to talk about things when you don't have an answer all ready." In the story that followed, Mary Bailey told of her love for medicine and her deep sense of commitment to her patients. "Sometimes I feel like a throwback." "How so?" I asked. "Well," she said, "it's mostly around this whole issue of autonomy. I just don't think it's always up to patients to call the shots. Doctors have feelings. Doctors have knowledge. Doctors have responsibilities."

"Does it seem like the Carlsons are trying to force you to do something you don't want to do?" I queried. "No, not the Carlsons. They're really wonderful. I think that's just it. If they wanted to try to make me participate in her death, I'd feel better about saying no."
They’re so reasonable, though, so damned reasonable. That’s what makes it so hard.”

“So you really don’t want to help her die?”

“I really don’t want her to have to keep on suffering like she is; I’m certain of that. She puts up such a good front. You surely saw it. But behind that, there’s never a moment when she’s not in pain, and it’s just going to get worse. And he’s on a leave of absence. Did they tell you that? He’s not getting a penny right now. They’re living on their savings, or what’s left of it.”

“Anything else bothering you, Mary?”

“You’re right. I don’t want to do this. But is it so bad to help someone die? I mean, when they’re going to die soon anyway? I can’t imagine God or anyone else thinking that her kind of pain is somehow special or holy.” I reminded her of the idea of redemptive suffering.

“If you think that’s a good idea for you, then you suffer. Maybe somebody else doesn’t want to. Maybe it takes just as much faith and courage to face the suffering and deal with it. Maybe as a physician, I ought to be more concerned about showing mercy and compassion for my patients than for myself.”

“A little compassion and mercy all around wouldn’t hurt,” I commented. She smiled and made a face. We talked for a while more.

I told her about my conversation with the Carlsons, just as I said I would. I also said I thought if she could, she ought to participate in those conversations with the family and their pastor. She did.

The story needs to stop here because it is not the ending that is important but the process. My task, as I understood it, was to listen, describe, assess and negotiate the stories being told, including my own. If I had been the Carlsons’ pastor (or in the event they had no clergyperson), I would have had an additional role in the further conversations and, continuing with the Carlsons’ metaphor of the Exodus, in facilitating the choosing or construction of some kind of ritual to bind up and mark before and with God whatever the final decision was.

I Will Fear No Evil

I do not believe that either a simple rule or personal relativism holds the answer to the question about a faithful response to doctor-assisted suicide. I believe that life must be valued, but we must be careful not
to embrace mere vitalism. Created life is limited, so neither life itself nor a final reliance on a lively intelligence should have the final word. I am certain that it is important for the faith community to rethink the idea of suffering. For instance, why might it be easier to suffer a hastened death than to suffer intractable pain?

Further, as people who have been entrusted with the gift of life and the power to make life-and-death decisions, we must responsibly balance personal autonomy, justice, and doing good/avoiding harm. In addition to relating scripture, tradition and reason to difficult situations, we must further the character-forming qualities of both the church and the social institutions of the larger culture. An ethic of character and responsibility can be a powerful alternative to that of teleology or deontology.

Finally, we must reclaim suffering and death from the language of privacy and place it again as a relational experience, making decisions in the context of the faithful self of the patient, the healthcare providers, the faith community, and the family and extended circle of intimates.

Writing as a United Methodist, I am always aware that only the words of our governing body, The General Conference, speak for the denomination. My claim that we are, at heart, a negotiating tradition means that within the denomination there are those who are going to tell stories reflecting the pattern of the traditionalist or individualist. Not all United Methodists take the personal stance of negotiation I have embraced. While the domestic theological debates of United Methodists are almost thermostatic—or pendular, perhaps—I believe the broad, overall themes of Mr. Wesley and the story he told provide for practical reflection on the relation of the incarnate God of transcendent dimensions (or vice versa) with God's created world.

Personally, I am not yet ready to support public approval of active euthanasia or doctor-assisted suicide. But neither am I willing to exclude these possibilities from the range of faithful human action. Finally, only God is God, and God's twin thrones of judgment and mercy will determine any ultimate Truth about this question.
Notes

1. Massachusetts Catholic Conference, 60 School Street, Boston, MA 02108; Rabbinical Council of America, 275 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10001.


5. Active Euthanasia, Religion, and the Public Debate (The Park Ridge Center, 676 N. St. Claire, Suite 450, Chicago, IL 60611).


7. All the names here have been changed and the situations disguised to protect the confidentiality of participants. Each has, however, given permission to relate their stories.

8. H. Goolishian, unpublished paper available from the Galveston Family Institute, Galveston, Texas.

9. J. S. Fraser, personal communication at the AAMFT Convention, Washington, D.C.


18. These categories are adapted from R. Veatch.

23. Parry, "A Universe of Stories."
26. This and the observation that follows were first suggested by William May, Ph.D.
28. J. Wesley, Works, vol. 11, p. 516, as quoted in Ott, "John Wesley on Health and Wholeness."
Gregory S. Clapper

Leadership and Religious Experience: Old Testament Lectionary Readings For Four Fall Sundays—Year A

These Old Testament lectionary readings all deal in one way or another with two key themes for our life together as a believing community: the nature of leadership and the biblical understanding of "religious experience." The responsibility, accountability, and privileges of leadership are shown with dramatic force through the focus on key events in the lives of Moses and Joshua. Since fall is the time when local church "nominations committees" work to fill the slate of church officers for the following year, these texts might provide the minister with a helpful platform to show the congregation a vision of the biblical image of a leader.

On the other hand, with these texts coming at the end of the long "Season after the Pentecost," these texts could be helpful in planning a sermon series on the nature of "religious experience." Since Pentecost was celebrated many months ago, it might be helpful to remind the people at the close of the season that the believing community's experience of God is not exhaustively described by the Acts 2 "tongues of fire" passage which started this season. Without denying the importance of the special gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, these passages remind us that people were having experiences of God long

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before that day, and that people continue to have such experiences. These stories about Moses and Joshua can help us understand and interpret our own various experiences of God.

Though these lectionary readings are scheduled for the Sundays of October 20 through November 10, the church calendar might allow some flexibility here. If your congregation wanted to celebrate Laity Sunday when the United Methodist church suggests (October 20), and if your guest speaker preaches outside the lectionary (as they often do), one could slide these four weeks worth of readings forward one week. This would finish the cycle just in time to celebrate Christ the King Sunday/United Methodist Student Day (November 24), which would be followed by the beginning of Advent (December 1). This way a four-week cycle on leadership or religious experience (or some combination thereof) could be preached without ignoring these other events.

Since these texts take us back to Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua, it might be helpful to ponder a basic hermeneutical question: How are we to understand the significance of ancient figures like Moses? The so-called "historical" books follow the Pentateuch, starting with Joshua. Are we then to contrast these "historical" books with those that are not historical? Time magazine recently asked this question on its cover: "Is the Bible Fact or Fiction?" (12/18/95). The article suggested that Moses himself might never have existed, since there is no archeological evidence for him.

