

Learning from others: The formation of a theologian

by [Stanley Hauerwas](#) in the [May 18, 2010](#) issue

I started to write when I was teaching at Augustana College, but after moving to the University of Notre Dame in 1970 I really began to put words on paper. I did not write because I thought you needed to publish to get tenure. I was not that savvy about how these things worked. I probably did need to write to get tenure, but I wrote because I thought I had something to say.

Two developments were crucial for giving me the presumption that I might have something to say. First, I became friends with a fly geneticist named Harvey Bender. Harvey was involved with South Bend's Logan Center. The center's mission was to provide schooling for the mentally disabled, and it was located across the street from Notre Dame. The center was constantly on the lookout for people to serve on its board who did not have a mentally disabled member of the family. They did so because it was one of the requirements written into their incorporation that members of the community who were not directly connected to the work of the center should be on the board. I have no idea how it came to be, but I was asked to serve on the board.

What an experience it was for me to become part of the world of the mentally disabled. That world, as I suspect it should have, frightened me. I shall never forget the first time I was given a tour of the center. A seven-year-old boy who had Down syndrome jumped in my arms and hugged me. He was too close, right in my face, and would not let go. I carried him as we continued the tour. I had to act like everything was just "fine," but in fact I was terrified. I soon began to think that learning to live with the mentally disabled might be paradigmatic for learning what it might mean to face God.

The second development, not unconnected with the first, occurred because of an article I wrote in 1972 titled "The Christian Society and the Weak." I wrote the article to articulate theologically how I understood the challenge of learning to be with the mentally disabled. It was published in the *Notre Dame Magazine*. I was cutting the grass (with our old push mower) when my wife, Anne, called me to the phone. "Sargent Shriver wants to talk with you," she reported excitedly.

I thought she must be kidding, but Sargent Shriver was on the phone. He and Mrs. Shriver had read my article and found it "powerful." They were anxious for me to come to Washington, D.C., to take part in a conference they were planning on medical ethics. That is how I became a medical ethicist.

I had never been around people like the Shriveres. I liked Sarge. I found Mrs. Shriver a bit much to take. I simply had no idea what it meant to be around people of power. I soon realized that they assumed their job was to find people to do the work they thought needed doing. The work that needed doing in this case was the care of the mentally disabled. They had been drawn into this work by the existence of Mrs. Shriver's sister. It was good work, and I wanted to be of use. But I found I simply was not cut out to play the game at their level.

The reason I had difficulty was brought home to me one evening when Anne and I had been invited to have dinner with a number of other philosophers and theologians at the Shriveres' home. There were, of course, servants in attendance, but this did not stop some at the dinner from talking about how hard it is to find "good help." I could not forget that the people who had prepared the meal, the people who served the meal, the people who cleaned up after the meal, were my people. I have since enjoyed many meals in which servants were present, but in truth I have never gotten used to being waited on. And I have trouble being around people who have.

In 1973 the Shrivvers made it possible for me to have a sabbatical at the newly formed Kennedy Center for Bioethics at Georgetown University. The Kennedy Center had been the brainchild of Andre Hellegers. Andre, originally from Holland, was an extraordinary man who understood earlier than most that medicine was facing a moral crisis. The crisis was not that associated with the increasing technological sophistication of medicine, but rather with whether we as a society had the moral presuppositions and practices to sustain medicine as a practice of presence to the ill.

Andre thought it quite important to educate some of us who claimed to be ethicists in the actual work of medicine. Paul Ramsey was among the first to receive this education. Andre brought Paul to Georgetown, with the happy result being Paul's great book *The Patient as Person*. I am in Andre's and the Shrivvers' debt for giving me the opportunity to learn firsthand the nature of modern medicine. Like medical students, we rotated through the different departments in the hospital.

I was fascinated by the way physicians learn to see their patients, because I thought they often exemplified the way practical reason is supposed to work. It turns out, just as Ramsey argued in *The Patient as Person*, that doctors treat patients—not diseases. Moreover, every patient is different, requiring doctors to attend to the concrete particular. It occurred to me that the way we train doctors might be a model for moral training. I have often wished that we could train those going into the ministry not unlike how doctors are trained.

