



"I skate to where the puck is going to be, not to where it has been."

- Wayne Gretzky

"In times of profound change, the learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." Eric Hoffer

The future is already here; it just isn't evenly distributed. - Unknown

In *The Up Side of Down* Thomas Homer-Dixon contends that five "tectonic stresses" are accumulating deep underneath the surface of today's global order. The five stresses he identifies greatly increase the risk of a cascading collapse of systems vital to our wellbeing — a phenomenon he calls "synchronous failure." Scary stuff: so what is the "up" side? He writes,

We can get ready in advance to turn to our advantage any breakdown that does occur.. We can boost the chances that it will lead to renewal by being well prepared, nimble and smart and by learning to recognize its many warning signs.¹

It has become a cliché that we live in a world that is changing so rapidly, we cannot cope. Many of our cherished assumptions are not shared by the next generation, assumptions which helped us to find stability in a world that is increasingly a strange place.

We grieve this loss – loss of familiarity, and loss of meaning. Where we do not grieve, we react: with a defensive posture, and sometimes with denial. A more positive posture, and the one which is taken by organizations which are negotiating these rough waters, is to become learners, and to adapt to change while finding the ground that is not shaken.

That unshaken ground – the solid Rock of God's covenant faithfulness – is offered to us in narratives that show both sides of the story: adaptation, and fear and reaction. Narratives like Israel moving from Egypt to the Promised land offer us both the hope of moving forward, and a warning against those who continually long for the security of the past – who want to return to Egypt.

We have to "exegete" our changing world and we must encounter God. That encounter will always leave us changed....

But while the answer seems simple – "let's move ahead" -- we already know that the answers are NOT easy. They are difficult; as difficult as anything we could face. We wrestle with changing language

¹ Thomas Homer-Dixon, *The Up Side of Down* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2006) 21.

("Christian" and even "church" now have multiple contexts and usage); we wrestle with whether adaptation equals compromise. We have exegetical and theological work to do, and we also have to "exegete" our changing world. These tasks are neither simple nor secure. They require faith and courage to engage. As one seasoned leader put it, faith is spelled R I S K.² Faith requires that we encounter the living Lord of the Church, and that encounter will always leave us changed.

One leader who speaks prophetically into this location in time is Henri Nouwen. He wrote a short meditation on leadership, reluctantly, in the late 80s'.

In *In the Name of Jesus*, he is working with two stories. The first is the story of the three temptations in Matthew 4. The second is the story of Jesus three questions to Peter in John 21. Nouwen is going to describe for us "the leader of the future." He characterizes the temptations like this:

1. the temptation to be relevant.

The question: "Do you love me?"

The movement – From relevance to prayer

2. the temptation to be spectacular

The task: "Feed my sheep."

The movement – From popularity to service

3. the temptation to be powerful

The challenge: Someone else will lead you

The discipline – From leading to being led.

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Nouwen describes the leader of the future as the praying leader, the vulnerable leader, and the trusting leader. I think these terms need reinterpretation for our time, and I translate like this:

- + the praying leader = the listening leader
- + the vulnerable leader = the vulnerable/transparent leader
- + the trusting leader = the surrendered/powerless leader

Speaking from John 21:18, Nouwen writes that the mature leader will follow where he/she does not want to go. There are components of surrender and vulnerability here. The Christian leader of the future, the missional leader, is "radically poor" — takes nothing for the journey, is radically dependent on Christ (Mark 6:8; Luke 10:4). Before we can become learners we have to become empty, leave our baggage behind us.

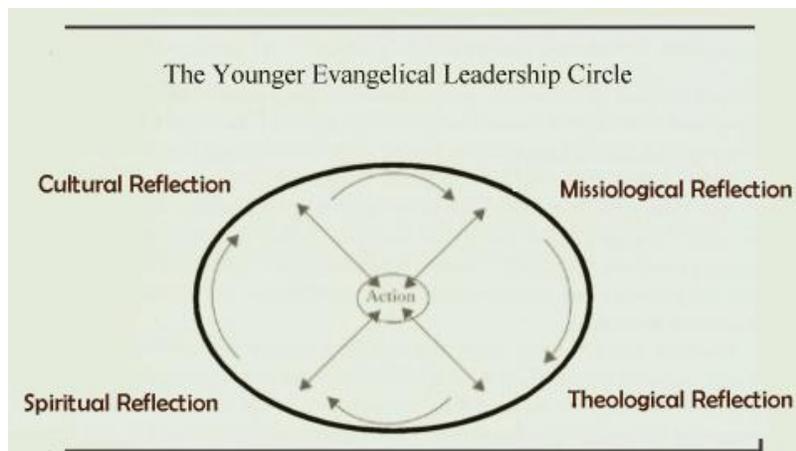
The discipline needed for this radical dependence and willingness to be led is *theological reflection*. Nouwen writes,

² See Frost & Hirsch recent book, *The Faith of Leap* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011)