Such a question overlooks the basic nature of the purpose of a canon of religious texts. The religious point of a passage is not what can be verified by outside researchers but what can be verified in the lives of believers. The question that the religious community brings to the texts is this: How can these texts be used to form people in the Christian way of life? In other words: How can these texts promote Christian spiritual growth? The answers are shown not in things that archeologists can find but in the quality of the hearts and minds and lives of those who read them as Scripture.

The specific questions that we will bring to these particular texts are these: In the context of a believing community, what does it mean to be a leader? What kind of experience should such a leader have? For what is the leader to be held accountable? What kind of experiences should a leader lead his/her people out of, and into? What kind of commitments should a leader ask of us? If we can help our
congregants gain answers to such questions by pondering these texts, we will have accomplished quite a bit.

October 20, 1996, the 21st Sunday after Pentecost
Exodus 33:12-33
Ps. 99
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

"Encountering God: What Next?"

In this passage, Moses bargains, cajoles, and pleads for divine revelation. Moses seeks assurance that God will accompany his people despite their recent folly. "Show me your glory, I pray" (33:18). God agrees, but only after making clear that God will not be manipulated into it ("I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and show mercy on whom I will show mercy" 33:19). Even after agreeing to this "revelation," God tells Moses that he has to be hid in a cleft in a rock and can only behold the "back" of God (33:21-23). This limiting of Moses' access to God's glory, though, is itself gracious, for "no one shall see me and live" (33:20). God allows only as much experience of divine glory as we can bear.

The context of this passage in the canon makes Moses' pleas especially pointed. In the previous chapter, Aaron led the people astray with the golden calf; that action enraged Moses and led him to smash the tablets containing the Ten Commandments. In preceding verses of the present chapter, Moses went into the tent of meeting (where "the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend," 33:11), and it is here that Moses asks for a glimpse of God's glory. Immediately after God accedes to Moses' request, chapter 34 begins with the Ten Commandments being given again on new tablets of stone, and the covenant is renewed. This encounter in chapter 33, where Moses bargains with God for a glimpse of God's glory, is therefore pivotal in the whole story of God's dealings with the people after the Exodus.

Most clergy are well-acquainted with the five stages of dying and grieving first systematized by Dr. Kubler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Usually our work as ministers is understood as helping people proceed through the stages to the goal of acceptance. While mental health experts tell us that most people have
their own idiosyncrasies in grief and we should not impose a rigid pattern on everyone, these five stages are still very often lifted up as a pattern that helps to understand the overall grief process. What, then, are we to make of this Scripture passage that contains some of the most shameless bargaining with God that one could imagine? Especially since the bargaining is seemingly not a stage on the way to acceptance but instead leads to God saying yes!

This contrast shows the difference between a secular understanding of “natural” stages toward accepting the “inevitable” and the biblical process of “wrestling with God,” the latter seen not only in this passage with Moses but especially when Jacob wrestles with God and is renamed “the one who struggles with God”—“Israel” (Gen. 32:24-28). We are called to bring all of who we are into our encounters with God: not just passively accepting whatever God chooses to give us but boldly speaking our deepest desires to God. This is consistent not only with Paul’s thrice-repeated request to be delivered from his thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:8-9) but also with Jesus’ asking three times in the garden of Gethsemane that the cup might pass from his lips (Matt. 26:36-46). We also see in Jesus’ prayer what puts all such requests into the category of truly biblical prayer and not a magic-like process of “bargaining” in the Kubler-Ross sense; after each request Jesus speaks the all-important, humbly qualifying phrase “yet not what I want but what you want.”

God grants Moses' request, but the context shows us that this was not a selfish request for aggrandizement or a self-delusional act of denial. Moses' request was a plea to be empowered for leadership. What follows the granting of this request? Moses receives the Commandments again and goes off to try to lead his rebellious people in a life of obedience. Moses was not asking for a permanent release from the trials of the world. Instead, he wanted to catch a glimpse of God's glory so he could again serve God faithfully after having his heart broken by his people's worship of the golden calf.

Would not a real glimpse of God’s glory be enough to enliven and motivate any leader, clergy or lay? I think we would all say “yes,” but then two questions would immediately come to mind: What would it be like? How can we experience such a thing today?

What would it be like to experience the glory of God? The text describes God’s willingness to show it and the conditions for it (e.g., Moses being hid in a cleft and exposed only to the backside of God), but then the chapter ends and the hope of any description ends with it!
The actual encounter is not narrated, only the preparations for it. Here we must ask, Could it have been described? Could such an encounter be put into words? Perhaps those who write hymns of praise have come close. Oddly enough, though, Martin Luther attempted to give a fuller picture of what this encounter between Moses and God was like, and he puts a decidedly Christian interpretation on it. In so doing, he provides an answer to our second question: How can we experience this today?

Luther takes this strange passage about Moses encountering the "back" of God as providing a paradigm for what it means to be a true theologian. In his *Heidelberg Disputation*, Theses 19 and 20, Luther says:

19. The person who looks on the invisible things of God, as they are seen in visible things, does not deserve to be called a theologian.
20. But the person who looks on the visible rearward parts of God (visibilia et posteriora Dei) as seen in suffering and the cross does deserve to be called a theologian.1

Taking this as a clue to the text could lead the preacher into other rich themes, such as pursuing Luther's "theology of the cross" or perhaps meditating on Matthew 25:40, where Jesus said, "As you have done it to the least of these [strangers; the sick; the imprisoned, etc.]... you did it to me." As anyone who has ever visited the sick or comforted the mourning knows, God's glory is often revealed in these "rearward parts" of suffering and crucifixion. In fact, how does Scripture say love is demonstrated most clearly? Not in the romantic couple skipping through a field of daises, but someone choosing to "lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). In any case, when we use this passage to encourage leaders to be empowered for their task by encountering the glory of God, it is good to keep in mind what the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (nouv) says in its note to this passage: "... the narrator stresses that God remains hidden (v. 20) even when most palpably present."

In the end, the question is not so much what "experiences" define what it means to be religious or what experiences empower leadership or even what it is like to encounter God. The key question instead is this: What experiences are made possible by encountering God? What comes next? This passage gives a clear answer: not a never-quenched
desire for more and more personal revelations but a fully energized desire to serve God and God's people. Conveying these priorities can set a congregation afire with the vibrancy of joyful, selfless service.

October 27, 1996, the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost
Deuteronomy 34:1-12
Ps. 90:1-6, 13-17
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-46

"Accountable for Holiness"

The reader might remember from his/her "Introduction to Old Testament" class that the Book of Deuteronomy is ostensibly Moses' final speech (or series of speeches) to his people, a summarizing of their history and a reaffirmation of the covenant between God and them. The end of Deuteronomy picks up the story where it was left at the end of Numbers. The lectionary lesson for this Sunday is in fact the last chapter of Deuteronomy, which makes it the last chapter of the entire Torah or Pentateuch, the most important of the three sections of the Hebrew canon.