I began to think it a mistaken idea that medicine has much to learn from ethics. The reverse more likely is true. The practice of medicine is a moral practice from beginning to end. Physicians must be trained to see and care for their patients in a manner such that all other judgments are irrelevant. I take this training to be one of the most strenuous moral commitments one could imagine. Physicians must acquire the virtues to sustain their commitment to be present to the ill even when there is not much they can do to make those for whom they care better.

Too often it is assumed that medical ethics is, or should be, primarily about what doctors do. But far more important is what kind of people we should be to be patient patients. I fear that patients who are no longer patient in the face of illness and death cannot help but bring expectations to medicine that are corrupting.

I did not put *Suffering Presence* together until 1985, but those essays reflect what I learned during my time at the Kennedy Center. The way medical ethics came to be conceived means that I am not a medical ethicist, but I believe that some of the writing I have done that is allegedly medical ethics, particularly *Naming the Silences*, is among my best work.

I hope my work in a book like *Naming the Silences* exemplifies what I can describe only as the importance of having a novelist's eye. We are complex creatures constituted by contradictions we refuse to acknowledge. The novelist must help us see our complexity without providing comforting explanations. We must be taught to see our pain and the pain we cause in others without trying to excuse ourselves by offering explanations.

I think "ethics" depends on developing the eye of a novelist. If my work is compelling, I suspect it is so to the degree that I am able to write like a novelist. If I have a novelist's eye, it is not accidental. I have, after all, spent many years reading novels. Reading novels will not necessarily make one better able to see without illusion, but it can help. My ability so to see, moreover, depends on how I have come to understand what it means to be Christian. I fear that much of the Christianity that surrounds us assumes that our task is to save appearances by protecting God from Job-like anguish. But if God is the God of Jesus Christ, then God does not need our protection. What God demands is not protection, but truth.

I was beginning to develop a different way of "doing" ethics. I had learned from Ludwig Wittgenstein and Julius Kovesi that description is everything. But to sustain truthful descriptions requires agents habituated by the

virtues necessary to avoid the lies unleashed by our desire to avoid experiencing the suffering of others. Descriptions, moreover, are not just "there" but interconnected. The interconnection is called "a story." Such a story must be told, tested and retold countless times if we are to approach the truth.

To approach ethics in this way depended on my dissatisfaction with the focus on decision and choice that dominated—and continues to dominate—ethical theory. Influenced by Iris Murdoch's claim that choices are what you do when everything else has been lost, I became increasingly convinced that what we do is not what destroys us. Rather, our fate rests on how we describe what we do. Indeed, we do not know what we have done until we get the descriptions right. I think I was beginning to see more clearly some of the implications correlative to my attempt to recover the significance of the virtues.

Also at work was my increasing realization that it is a mistake to think Christian ethics can be divorced from theology. I realize that many who want to maintain the independence of Christian ethics would protest that divorce is too strong a word. But too often it accurately describes how ethics is done. Love or justice or some other fundamental principle is identified as the source of the moral life. God and the church might be assumed as background beliefs that may be needed to sustain the intelligibility of the fundamental principle or principles, but they are seldom thought to be vital to how our lives are morally constituted.

Too many people, I fear, become "ethicists" because they do not like theology. I have always been a strong supporter of the Society of Christian Ethics, but the very existence of such a society can be a temptation to separate theology from ethics. I suspect that one of the reasons some of my colleagues in ethics find me hard to take is due to my unrelenting claim that God matters. Not just any God, moreover, but the God that has shown up in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I began to think that the separation of Christian ethics, or moral theology, from theology proper was a reflection of the presuppositions of a liberal social order. The distinction between theology and ethics legitimated the public-private distinction that is the heart of the liberal project to domesticate strong convictions and, in particular, strong religious convictions. So the work I was doing in political theory, philosophical ethics, and the care of the mentally disabled seemed inextricably connected. That is what I thought I had to say, and I was determined to say it.