Just as prayer keeps us connected with the first love, and confession and forgiveness keep our ministry communal and mutual, so strenuous theological reflection will allow us to discern where God is leading.³

I want to connect Nouwen's argument for the need of theological reflection with the same argument made by Robert Webber in *The Younger Evangelicals*.⁴ Webber writes that the new leadership "is not shaped by being right, nor is it driven by meeting needs. Instead, it arises out of (1) a missiological understanding of the church, (2) theological reflection, (3) spiritual formation, and (4) cultural awareness... These four areas represent a circle of leadership." Connecting theological reflection explicitly with the *missio Dei*, he writes,

We do not define God's mission. It defines us. It tells us who we are, what our mission is, how we are to do ministry, worship, spirituality, evangelism. There is no aspect of the Christian life, thought, and ministry that is not connected with God's mission to the world.



For this reason theological reflection is inextricably linked with the *missio Dei*. It is not an abstract objective discipline that is subject to reason, logic, or science. It is instead a communal reflection on God's mission that arises out of God's people as they seek to discern God's work in history and his present action in the life of the community.⁵

In short, we won't escape the pragmatism or Triumphalism that have subverted our church culture unless we are willing to do theological work. And this is not mere study, but disciplined submission to our active and living Head as he reconstitutes our communities as a faithful witness in a fallen world.

Gary Nelson reaches a similar conclusion in *Borderland Churches*. In the fourth chapter, "Landscapes and Tool Kits," Gary calls for pastoral leaders to "face the call" of borderland living. In conversation with leaders moving into the borderlands Gary has noted four repeating themes. These are not held in some kind of synthetic balance, but often in great tension. The call of leadership today is to be *apprentice-pastor-theologian-missionary*.⁶

Apprentices are formed in the hard disciplines of prayer, study and reflective action with the intention of producing passionate followers of Jesus. Disciples "systematically and progressively arrange their affairs" under the guidance of the Word and Spirit.⁷

³ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad Books, 1989) 85.

⁴ Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005) 240-241.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁶ Gary Nelson, *Borderland Churches* (Chalice Press, 2009) 83.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

Pastors are committed to the formation of a genuine community of faith. Only genuine communities can fling themselves boldly into the world. Jim Wallis voices a parallel thought: "Community is the place where the healing of our own lives becomes the foundation for the healing of the nations."⁸

Missionaries intentionally cross borders, learning the language, the rhythms, and the values of those they engage. Missional leaders must understand the times and places where they dwell in order to have genuine encounters.

We must also be *theologians*. Nelson writes, "The role of theology has been suppressed in the last decade because of our love for the pragmatic... deep theological and biblical reflective frame must be formed in the pastor's life."⁹ Leaders must not only "have" a theology, they must be adept at *doing it*. The tension of the first themes is informed by the practice of theological reflection. Nelson notes that when this is absent, the content required for effective borderland living is also absent.

Poets and Missional Imagination



In *The Sky is Falling* Alan Roxburgh identifies a new type of leadership that arises in the unique post-modern landscape.¹⁰ This new type may be a unique blending of types we already know. Within the five-fold gifts of Ephesians 4 there are certain combinations that appear new, uniquely suited to times requiring innovation and adaptation: *the poet, the synergist, and the boundary-crosser*. These types are primarily a blend of prophetic and apostolic, though the boundary-crosser may add a strong element of pastor and evangelist. Let's consider the poetic type.

According to Roxburgh, the poet is especially oriented to helping us recover missional imagination. The synergist is like an abbot figure. The boundary crosser is a prophetic networker with pastor-at-large overtones.

The poet, like Adam, helps us make sense of our experience. The word in the prologue of John tells how Jesus "became flesh and lived among us."¹¹ In a similar way, the poet shapes words so that what was hidden and invisible becomes known. Poets remove the veil and give language to what people are experiencing. This is only possible when the poet him/herself lives within the traditions and narratives of the people: "The poet listens to the rhythms and meanings occurring beneath the surface."¹²

⁸ Jim Wallis, *Call to Conversion* (San Francisco: 1979) 81.

⁹ Nelson, Op Cit. 84

¹⁰ Alan Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling: Leaders Lost in Transition* (Eagle: Allelon Pub., 2004)

¹¹ Ibid.,165.

¹² Ibid., 166.

The leadership of poets, however, is not expressed in a modern manner. Poets, "are not so much advice-givers as image and metaphor framers... What churches need are not more entrepreneurial leaders with wonderful plans for their congregation's life, but poets with the imagination and gifting to cultivate environments within which people might again understand how their traditional narratives apply to them today."¹³

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Without missional imagination, faith communities become stuck moving in circles. The purpose of formation, however, is to enable us to widen our embrace, to move outward and make known the grace of God to all creation. The congregation that exhibits the fullness of Christ inevitably proclaims *and performs* the gospel, both declares *and demonstrates*. In the new world that is dawning, we will need leaders of all kinds; if these functions are often transparent or invisible, like yeast hidden in dough, powerfully influencing change by birthing a new world, all the better.¹⁴

Theopoetics

It is at the level of the imagination that the fateful issues of our new world-experience must first be mastered. It is here that culture and history are broken, and here that the church is polarized.