The most crucial event in this passage is the death of Moses (34:5), which is followed by Joshua's taking over leadership of the people (34:9). Given the theme of leadership in the readings for these four weeks, one could certainly take this as an occasion to speak about the change of leadership that a new year brings in a church. No one person can accomplish all that God wants done, and there comes a time to pass the torch on to the next generation of leadership.

At those times, we should celebrate the leadership of the past, learn from their time at the helm, and look to the future with anticipation. This is just what we see in the story of Moses' death. Moses is mourned, wept for, and eulogized (34:10-12); see especially 34:10: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" [emphasis mine]. Though we might say (based on last week's reading) that it was more "face to back" than "face to face," the extraordinary intimacy between Moses and God was one of the most salient features about this great leader, one of the things to lift up, celebrate, and remember with thanksgiving at the time of his death.

Joshua takes over, and he, too, seems to be unusually well qualified for leadership because of his peculiar experiences. Verse 9 says he was "full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on
him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses [emphasis mine]. There seems to be a kind of experiential pedigree at work, tracing Joshua's experience back through Moses, the one who had direct access to Yahweh.

One way to preach on this text—and deal with the question of the passing on of the authority of leaders—would be to say that a good lineage can give us a good start, but it does not guarantee results. This would allow a sermon on the theme "God has no grandchildren." The thrust of this is that we all need to have our own relationship with God as our parent, that we cannot depend on the exceptional relationship with God of those who went before us to see us through. We cannot count on God blessing our work simply because we stand in a line of great leaders. We all have to seek our own direct relationship with God (as, in fact, Joshua goes on to do).

But one could pick up a different aspect of the theme of leadership in this rich passage if one desired. If last week's reading was about the religious experience of our leaders and how it is to empower them for service, this week's could be about the responsibility and accountability of leaders. Perhaps one of the most troubling parts of this lection is the question of why Moses was prohibited from entering into the promised land ("I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there" 34:4). Deut. 32:48-52 explains this by saying that Moses failed "to maintain my holiness among the Israelites" (32:51). It seems reasonable to bring in this text and preach on the accountability of leaders, how no one is above being held up to the standards of God. Alternatively, instead of emphasizing the general issue of accountability, one could emphasize the specific charge against Moses and hold that up for consideration: that he did not maintain God's holiness among the Israelites.

What would it mean today to be held accountable for the holiness of others? It means that at minimum leaders in the biblical mold will provide an atmosphere that nurtures the growth of the "fruit of the spirit" (Gal. 5:22ff). Our churches should be populated with people who stand out from the world because of their humble love, their joy, their peace, and, to invoke the Lord's prayer, their willingness to forgive as they have been forgiven. If our churches are not producing such people, then why do they exist? As John Wesley said:

*What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in*
his fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers
these ends: and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth. 2

November 3, 1996, the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Joshua 3:1-17
Ps. 107:1-7, 35-37
1 Thessalonians 2:9-13
Matthew 23:1-12

"Freedom from and Freedom for"

The Lord here promises to Joshua that “I will be with you as I was
with Moses” (3:7). The people cross the Jordan (the natural eastern
boundary of Canaan) into the promised land, an event that parallels
the crossing of the Red Sea out of Egypt. This is made possible
because the waters of the Jordan were stopped in the presence of the
ark of the covenant. “By this you shall know that among you is the
living God...: the ark of the covenant... is going to pass before you
into the Jordan” (3:10-11). Regarding the
context of this passage, the previous chapter
shows the spies being helped at Jericho by
Rahab the prostitute (who later gets an
honorable mention in the “Hall of Faith” in
Hebrews 11). In the following chapter, the
people set up a monument to the miraculous
crossing of the Jordan described in this chapter.

Joshua was the undisputed leader, but the ark
of the covenant also plays a key role in the story.
Lest anyone become confused about just how
undispensable their leader is, the large role that
the ark plays in this passage shows that it is not
some inherent charisma of Joshua that pushes
things along—it is the Holy One. On the other
hand, those who are feeling unworthy to serve in
God’s cause should see from this text that God
will empower us for what God wants done. God
will provide. If we say “yes” to God and make ourselves willing, the
resources will follow. As I once heard, “God does not call the gifted;
he gifts the called.” Along the same lines, yet in a slightly earthier

If we say “yes” to God and make ourselves willing, the resources will follow.
vein, is an image from old-fashioned plowing: the mule can't take direction until he is in the harness.

This week's reading makes unmistakably clear the parallel between Moses and Joshua. Not only do both miraculously cross a body of water by God's power but their missions are two halves of the one huge story of the mystery and drama of human freedom. Moses led the people out of bondage—a freedom from oppression—and Joshua led them into a new way of life in a new land—a freedom for obedience. The two-sided nature of this experience of freedom is something that many people do not understand, and the results of this ignorance have been devastating for our culture.

When freedom is discussed in our culture, it is almost always seen in terms of "freedom from": freedom from racial oppression, freedom from abuse, freedom from political domination, freedom from outside constraints. These are all legitimate uses of the word freedom, and almost all would agree that they are in fact goals worth pursuing. The fact that such freedom is only half the story, though, can be seen in the kind of "freedom from" that I see operating among the first-year students on most college campuses (I do not think mine is exceptional in this case).

For most first-year college students, true freedom is finally realized when they arrive at college—free, free at last! Free from that oppressive penumbra of intolerance known as living at home. Brimming with the exuberance of pardoned prisoners, many spend their first month (or semester, or year ...) living with reckless abandon. They are free!

Eventually, though, most come to realize that while "freedom from" by itself is exhilarating, without something to be free for, they are just spinning their wheels. "Freedom from" by itself is what I think Kris Kristofferson had in mind when he wrote "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." Another, more biblical, illustration can be found in Moses's refusal to "be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter" (Heb. 11:24, referring to Exod. 2:10-15). When Moses saw the Egyptian abusing a Hebrew and decided to kill the offender, he was clear at that point in his young life who he was not, but he did not yet know who he was. He was sure what he was free from but not yet sure what he was free for.

Moses, of course, went on to lead the people out of slavery by God's power, one of the greatest examples of "freedom from" in all of history. Yet, as soon as the people were delivered, they were shown
what they were freed for: obedience. While we remember the people being freed from oppression, we usually overlook that God had something further in mind: freedom for obedience, expressed through the giving of the law.

The law was seen as a gracious gift of God, something to guide the people in how to use their freedom. All too often we think of law, or restraint, or directions as a limitation on us, something to be rebelled against and overthrown as inherently oppressive. But God's gift of the law was pure grace: "Now that you are free from bondage, here is what you are free for, this is what you are free to do—obey."

"Free to obey?" we might ask. Like college freshman, we would prefer to see freedom only as "freedom from." But eventually, by God's grace, we come to see that we must move into the future with more than a sense of being led out of Egypt; we must move also with a sense of destiny for joyful obedience. Joshua's leadership into the promised land shows us the living out of the other half of freedom. Remember and honor the gifts of the past, yes, but now use your hard-won freedom to settle the new land before you—the future.

