

## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION in SPIRITUAL CARE

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The formation of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) sparked a revolution in theological education by shifting the focus from books in the seminary to patients in the hospital. Yet rather than contrasting the two, Anton Boisen connected theological school and hospital by naming patients in care *living human documents* – documents that need to be studied and exegeted with the same care and respect as accorded to sacred scripture. The discipline of *theological reflection* has built a similar bridge between school and clinical site, between theory and practice.

Theological reflection is at the core of the practice of experiential learning that characterizes supervised pastoral education (SPE). Following the cyclical process in adult education, theological reflection starts with a concrete experience in spiritual care that is being critically examined and evaluated, drawing upon the wisdom of one's religious heritage in the larger context of major perspectives and practices in the social sciences, while generating new visions in understanding and practicing care. This is *the caring triangle* pursued in the curriculum – the three way interaction of theory, practice, and the caring relationship. Theological reflection guides the experiential learning process that integrates and transforms what we know, what we do, and who we are in the practice of spiritual care.

### A Case of Theological Reflection

One remarkable example of theological reflection is situated early in Anton Boisen's student days. It pinpoints the critical event that launched Boisen's vocation to clinical education in spiritual care for those afflicted with emotional and mental illness. As a young 20-year old theological student, Boisen became alarmed when consulting his Greek dictionary obscene words would leap out of its pages. He writes:

*The tension reached the breaking point on Easter morning of 1898. I got up early that morning after a sleepless night and went out into the garden where Mother's hyacinths and daffodils were in full bloom. It was a beautiful day but there was no sunshine there for me, and no beauty – nothing but black despair. I came back to my room and threw myself on my knees with an agonized call for help. And help came! Something seemed to say to me almost in words, "Don't be afraid to tell".... My development had been checked by the presence of instinctual claims which could be neither controlled nor acknowledged for fear of condemnation. The prompting, "Do not be afraid to tell," brought relief by socializing the difficulty, and it did so on the level of what for me was abiding and universal. I was now at one with the internalized fellowship of the best, the fellowship which is represented by the idea of God. I felt now like a new being. There was new hope and new confidence, and the painful shyness which so long had troubled me seemed to have disappeared" (1960, 47).*

## I. STARTING WITH THE EXPERIENCE

The learning cycle of theological reflection starts with a concrete, present experience in the practice of care. For Boisen the text in clinical education is found in the case study of a living human document. What is unusual in the above case example is that Boisen takes his own crisis experience as the text for study – he reflects on himself as living human document. Yet, when the living human document is seen as a relational experience, as a personal interaction in the practice of care, theological reflection always culminates in self-reflection. In Boisen's days the case study ideal was for the student to be the objective observer who would stay back as the outsider in a quasi-scientific investigation. As SPE is understood and practiced today, the care provider's role is being primarily a participant rather than observer. In theological reflection we become insiders, owning the patient's or client's lived experience and understanding its meaning in the actuality of our own life.

### Some Personal Questions

- What have you at this point learned about yourself in caring for others?
- What patient makes you feel most, or least, at ease with yourself?
- Which of these two patients makes the better teacher?

### A case of listening

In the empathic practice of active listening, the caregiver prepares a place for the other to be heard and to become present. This is the story of Josef, a 70-year-old patient who has endured many losses, most recently a loss of speech due to a stroke. His CPE spiritual care visitor listens hard to give him a voice:

*Through an arduous interchange of his mumbled syllables and my series of prompts and clarifications, the pain of Josef's losses are articulated. He held my hand and cried all the while. At the end of the visit I told him that I thought I had understood about 80% of it and he smiled...*

*Later I expressed Josef's sorrow-filled story in the following words:*

### *No More<sup>1</sup>*

What have I come to?

These hands that once plied my trade and taught young men  
are numb and useless

This body, once tall and virile, dancing under the stars of a Yucatan sky,  
lies in a bed to walk no more

This tongue from which words in five languages once rolled so easily  
is thick with slurred speech;  
the voice of my thoughts now restrained

I recall the days of my youth

When I went forth in strength to work, to play, to love, to live

Those days are now no more

I fed my birds from this paralysed hand,  
seed carefully chosen and mixed for each kind  
No effort too great for the yellow finch, la paloma, the starling  
I have watched them pecking out each others' eyes,  
The strong attacking the weak  
How long must I endure?

How I love the white-winged dove, beauty unobscured;  
the sight of her fills my heart  
as a distant trumpet melody, echo of my aching

## II. EXAMINING AND EVALUATING

In theological reflection the caring interaction is remembered in living and concrete detail. A verbatim or taped recording is a treasured tool in SPE to sharpen and develop one's observation skills in documenting the physical, rational and emotional givens that compose a particular instance of spiritual care. In critical reflection questions are asked not only about what happened but what did not happen, wondering how it could happen. Novelty is courted with creative imagination to release memories from the past to present and future possibilities.