*Old words do not reach across the new gulfs, and it is only in vision and oracle that we can chart the unknown and new-name the creatures.*¹⁵

The term *theopoetics* was first seen in the form of *theopoiesis*, used by Stanley Hopper.¹⁶ Since then, theopoetics has served as a noun referring to a particular devotional quality of a text, a genre of religious writing, and a postmodern perspective on theology. A useful working definition of the term would be the study and practice of making God known through text.

Only as we invite others to live as whole beings before God... will they experience God in a meaningful way.

Making God known through text? Phil Rollins has helped us identify this as a slippery venture.¹⁷ But one of the main concerns of theology has been to bridge the complex world of experience with the story of God. Phil Zylla writes, "As experiences increase in complexity and depth the facility of language loses its capacity to express the hope of the gospel in relationship to the reality that we perceive and into which we attempt to live."¹⁸

Zylla references Donald Capps 1993 book, *The Poet's Gift*. Capps proposed that we consider poetry as a source of vision and inspiration for the pastoral task, and as a source of renewal for pastoral theology itself. In Capps view,

¹³ Ibid., 166

¹⁴ The Tao of leadership: "When the best leader's work is done the people say: "We did it ourselves!"

¹⁵ Perry Keefe, "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective." *Christianity and Literature* 58,4 (Summer, 2009) 579-601.

¹⁶ David L. Miller "Introduction." In *Why Persimmons? and Other Poems: Transformations of Theology in Poetry*. Atlanta: Scholars, 1987. 3.

¹⁷ Notably his book, *How (Not) to Speak About God*.

¹⁸ Phil Zylla, "What Language Can I Borrow?" in *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry*, 9,129

both pastor and poet share a common passion for probing what is occurring beneath the surface. Both seek to understand the complex reality of human experience; both exhibit a deep care for words; both seek to ground reflection on actual situations; both seek to understand or pursue wisdom; both seek to write about the anomalies and tragedies and the unexpected blessings of life with thoughtfulness and passion.¹⁹

This is not far from the James Smith's pursuit. While Smith is ostensibly pursuing a theology of cultural engagement,²⁰ theo-poetics pursues integration and honesty in the recognition that only whole persons before God will deeply experience the divine. Moreover, it is only as we invite others to live as whole beings before God that they will experience God in a meaningful way. We are embodied, and we live in a world of ambiguity in our daily experience: recognition of these realities is more likely to prove fruitful for a whole life spirituality than attempting to deny them.



Theo-poetics isn't entirely new. Reading the work of Bernard of Clairvaux or William of Saint Thierry, one feels familiar echoes. Recently I picked up a novel by Charles Williams, *Shadows of Ecstasy*. A day or two later, a copy of Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, arrived. As I browsed through the volume I read Smith's argument that the erotic is precisely the lever we must reconsider in spiritual formation, so carefully employed by Hollywood and Madison Avenue. With our practiced dualism we have neglected this area and left the door wide open for more worldly agendas. Smith notes the romantic

theology of Charles Williams. A few days later we listened to Steve Bell in concert, performing a number of his oldest compositions, including *Why Do We Hunger for Beauty?* As people hung on the words, and as the music carried water to our souls, I realized how hungry for God 'churched' people are. What? Churched people hungry for God?

In the West we dwell in the world of ideas, where ideas are more real than the thing itself. In things, we believe, the real is shadowed but not present. Appeals to the mind abound: but appeals to the soul, and our ability to live in that place where duality is gone, seem tenuous at best. We rightly recognize and are attracted to the beauty we see around us, but too often it becomes an end in itself rather than a path to something more. Beauty and love are icons of the true. James Houston writes,

The icon ... is not a self-projection, but a revelation. It brings us a message from beyond, so we interpret and look at it differently. As Jean-Luc Marion has observed, the icon lets the visible image be "saturated" by the invisible, pointing beyond itself.²¹

Beauty, goodness, truth: these are icons rather than shadows, because shadow implies some lack of reality or something less than good. But beauty and love are not merely shadows or less than good, they are only less than God.

¹⁹ Ibid., 130.

²⁰ In particular in *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009)

²¹ James Houston, *The Mentored Life* (Navpress: 2002)

So we end with theopoeitics, because after all there is no way to use mere words to describe the transformative power of love, any more than mere words can describe the lover's experience of the beloved. We use word-pictures and rhyme and music because poetry and music help words take flight, and the experience of love is both rooted and wild and words need wings to approximate it. We end up in the song of songs, or in the poetry of Saint John of the Cross.

*Your eyes in mine aglow
Printed their living image in my own...
Only look this way now
as once before: your gaze
leaves me with lovelier features where it plays.²²*

Len Hjalmarson, DMin
Advent, 2010

²² John Frederick Nims. *The Poems of St. John of the Cross* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968). 20.