The subsequent history of the Israelites does not encourage us about how well God's people used their freedom. See, for instance, the end of the Book of Judges: "All the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg. 21:25) or the wild fluctuations that followed under the various monarchies, ending in the humiliation of Babylonian captivity (see 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings). Christians see in these failed schemes of worldly leadership the need for One who can lead us to the ultimate "freedom from"—the freedom from sin—and the ultimate "freedom for"—the freedom for love. Without the leadership provided by "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2), all human schemes of liberation and freedom are doomed to similar failure.

November 10, 1996, the 24th Sunday after Pentecost
Joshua 24:1-3a; 14-25
1 Thessalonians 9:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

"True Heart Religion"

This is the last chapter in the Book of Joshua. In the previous chapter is Joshua's farewell admonition, and in the verses following this selection Joshua dies. This leads to the Book (and the age) of the
Judges—the transitional time before kingship becomes the mode of leadership. After their history is briefly recited (24:3-13, with Abraham as the key transitional figure, and the surprising omission of God's gift of the law on Sinai), the people make (or renew) a covenant at Shechem.

Joshua shows bold leadership in the making of the covenant, for before he asks anyone else to "choose this day whom you will serve" (24:15a) he makes clear his own commitments. In a quote that has been emblazoned on millions of wall plaques around the world, Joshua says, "But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (24:15b). But before the people can give their own response they are warned first: "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins" (24:19). An intimidating image of God and what God demands! This is not a commitment to be taken lightly. But in the face of this daunting warning, the people agree: "We are witnesses" (24:22).

Since this passage is all about the making of a covenant, it might be useful to consider using this scripture in the context of John Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service (UM Book of Worship #288). Some churches use this service to start the new secular year (i.e., the Sunday nearest January 1), but since this week's lection is one of the last in the current church year, this might be a good season to renew our Christian commitments. It might be publicized as a time to make resolutions for the new church year. This might promote a more spiritual approach to renewal and commitment by moving it out of the New Year's context where people are often concerned with resolutions having to do more with losing weight than with renewing their spiritual lives.

After the people agree to join Joshua in this covenant, he enjoins them to "put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel" (24:23). The first step, then, in this commitment to God, is to "incline your hearts to the Lord," one of the first recorded calls for "heart religion." What could this mean? Was Joshua asking for some kind of exotic, rococo interior sensation to be the true mark of a believer? Sometimes certain revival preachers make it sound as if that is what God requires. We all know of entire denominations that require people to have certain dramatic "experiences" before they are considered to be full members and truly "have" the Holy Spirit. In order to explore the nature of the
commitment that our leaders call us to, let us look to the theology of John Wesley for help.

Wesley, as the founder of an evangelistic movement that grew into a Protestant church, certainly knew that people had a lot of ideas about what "heart religion" was all about. Many of these ideas he found strange, even bizarre. Much of his writing was prompted by these misunderstandings; he wanted people to know what real heart religion was all about.

As I have spelled out elsewhere, Wesley thought that genuine Christianity consisted of three main parts: orthodoxy (right belief); orthopraxis (right actions), and orthokardia (right heart). The right beliefs by themselves were just a train of ideas in the head and to little purpose. Actions by themselves could be just a dreary moralism, easily degenerating into a deadening legalism. Only when the very center of the person—the part that holds in place the crucial judgments about what is worth loving, what is worth fearing, what brings the deepest peace, in short, the heart—only when this center is engaged will the beliefs and actions find their true meaning. But intense feelings by themselves were as useless and misleading as either of the other two elements when isolated.

If we take Wesley's understanding of genuine Christianity and apply it to Joshua 24, we can find that all three of the elements are present. First comes the recitation of the holy history, a narrative description of the great works that God has done in the life of the Israelites (24:3-13). In a very real sense, this is the orthodoxy, a statement about the being to whom they are going to commit themselves. Next comes the call to "incline your hearts to the Lord" (24:23), the call for orthokardia, the call to "re-boot" their hearts, to reorganize their wants and desires around the things of God. If our hearts are committed to the right understanding of who God is and what God wants, only one thing can follow, and sure enough we see this in the following verse: "The people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey" " (24:24). They commit themselves to orthopraxis, to serve and obey the one who has given them such a powerful history, the one who lives at the center of their being, the one who forms their very hearts.

For Wesley as for Joshua, then, "heart religion" is not about the heart alone but also about the head and the hand. It is a question of understanding enough about the mysterious God who calls us into fellowship so that we can commit to this One from the center of our
being and serve this One with all of who we are. While making the appropriate theological qualifications about how God's grace goes before all that we do, we leaders of Christ's church must nonetheless hear Joshua's direct challenge, take it as our own, and pass it on to all in our care: "Choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (24:15).

Notes

Leadership, Change, and the Parish


The pastor in search of studies and models of parish ministry will find a veritable Mount Nebo of texts to consider. Although it is not exactly a model, *leadership* is a buzz word which will probably be with us for a while. In response to the decline of mainline Protestant church membership since the mid-1960s, many have called for a dynamic, transformational clergy. Pastoral leadership, they say, is not just good preaching and good management (although these are indispensable); pastoral leadership is also the ability to lead a congregation in articulating a common vision and then to lead the congregation toward the fulfillment of that vision.

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Recent Issues

If one browses through recent texts on pastoral leadership, one finds certain constant themes: spirituality, transformational leadership, and congregational dynamics. The first and most important of these—for any and every aspect of church ministry—is spirituality, an earnest seeking after God’s will and grace for the pastor and the congregation. All parish ministry must be undergirded by an active spirituality, guided by God’s grace. Some books take God’s own work for granted and proceed immediately to the specifically human work of the church, thus introducing a Pelagian (or, as Stanley Hauerwas might quip, an atheistic?) outlook on leadership.

I was amused recently to discover that the previous owner of a church growth text had written a frustrated comment in the margin of chapter 9, where the author finally discussed prayer as an important factor in congregational church growth. “Should have recognized it at the start!” read the note in pink highlighter ink. It is important to understand how much dependence upon God’s will and grace is needed in the leadership of the church. Leadership never rests upon one’s best efforts but upon God’s grace. That grace both enlivens a leader’s spirituality and creates leadership itself. (Furthermore, dependence upon God’s grace may or may not lead to successful outcomes and results; as we will see in Gardner’s book, Leading Minds, failure is not inconsistent with strong leadership. Dependence upon God, however, does have to do with faithfulness to one’s call, which transcends specific successes and failures.)

Another constant concerning pastoral leadership is that the “transformational” leadership strength of the pastor is a key factor in the work of the church. The terms transactional and transformational have been current in leadership theory for several years. Transactional leadership refers to the effectiveness of management, such as the placement and implementation of volunteers, effective goal-setting, responsibility and integrity, ability to plan and troubleshoot, and an orientation to tasks and outcomes. A wide variety of current works on leadership describe well the important attributes and skills needed in effective parish administration.