### **In a Theological Context**

Theological reflection is a spiritual discipline in self-care and in personal and professional growth. Yet as a theological exercise its focus stretches well beyond the personal. In a theological context our subjective experiences and concerns are reflected upon in relation to faith and wisdom traditions that reach for ultimate reality. The Anton Boisen story shows how Boisen placed his obsession with obscene words in a theological context. In prayer he placed his unrelenting obsession: "I came back to my room and threw myself on my knees with an agonized call for help. And help came! Something seemed to say to me almost in words, 'Don't be afraid to tell'." It is remarkable how the theological context radically changed his understanding of the problem: it was fear of condemnation rather than a penchant for dirty words.

### **Theological and its Meanings**

- The term theo-logy in its literal sense conveys that is a search for knowledge that aims at God as its object. Accordingly theological reflection is often understood as the quest of discerning God's presence in a particular situation. In a recent research study, spiritual care providers reported that in theological reflection they often encounter God and respond to that presence in prayer.<sup>2</sup> Prayer and theological reflection thus can fuse in our lived experience. In the Boisen story, it is prayer that marks the reflection theological.
- The concept of God in theological reflection is open to a variety of interpretations. God can be visualized from the perspective of classical theism where God as a supreme being or a transcendent presence can meet us to inspire and support,

especially in critical times at the boundaries of human existence. Often theological reflection adopts looser forms of theism. Common in current practices of theological reflection are immanent and process images of the Divine. In panentheism God is seen as present within all of created and lived life. In process theology God is present as a creative power of love behind and within the worldly process and personal/communal experience.

- For Anton Boisen God symbolized “what for me was abiding and universal.” He experienced the presence of God when he “was now at one with the internalized fellowship of the best, the fellowship which is represented by the idea of God.” For him the essence of religious experience meant to harmonize with the best or perfection. He reflects the thought of his contemporary, the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who in a classic statement contrasted primitive or “communal religion” where “you study the will of God in order that he may preserve you” with universal or “purified religion” where “you study his goodness in order to be like him.”<sup>3</sup>
- Theology is called *functional* when God stands for whatever functions as one’s ultimate meaning in life. It is not the question whether God exists but what functions as one’s God. The theologian Paul Tillich emphasized that for existence to be human it requires meaning. From this perspective theological reflection is about meaning-making. Two models in theological reflection and assessment in spiritual care in particular relate to functional theology as the process of meaning-making:

1. theological themes

A theme describes a pattern of interaction between a person and his or her functional world. A thematic approach in personality theory that has greatly influenced the field of psychology and the practice of spiritual care and counseling is found in Erik Erikson’s eight psychosocial themes, spanning developmental stages from infancy to old age. Each stage involves an interaction with a changing and expanding environment, triggering a psychosocial crisis that generates the formation of basic virtues or personality strengths. Hope, will, purpose, and competence become the rudiments of virtue in childhood, fidelity the adolescent virtue; and love, care, and wisdom the central virtues of adulthood.

Closely linked to Erikson’s developmental schema is Paul Pruyser’s listing of seven theological themes in his classic SPE resource: *The Minister As Diagnostician* (1976). He uses theological and biblical language such as *awareness of the Holy*, *faith*, *providence*, and *repentance*, not as dogmatic contents but as functional indicators of a person’s place in the world, as “multidimensional themes which, in the mind of the pastoral interviewer, provide vistas of the person’s organization of meanings.” Like in Erikson’s schema these are perennial and universal themes that function as ordering principles in regulating psychosocial interactions. Accordingly, the theme of *awareness of the holy* focuses on whether the person can experience a sense of awe and mystery beyond a concrete world of cold factuality. The theme of faith explores how

enlarging or constricting faith is in developing one's talents and exploring one's curiosity about life and engagement in the world.<sup>4</sup>

### A Study Project

Utilizing the approach of Erikson and/or Pruyser with reference to the poem *No More* reflecting patient Josef's situation, what developmental/theological theme or combination of themes emerge in framing the meaning of Josef's life?

#### 2. theological worlds

As in the "theological themes" approach, ultimate concerns stand out in the topographical metaphor of *theological worlds*. Paul Jones (1989) coined this concept to describe the spiritual striving in a theological world constituted by an *obsessio* (dilemma) that is attuned to a contrasting *epiphania* (resolution). There are diverse theological worlds and the "rhythm" in each one is found in the interplay between the respective poles of *obsessio* and *epiphania*. A variety of meaning constructs thus emerges in the following polar dyads: Separation and Reunion, Conflict and Vindication, Emptiness and Fulfillment, Condemnation and Forgiveness, and Suffering and Endurance.