Going beyond the transactional, transformational leadership consists of the ability to inspire, motivate, and unite a group of people to attain goals and work for congregational change. The transformational leader is able to unite people (who may not share the
same ideas and values) in the fulfillment of shared goals. This is obviously more difficult than managerial leadership. It requires strength in preaching and worship; the ability to identify, inspire, and work with key leaders of the church; and the endurance needed to work through congregational inertia, resistance, poor internal communication, etc. The transformational pastor realizes that his or her authority is both from above (the divine call, empowerment, and grace which, the Apostle Paul notes, is our true leadership) and from below (in the sense that the laity gives the pastor his or her authority to lead, quite apart from the pastor’s credentials, experience, and professional status).

Similarly, transformational leadership is dependent not so much upon style but upon the leader’s philosophy or theology. Styles and methods abound—happily so—and each pastor has different strengths and skills. Style is, of course, an important factor in leading any group of people—staff or volunteers. The intermingling of preferred styles, whether hierarchical or parallel or others, can be difficult without some knowledge of differences among styles as well as a willingness among staff or volunteers to accommodate to one another and to be consistent in accountability and other matters. But a strong and appropriate theology of leadership is more important than a particular style, which the pastor may have to adapt or change. Callahan argues further that models of leadership such as the top-down-thinking boss, the manager, the (passive) enabler, and the apocalyptic inspirer are based upon theologies which are insufficiently missional, dynamic, and inclusive.

Another constant in parish leadership is that the positive aspects of congregational life need to be recognized and built upon. Lyle Schaller, as well as John Ed Mathison at Frazer Memorial UMC in Montgomery, Alabama, has argued that, rather than focusing upon weakness and programs, successful leadership recognizes the importance of building upon strengths and setting expectations of success while counting upon God.

Herb Miller, William Easum, and others have considered the qualities of healthy, “vital” congregations. Miller identifies many aspects of health: a strong Sunday school and Bible study program; positive attitudes among the staff and laity and positive conversational patterns; a predominance of praise rather than blame among the people; an organization for congregational prayer and caring for one another; a good system of some sort for planning, goal setting, and
conflict resolution; warm, varied worship services; a satisfactory nursery and adequate parking; visionary leadership; an effective annual stewardship campaign; and a service (rather than “serve us”) mentality among the people. These are just a few signs of vitality in a congregation. We might add to them a spirit of fun, confidence, hominess, and affirmation; evidence of spiritual “fruit”; a readiness to learn; a mixing of the sometimes incompatible aspects of strong small groups and openness to newcomers; growth in financial resources; participatory decision-making.

Overall, a “healthy” church is one where God is glorified and where disciples are produced through an emphasis upon dynamic and varied worship, organized and private prayer, and Bible study through the church’s own educational opportunities, and in private study. Likewise, it is a church where certain theological “nonnegotiables” are affirmed. Although much church growth literature shows that numerical growth is highly desirable and biblically warranted, Loren Mead has shown how churches which have plateaued or declined numerically may display other kinds of growth like incarnational, maturational, and organic (transforming the organization into an energetic community).

But... how does one get there? As a method which recognizes both pastoral leadership and congregational dynamics, the equipper style has been popular in recent years and has an appropriate biblical and theological vision of training, including, and empowering the laity to be Christian ministers themselves. Such a model helps show how a congregation may become vital and growing. But as Lyle Schaller points out in another context, enabling requires much process, pastoral self-confidence, and patience, and may even be mistaken for ineffective leadership. Thus Stevens and Collins, as well as Shawchuck and Heuser, have described the “systems approach” to equipping a congregation: the pastor shifts attention from specific tasks to the strengths, peculiarities, traditions, power brokers, and potentials of the congregation, as well as the strengths, weaknesses, and potential of the pastor. All aspects of the “system” are thus honored, rather than the managerially correct targeting of specifics.

Leading the Congregation. I’ve lingered over a variety of texts. Prayer and spirituality, leadership styles and philosophies, transformational leadership which goes beyond management, congregational dynamics and systems—all these issues (among
others!) have been considered by studies of parish leadership. One of the very few texts which discusses nearly all these issues, as well as some others, within the whole context of leadership is the book by Shawchuck and Heuser. I will review some of the authors' points before turning to two nontheological books which, I believe, complement the discussion of parish leadership.

Shawchuck and Heuser begin their study by asking point-blank: "Why is it so tough to be a church leader?" One reason is that people often regard leaders, including church leaders, with cynicism and distrust. Another reason is that leaders place themselves at risk whenever they try to pursue a vision. Yet another reason is that churches victimize leaders with crises and the need to manage rather than to lead. Lest pastors succumb to "acedia and discouragement," they must cultivate their own inner attitudes. Parish leadership emerges from such attitudes—childlikeness (Matt. 18:3-5), poverty of spirit (1 Cor. 1:26-31), a spirit of servanthood rather than popularity and position, and a spirit of self-examination. The leader's spirituality is a key factor in leadership: with a proper spirituality a pastor can renew vision and energy and find a solitary place in the heart (as well as within one's schedule!) for God. A small covenant community, a rhythm of public ministry and personal time, and attention to graces such as fasting, worship, study, and so forth can be found among the events in Jesus' own life.

In chapter 4 the authors consider the leader's call. Although in theological circles today there is less of a distinction between the ministry of the ordained and that of the laity, the clergy still have a particular call to a set-apart ministry. God calls us but also tests our call. The leader both resists God and accepts God's promises, and that rhythm of resistance and acceptance helps form and mature pastors in God's grace.

The vision and ensuing mission of the pastoral leader arises in response to (and is nourished by) the attitudes, spirit, and call of the pastor. Vision is not something unusual or uncommon; vision is the ever-freshening insight into God's glory, joined with an acceptance of one's severe limitations as a minister, combined in turn with a view of outward circumstances which God touches. Vision gives rise to mission, which consists of the specific plans and strategies by which the vision can begin to change congregational dynamics and to create Christian ministry.

Vision must be formed through reflection. As the authors note in chapter 6 (and in chapters 1-4), pressures upon the pastor can limit or
prevent successful vision formation. An awareness of the decline of the “mainline” denominations prevents leaders from reflecting upon the road ahead. The congregation may pressure the pastor to accept something less than effective leadership. Regardless of the inhibiting factors, the pastor must manage his or her effectiveness through ongoing reflection upon personal leadership, congregational strengths and weaknesses, and priority setting. The pastor must work with the congregation on those priorities—communicating mutual expectations—while managing his or her time around recognition of what is important, urgent, or unimportant.

The next chapter concerns “testing the spirits” which compel both pastor and congregation. Neurotic leadership can be expressed in various ways. Dramatic, suspicious, detached, depressive, and compulsive behaviors can be exhibited both in pastoral leadership and in the congregational organization; behaviors in one can be projected upon and determinative of the behaviors in the other.