### The Boisen Case Study Example

In revisiting Anton Boisen's episode of what could psychiatrically be labeled as an obsessive compulsive disorder, we may wonder in theological reflection how this experience frames and locates Boisen's theological world. As a young adult, he had finished College but became frustrated in his inability to secure his goal of a teaching position. He returned to the world where he had been successful, school, now as a theological student. While in his first year of seminary, he encountered obscene words leaping, from all places, right from his Greek dictionary.

In this story the theological world of *separation and reunion* presents itself as the theological stage on which to explore Boisen's crisis and conversion experience. Feeling disappointed after failing a transition to the adult world, young Boisen's sense of dislocation pursued him also in his academic studies, a place supposed to be safe for him. With the prompting "do not be afraid to tell," he understood that the core problem was not a matter of what he saw but what he felt: the fear of condemnation. Relief came when he began to tell what had terrorized him. He experienced reunion – feeling "at one with the internalized fellowship of the best." He found "new hope and new confidence, and the painful shyness which so long had troubled me seemed to have disappeared." Later Boisen theologically defined the heart of darkness in his crisis, and in general for psychiatric disorders, as one of "estrangement and isolation" (1960,197).

- The emergence of a *public theology* lends another meaning to theological. In the post-Christendom world, talk about God translates itself into a public discourse of what matters to people and societies in today's world. David Pfrimmer, Principal Dean of the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, speaks of the challenge for theological schools and the practice of spiritual care to "go public" by engaging today's issues. He suggests that "a public theological practice of religious and spiritual care is about preparing a

safe space for individuals or groups to confront the essential truths about themselves” (2008,56). From this perspective, theology addresses the essential truths about what it means to be human and, consequently, become community. Public theology happens when and where religious wisdom traditions, the social sciences and community awareness join as co-authors in writing the spiritual care agenda.

#### A Boisen Case Study Application

Boisen did not treat his personal crisis experience as a private matter. He interpreted the dynamics of his mental breakdown as a human condition that requires a communal response in spiritual care. He thus established and developed chaplaincy services in psychiatric hospitals through the process of clinical pastoral education. In his personal credo, presented at the 1950 Conference of the Council for Clinical Pastoral Education, Boisen stated the core mission of his life by defining human need not as “the discontent with one’s imperfections, even when that discontent is carried to the point of severe disturbance, but in the sense of estrangement and isolation... (1960, 197). While psychiatric care emphasized the patient’s pathology and imperfections, spiritual care was to awaken the person to a deeper or religious understanding of his or her distress and restore communion and purpose in life.

#### **Theological or Faith-based?**

Since spiritual care associations, including CAPPE/ACPEP, are sensitive and respectful to its increasingly multicultural and interfaith scope of practice, the term “theological” with its theistic associations is sometimes dropped in favor of the term *faith-based* reflection. Although “faith-based” loses some of the above-mentioned meanings of theology and hence breadth of context for reflection, the term highlights the role of one’s religious heritage as essential to the practice of reflection. While theological reflection traditionally has been practiced as a Christian discipline, the term “faith-based” clearly intends to re-baptize the discipline as a multifaith practice.

#### A Faith-Based Perspective on the Boisen Case Study

Anton Boisen’s theological insight can be related to his protestant Christian faith tradition. In this tradition the doctrine of justification by grace stands central. The good news of the gospel is that what counts is not our imperfections but God’s acceptance. His fear of condemnation made him hide in silence and withdraw in shyness. The instruction “don’t be afraid to tell” turned his solution of hiding into the real problem. By faith he could mock his fears and go public with his imperfections.

This religious perspective of grace can be correlated with the psychodynamic insight of Freudian psychology that revolutionized the social sciences in Boisen’s days. In those days of Victorian repressive moralism, Freud’s discovery of the unconscious normalized the presence of aggressive and sexual instincts that, when repressed rather than socialized, make for neurotic guilt and obsessive compulsive disorders. Boisen could thus, reflecting the graceful insights of both gospel and science, say: “My development had been checked by the presence of instinctual claims which could be neither controlled

nor acknowledged for fear of condemnation. The prompting, ‘Do not be afraid to tell,’ brought relief by socializing the difficulty.”