Chapter 8 discusses current ideas concerning parish leadership, especially in light of the growing number of parishes with 1,000+ worshiping members. The authors describe the personal and interpersonal skills, as well as different ministry expectations, which are called for within larger parishes. Whatever the size of the congregation, however, a tension sometimes exists between the type of spirituality which the congregation professes and its “lived spirituality.” Both pastors and denominational agencies are often uninterested in developing congregational spirituality beyond the tried-and-true aspects of worship, study, and programmatic ministries. Here again, the pastor’s leadership, effected through her spirituality, can provide exemplary leadership for congregational formation.

If the pastor leads the congregation’s spirituality through example and guidance, the pastor cares for the congregation’s vision as well. Congregations may wish for and dream of a ministry vision but remain uncommitted; “visionary” congregations actually move toward actions. Such action may occur in churches where chains of command and flowcharts are valued or in churches where the quality of relationships are more valued than organization; either way works, according to the particular “culture” of each.18

Every parish has its own social aspects and life-cycle stages, and within this context the pastor can have an important role as an agent of change. “The only congregations that will thrive in the coming decades will be those whose leaders have learned to respond to
change, not resist or ignore it" (p. 167: the authors' emphasis).

Drawing upon research into organizations, the authors name three keys to change within congregations: anticipation (the ability to see the congregation’s spiritual and organizational “seasons”), innovation (the ability to help the congregation do things better than in the past), and excellence (a complete commitment to quality). Likewise, drawing upon a “systems approach” to congregational life, the authors show that transforming the “internal communication” patterns of the congregation is necessary for creating change. Change cannot happen, furthermore, without a satisfactory leadership team in the form of pastoral staff, governing boards, or groups of lay leaders. The pastor has a responsibility to work with both staff and boards in creating helpful, sound patterns of communication and (reciprocal) accountability.

In the final section of the book, Shawchuck and Heuser discuss paradigms for church leadership. Today’s trends can be worrisome; the old-line Protestant traditions are undergoing major paradigm shifts in the wake of growth among conservative denominations as well as larger “seven-day-a-week” churches. It is not at all clear which paradigm will emerge as lasting. They present two models of “organizational learning” which can help congregations learn for the future, multicultural paradigms for churches, as well as a model of women in leadership. The authors note that women tend to work from experience, relationships, and collaboration rather than from stereotypically “male” paradigms from the business world. The female leadership paradigm is not incompatible with W. Edwards Deming’s business model of “total quality management.” The opposition to these styles, of course, comes from traditional male-dominated hierarchies as well as a bias within the church toward “top-down” managerial thinking—not to mention the theological prejudices throughout Christian history toward women and the feminine. Finally, in the last chapter, the authors consider how a pastor may “finish well” in ministry.

After reading Shawchuck and Heuser, one may be a bit intimidated by the prospect of pastoral leadership. According to these writers, pastoral leadership entails the willingness to put oneself at risk; the ability to develop a suitable and healthy spirituality within one’s call; the development of a spirituality which can lead an entire congregation; the willingness to let God test us; the skill to manage time in order to read, reflect, and establish a vision; skill with persons
and congregational dynamics (as well as the self-insight) to lead and transform less than healthy and/or dilatory congregations to greater health and mission; the ability to gather a leadership team within the congregation with a transforming, change-oriented vision; and finally the openness to new paradigms which are transforming churches throughout the world. All these things can add up to transforming leadership and congregational renewal. (All the while, the pastor hopefully has a healthy personal and family life separate from the parish.)

Anyone who has served parishes knows that any one of these points can become very difficult to achieve. One of the benefits of Shawchuck and Heuser’s book—unlike some books which would make all this seem easy and obvious—is that their style is never imperious. Throughout the book are (presumably pseudonymous) stories from parishes to illustrate what may go either right or awry as one works toward effective leadership within one’s own sphere of influence.

Leading Change. Although James O’Toole’s book Leading Change: Overcoming the Ideology of Comfort and the Tyranny of Custom is not concerned with the specific dynamics of church leadership, the book begins and ends with references to Jesus Christ! O’Toole’s remarks about leadership dovetail very well with our discussion of transformational leadership, particularly as it gathers people together to effect change.

Leading Change begins with a little-known expressionistic painting by the Belgian artist James Ensor entitled Christ’s Entry into Brussels (1889). The Brussels crowd which fills the painting is diverse, chaotic, happy. But where is Christ? He appears in the background, nearly lost in the crowd. What kind of leadership is depicted by a Christ nearly hidden in this mass of democracy, diversity, and pluralism; and how could such a leader effect change? Change may be commanded, created by manipulating followers or paternalizing (shepherding) people. It can be directed through CEO power, contingency, or appealing to the lowest common denominator. But the image of Christ standing amid a roaring crowd evokes another possibility: winning converts by working with a few disciples. A leader can win followers through superior values which in turn create trust, moral respect, moral purpose, and a leadership created through an initial, values-based leadership.

O’Toole discusses leaders in the book’s first half. To effect change,
one must become a leader of leaders, one who inspires others to lead the transformation. Such leadership is difficult to achieve because no formula, no documentable technique, and no replicable skill are involved. Instead, values-based leadership is an attitude about people, philosophy, and process. (p. 14, author's emphasis)

He considers the leadership of Washington, Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Lincoln (whom he calls, by shorthand, "the Rushmoreans") as examples of values-based leadership. These people possessed integrity, gained trust, listened to public opinion, and showed respect for their followers. None was perfect, but each offered visions of the world which transcended the differences among their constituency.

A long list of "corporate Rushmoreans" highlights persons who "practice the art of inclusion" (p. 37) and display a suitable philosophy—one which gives high value to trust and respect and the ability to listen in relationships between themselves and their people. These leaders do not practice a particular leadership style, however; they are more like enablers who show their followers how to realize their potential. Change that is holistic, ongoing, and incorporated into the organization at all levels is effective. If I read Lyle Schaller correctly, that is exactly what he is saying to churches in his several books.

Interestingly, O'Toole shows that leadership which is stereotypically "tough," "realistic," "demanding," "hierarchical," or "situational" really is ineffective! Tough leadership is common, however, because it is human nature to use force to overcome inertia and resistance. Leading through moral authority (like the Rushmoreans, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Vaclav Havel, for example) is much more demanding and difficult. Yet in the long run, people respond to inclusion and respect rather than to toughness and force. Indeed, says O'Toole, the "feminine" style of inclusiveness and respect,

is more effective in modern organizations in which everyone's best efforts are needed—that is, in any organization that requires employee initiative, self-motivation, innovation, and willingness to take the extra step to serve customers or to meet competitive changes. Importantly, "feminine" leadership does
not mean weak leadership—nor does it mean that only women can or do practice it.” (p. 139)

He cites leadership authorities like W. Edwards Deming, Tom Peters, James MacGregor Burns, and others—including the Rushmoreans!—who advocate or have practiced this kind of leadership.