### III. PRAXIS

The process of theological reflection incorporates practical concerns right from its start in the initial experience, continuing to do so in the ensuing critical in-depth reflection while simultaneously generating new insights and possibilities of practice. This is the meaning of praxis as practice shaped by reflection, practice that is “theory-laden.” Praxis reveals the theology, the theoretical assumptions and underpinnings, of our practice of care.

Rather than a linear three-step stage theory – from experience to reflection to praxis – theological reflection is an ongoing cyclical process in experiential learning. It aims at becoming self-aware and intentional in learning from our experience: to know who we are in how we practice what we believe.

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#### *A Process Report of Theological Reflection in Spiritual Care*

Harold Kushner’s popular book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* exemplifies the process of theological reflection. The first sentence of the introduction states: “This is not an abstract book about God and theology.” Instead it is steeped in the devastating experience of a young rabbi and his wife hearing that their first child, Aaron, is diagnosed with progeria or “rapid aging” – that he would look like a little old man while a child and would die in his early teens. Kushner continues: “This is a very personal book, written by someone who believes in God and in the goodness of the world, someone who has spent most of his life trying to help other people believe, and was compelled by personal tragedy to rethink everything he had been taught about God and God’s ways.”

This is a story of theological reflection. The rabbi places the crisis of his experience in the biblical context of the book of Job. He listens to Job’s counsellors as they try to comfort Job by assuring him that God is good and in control of all what happens in the world. Here the rabbi begins to evaluate the theology: “to say that everything works out in God’s world may be comforting to the casual bystander, but it is an insult to the bereaved and the unfortunate.” To account for Job’s misery in this theology is to question his innocence otherwise God is guilty of making an innocent man suffer. However, “Job, for his part, is unwilling to hold the world together theologically by admitting that he is a villain.” From this theological reflection comes new insight and relief: “If God is a God of justice and not of power, then He can still be on our side when bad things happen to us.”

As a clergyperson Kushner found himself in a perfect research environment to hear and critically evaluate the practice of care for the bereaved and unfortunate. He surmised in his critical examination that Job’s counsellors are still around and practicing. From his correlation of the message of Job with common, present-day grief care flow new insights

and practices of spiritual care: “Only the voice of religion, when it frees itself from the need to defend and justify God for all that happens, can say to the afflicted person, ‘You are a good person, and you deserve better. Let me come and sit with you so that you will know that you are not alone’.”(143). While staying within a traditional theistic framework, these words reject some popular images of God that in the practice of care prove offensive and insensitive to those afflicted by tragic loss and meaningless misfortune. Chief among these dysfunctional images is God as controlling power and God as the detached cosmic moralist.

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## CONCLUSIONS

In one study<sup>5</sup> 75 spiritual care providers were asked to rate the importance of theological reflection to their professional identity. The responses were unambiguous: “essential,” “very important,” “crucial,” “foundational,” “central,” “integral,” and “huge.” Yet at the same time there appears to be ambiguity about the process of theological reflection and unevenness in incorporating its practice as a regular personal discipline. Verbatim reports in SPE programs generally include a section on theological reflection that, for whatever reason, often produce a sense of uncertainty and boring and repetitious responses.

### *Your Response*

- Do you think this is a fair assessment?
- If there is some reality to it, how do you account for it?
- What would make theological reflection more inviting, stimulating, challenging?

At this time some SPE programs incorporate literature and film as additional narrative means to access living human documents, to examine the text, explore its meanings, and generate alternate stories. We can learn from and participate in interdisciplinary groups in health care professional education and practice as these emphasize the value of reflection through critically reflective and reflexive practices, narrative, the arts and humanities, and ethics education. Theological reflection grows our personal and professional integrity and vitality through a discipline that treats theory as living truth and transforms both practitioner and practice through new insight. As such theological reflection may just be the best antidote to burnout and loss of meaning in a practice generally recognized as a perilous profession.

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## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Written by Donna Mann

<sup>2</sup> See O'Connor, Meakes & Lashmar. 2008. "Theological Reflection in Spiritual Care: Identity and Practice," in *The Spiritual Care Giver's Guide*. CAPPEWONT & Waterloo Lutheran Seminary.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred North Whitehead. 1926. *Religion in the Making*. P.40. New American Library.

<sup>4</sup> For an exploration and application of the thematic approach in spiritual care and counseling see Donald Capps. 1979. *Pastoral Care – A Thematic Approach*. Westminster. This text also provides a helpful diagram of the correlation of Pruyser's theological and Erikson's psychosocial themes (pp. 113-116).

<sup>5</sup> See O'Connor, Meakes & Lashmar. 2008. "Theological Reflection in Spiritual Care: Identity and Practice," in *The Spiritual Care Giver's Guide*. CAPPEWONT & Waterloo Lutheran Seminary.

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