Another stumbling block to inclusive leadership is the idea that democracy and strong leadership are incompatible, or that democracy leads inevitably to anarchy. O’Toole compares the autocratic style of the late conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, Herbert von Karajan, with the inclusive approach of Michael Tilson Thomas, director of the San Francisco Orchestra. O’Toole finds no “wimpiness” or lack of profundity as a result of Tilson Thomas’s style and no lack of discipline. There is nothing chaotic or oxymoronic about “democratic leadership” as long as that leadership is based on value-based principles.

In the second half of the book, O’Toole considers the resistance to change. He offers no fewer than 33 hypotheses to account for it; many of them boil down to a group’s collective assumptions and their ability to suppress or deny information which leads to change. Organizational culture (which is an expression of a group’s underlying values), as well as Western values of efficiency and hierarchy, also fuels resistance to change. Even good ideas from a good leader (as in the case of W. Edwards Deming, whose ideas about Total Quality Management helped revolutionize postwar Japanese industry) can encounter resistance if they are presented poorly or at an inappropriate time.

The case of the nineteenth-century Welsh social philosopher and philanthropist Robert Owen is relevant here. Owen had (for the time) radical ideas of industrial innovation, labor and consumer services, and social policies as well as ideas for childhood education. Even though Owen put his ideas and reforms into practical terms in order to win followers, his own bullheadedness created resistance to change.

Another social philosopher of that time, John Stuart Mill, noted that society itself is by its nature resistant to change. O’Toole expands on Mill in saying that the “good enough” mentality of society’s “haves” creates a kind of “ideology of comfort.”

The leader must convince the people with power of the rectitude of the proposed change. Even more, the leader must
be able to show that the proposed change is a necessary step toward progress as defined by the haves. This is the most difficult challenge of leadership, bringing about change without imposing one's will on others . . . (p. 254).

Finally O'Toole lifts up Vaclav Havel, playwright and current president of the Czech republic, as an example of value-based leadership which creates "moral symmetry" among people without overruling people's different objectives.

Those hoping to create change in congregations may take comfort (or condolence!) in the situation sketched by O'Toole. In order to bring about congregational change, the pastor must gather the people together, allowing them to set a vision for their own church (the "bottom-up" thinking which Mathison has described in the program of his own Frazer Memorial UMC). At the same time the pastor must strongly articulate her own Christian vision in such a way that does not create self-defeating resistance.

Leading Minds. Leading the Congregation describes the various factors involved in leading congregations; one aspect of this effecting change. Leading Change focuses on the ways change can be accomplished within any organization, without unintentionally creating resistance to change. Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership by Howard Gardner, resembles Leading the Congregation in that it takes a broad view, raising the fundamental question: What is a leader?

Gardner's text examines eleven persons hitherto unlinked in leadership studies: Margaret Mead, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Robert Maynard Hutchins, Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., George C. Marshall, Pope John XXIII, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr., Margaret Thatcher, Jean Monnet, and Mahatma Gandhi. He also examines an assortment of other twentieth-century world leaders. The book is far more rich than my review will have space to consider and would be an excellent choice for the individual who reads biographies for the sake of personal insight.

In these eleven persons Gardner has looked for continuities of leadership. "Leaders achieve their effectiveness through the stories they relate" (p. 9); stories means here perspectives and visions, especially those which have to do with one's identity. Telling stories does not necessarily mean presenting something in words; the
embodiment of stories is also important. The "ordinary" leader's stories are not significantly different from those of the audience. The "innovative" leader gives a people's stories a different twist and reorientation. The "visionary" leader creates new stories and achieves some success in conveying such new stories to audiences. Stories are important because "those leaders who presume to bring about major alterations across a significant population must in some way help their audience members think through who they are" (p. 62). To do this, the leader must communicate her own story in a sufficiently compelling way (again, through words and life alike) to meet the competition of the many conflicting stories of her audience.

Taking a cognitivist approach to leadership, Gardner surveys the structures of leadership and "followership" within human biological and psychological development. Without particular kinds of followers, a leader cannot lead. Both the dynamics of following and leading (which both entail a need to have a mission of some sort) arise in childhood socialization and cognitive formation. Thus leadership and followership are more than issues of power, group dynamics, leadership charisma, and so forth but rather have to do with the interaction of the minds of leaders and audiences. (In the present context, we might add that leadership and followership include interaction of the spiritualities—which is something mental but also something more—of the minister and her parishioners.)

The exemplary leader, says Gardner, has several qualities (pp. 295-300). She is a skilled speaker, has an understanding of other people, is concerned with moral issues, and feels herself to be peer with those in authority. She has some charisma which helps her relate to others as a leader. She is good at finding, expressing, and embodying solutions to problems in a way which satisfies a variety of people. She takes time to reflect, renew, and to discover the big picture. She is willing to take risks and to wait her turn as someone else leads. (This latter point, Gardner points out, is especially true for leaders in hierarchical organizations such as churches!) While other authors take the "ideal" view and show how failure in leadership can be avoided, Gardner takes a refreshingly different view: the most effective leaders are often those who have failed! Leaders aim high, make demands, and take risks; meanwhile, those who are merely leader-managers neither risk greatly nor achieve great things. Gardner maintains that the most effective leaders succeed, fail, return, and recover, sometimes a number of times—indicating that flexibility,
perspective, and resilience are essential leadership qualities, too. All in all, however, Gardner finds six constants of leadership:

1. **The story**—one which can speak directly to persons regardless of their training or backgrounds.

2. **The audience.** A leader may effect significant change within very large groups if that group is already dedicated and responsive; the greatest challenge is to create change within a very heterogeneous audience. This requires patient concentration upon the same message, with a variety of means of expression, and a willingness to allow persons to apprehend the message at various levels.

3. **The organizational basis for the leader.** The most effective leaders bring their organizations along.

4. **The embodiment.** The leader needn’t be a saint, but her actions should speak as well as her words.

5. **Direct and indirect leadership.** A leader may lead through direct appeal to an audience or through books, artwork, etc. Some, like the already mentioned Vaclav Havel, have done both.

6. **The area of expertise.** A leader is always an expert in a particular field, but the most effective leaders bring their organizations along.

To set Gardner’s thoughts within our discussion of Shawchuck and Heuser’s and O’Toole’s books: The pastoral leader tells the gospel story in such a way that it becomes the story embraced by her congregation. The leader has taken time to cultivate the story in her own life, through God’s grace, so that it is her story, too; but the leader’s message does not center so much upon her own personal call to ordained ministry as on the story of all persons in ministry together. Nevertheless, as an ordained pastor with a field of expertise, the leader is able to embody the story in a special way through her maturing spirituality, personal integrity, exemplary leadership, vision of ministry, and openness to God’s work. The leader undertakes a difficult task: she provides strong, inclusive leadership which creates other leaders and also effects change among people of varying backgrounds and agendas. She responds to change and makes change happen without creating a climate of resistance. The leader appreciates and understands the congregation’s dynamics; she works with the people and respects their differences; she does not succumb to the temptation of “easy” styles of leadership which lack moral authority and inclusiveness. She may be discouraged by failure, but she is
flexible and farsighted; she knows that, ultimately, it is not her work at all but God’s.

As I stated earlier, pastoral leadership, as described herein, is difficult. Anyone familiar with the competing and sometimes exhausting tasks of ministry knows this. Yet as pastors set their priorities, reflect upon tasks, and grow in their calling, they may find interesting and unexpected vistas of leadership emerging within their spheres of influence. Hopefully—to raise an implicit theme of this review—a result of their pastoral leadership will be the ministry conducted by the people themselves.

Notes


A problem with introducing terms such as management from the business world is, of course, a conflict between secular philosophies and theological realities; if models from the business world are used uncritically in matters ecclesial, wrong paradigms and practices may emerge. Roy Oswald, for instance, rightly believes that secular technologies do not belong in clergy assessment; see his “Alban Institute Approaches to Assessment,” in Richard A. Hunt, John E. Hinkle, Jr., and H. Newton Mays, eds., Clergy Assessment and Career Development (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990). Similarly, David Wells has criticized the paradigms of consumerism (including notions of the
parishioner as "customer") which underlay megachurches and certain aspects of the church-growth movement; see his God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).


10. Callahan, Effective Church Leadership, 37ff; see also Schaller, Strategies for Change, chs. 2-4.

11. John Ed Mathison, Tried and True: Eleven Principles of Church Growth from Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1989). See also Schaller's books (all published by Abingdon): Activating the Passive Church: Diagnosis and Treatment (1981); The Change Agent (1972); Choices for Churches (1990); Create Your Own Future! (1991); Effective Church Planning (1979); #4 Steps up off the Plateau (1993); Getting Things Done (1986); Growing Plans (1983); Hey, That's Our Church! (1975); Innovations in Ministry: Models for the 21st Century (1994); It's a Different World! (1987); Parish Planning (1971); The Pastor and the People (1973, rev. 1986); Reflections of a Contrarian: Second Thoughts on the Parish Ministry (1989); The Parish Messenger (1988); The Seven-Day-A-Week Church (1992); Strategies for Change (1993); 21 Bridges to the 21st Century: The Future of Pastoral Ministry (1994); Schaller and Charles A. Tidwell, Creative Church Administration (1975); and a number of others.


15. Two of the best books on this style are by R. Paul Stevens, The Equippers Guide to Every-Member Ministry (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992) and Liberating
The idea that laity of the church are the true ministers is not new, of course. Beginning with Elton Trueblood’s *Your Other Vocation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952) and Hendrik Kraemer’s *A Theology of the Laity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), a growing number of books have been published to help the laity realize their God-given vocation to ministry.

18. Following his notion that organizations should be as creative and crazy as possible in today’s “insane” economy, Tom Peters notes that an “ideal” corporate organization chart looks like Jackson Pollock’s chaotic, abstract expressionistic painting *Autumn Rhythm*. His ideas of craziness, creativity, and excitement “beyond” total quality management, empowerment, and reengineering might be apropos for churches, especially those stuck in unproductive patterns of organization and expectation. See Tom Peters Seminar: Crazy Times Call for Crazy Organizations (New York: Vintage, 1994), 182.
20. Lyle Schaller’s 1972 book *The Change Agent* is a difficult and challenging text (the first chapter is provocatively entitled “How to Cut Your Own Throat”) but covers many of the same principles concerning leadership and change agency. Schaller discusses at length situations and leadership styles which create resistance to change. (William Willimon has a hilarious and telling story about the first parish in which he hoped to carry out Schaller’s ideas: see his *Clergy and Laity: Burn-Out* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1989], 101-102.) Although he deals with public schools rather than churches, Michael Fullan has “eight basic lessons of the new paradigm of change” which, I believe, make enormous sense when applied to congregational change. 1) “You can’t mandate what matters.” (The more complex the change the less you can force it.) 2) “Change is a journey, not a blueprint.” (Change is nonlinear, loaded with uncertainty and excitement and sometimes perverse.) 3) “Problems are our friends.” (Problems are inevitable and you can’t learn without them.) 4) “Vision and strategic planning come later.” (Premature visions and planning blind.) 5) Individualism and collectivism must have equal power.” (There are no one-sided solutions to isolation and groupthink.) 6) “Neither centralization nor decentralization works.” (Both top-down and bottom up strategies are necessary.) 7) “Connection with the wider environment is critical for success.” (The best organizations learn externally as well as internally.) 8) “Every person is a change agent.” (Change is too important to leave to the experts; personal mind-set and mastery is the ultimate protection.) See Michael Fullan, *Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform* (Bristol, Penn.: Falmer, 1993).
21. The idea of democracy in churches chafes deeply against John Wesley’s own “top-down” conception of Methodism. Bishop Wilke in *And Are We Yet Alive?* (32) brushes aside—too hastily, I believe—the idea of democracy in churches, citing the ineffectiveness of many committees and majority-voting. At the same time,
"top-down" thinking is scorned by other authors such as Mathison, Callahan, Ezra Earl Jones, and others. Thus a challenge of transformational pastoral leadership is this: How does one allow the congregation to be a democracy—allowing the people to set a vision and common voice for themselves—without that vision's being lost in unproductive, lengthy meetings? (Lyle Schaller and Charles A. Tidwell offer varieties on how to create consensus and creative thinking without traditional, unproductive voting; see their Creative Church Administration, 38ff, passim.) As O'Toole notes, this is the paradoxical but not impossible task of effective leadership.

22. Quality is a term (as noted herein) originating from the work of W. Edwards Deming. Lyle Schaller has discussed "the quest for quality" as early as 1971 in his helpful book Parish Planning: How to Get Things Done in Your Church (Nashville: Abingdon). Ezra Earl Jones uses the idea of TQM (total quality management) in his recent book Quest for Quality in the Church: A New Paradigm (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1993). Although the paradigm isn't really new, Jones expands its implications to show how the goal of quality can bring positive change to United Methodism on the levels of the local church as well as the annual conference.

23. As already noted by Shawchuck and Heuser, congregations vary in their dynamics and responsiveness. One of the reasons that church growth techniques do not always work when carried back to local congregations from megachurch seminars is that the megachurch may have been a more dedicated and responsive audience than the local congregation.

24. Cf. Ezra Earl Jones, who in his Quest for Quality in the Church argues that future church leadership will necessarily mean a concomitant change within the whole system of the church.

25. A certain amount of antiprofessionalism exists in contemporary studies of the clergy, stemming from the perceived complacency of the church in the days prior to the Mainlines' decline. It is important to realize, however, that the pastor is still a person with technical or professional expertise—difficult though it may be, as Gardner notes, to retain that expertise in today's quickly changing society.
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