The other development that made all the difference for how I was learning to think began quite innocently. I thought it might be a good idea to find the guy named John Howard Yoder who had written a pamphlet on Barth I had read just as I was leaving Yale. Goshen was not far from South Bend, so one Saturday I put my son, Adam, in the car and drove out to Goshen, assuming that this must be where the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary was located. It turned out that the seminary was in Elkhart. But in Goshen I did go into College Church and discovered a display of pamphlets, some of which had been written by Yoder. There was one on Barth, another on Reinhold Niebuhr and still another on capital punishment. I seem to remember that they each cost a dime. I had the money, so I bought them.

I drove back to South Bend and devoured what Yoder had written. I was stunned. I could not avoid recognizing that this guy had extraordinary analytical power. He wrote clearly and powerfully. I was overwhelmed. I also assumed that he had to be wrong. After all, he was a Mennonite. Mennonites were pacifists, and pacifism had to be a mistake. But I was intrigued. I discovered that you could call Elkhart, Indiana. I even discovered that you could call Yoder at the seminary in Elkhart. So I called and made an appointment to come to see him. I had no idea that a trip to Elkhart, Indiana, was going to change my life.

The Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary is an appropriately modest collection of buildings on the south side of Elkhart. John occupied an equally modest office in one of those buildings. I have no idea what John made of me. I did allow that I found his writing profoundly challenging. I suspect he must have assumed that I brought

all the prejudices and stereotypes about Mennonites characteristic of someone educated at Yale—stereotypes that placed him in a "Christ against culture" position. In short, he may well have thought that, however our conversation developed, I would assume that he bore the burden of proof.

John Yoder was tall, and many people reported that they thought of him as severe. There is no question that he could be quite intimidating. I probably should have been intimidated, but I was not. I did, however, find him hard to talk to. John had little use for casual chatter. I would ask him a question, and, as was his habit, he would answer using as few words as possible. John never tried to use charm to convince you to be an advocate of Christian nonviolence. Charm and John Howard Yoder were antithetical.

I did my best to make conversation, but it was not easy. I finally resorted to the academic game—"So what are you working on now?" John said he was not producing much that he thought might interest me. I noticed, however, a shelf of mimeographed materials and, assuming they might be something he had written, asked if I might read them. I left with a stack of his work about a foot high. I had also found in the seminary bookstore a copy of *The Christian Witness to the State*, which had been published by the Faith and Life Press in Newton, Kansas, in 1964.

I returned to South Bend and began to read. I discovered in the mimeographs a book titled *The Politics of Jesus*. I met John in the summer of 1970. *The Politics of Jesus* would be published in 1972 by Eerdmans. I do not think reading the book had the same effect on me that Kant reports reading Hume had on him. After all, reading Barth as I had was preparation for encountering Yoder. But I recognized that Yoder's book was not just another position one might consider. Stanley Fish reports that when he teaches Milton there comes a moment when an undergraduate expresses admiration for Milton's poetry, giving Stanley the opportunity to observe, "Milton does not want your admiration. He wants your soul." Yoder did not want my soul, but he made it clear that Jesus did. This was not going to be easy.

I began to read John's essays published in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* as well as some of the pamphlets produced by the Concern Group. The latter was a group of young Mennonites receiving education in Europe. They were united by a desire to recover the radical character of the Radical Reformation. I was particularly struck by Yoder's Concern pamphlet "Peace Without Eschatology?" I began to understand that pacifism is not a position that you might adopt after you get your Christology straight. Yoder forced me to recognize that nonviolence is not a recommendation, an ideal, that Jesus suggested we might try to live up to. Rather, nonviolence is constitutive of God's refusal to redeem coercively. The crucifixion is "the politics of Jesus."

The Original Revolution, a collection of John's essays published in 1971, included not only "Peace Without Eschatology?" but also the title essay. I had presumed that an account of the virtues necessarily entails a politics. Reading Yoder's understanding of the church made me think that I might have discovered what such a politics entails. I do not think it is accidental that Alisdair MacIntyre's *Against the Self-Images of the Age* was also published in 1971. Thus began my strange project, as some people have described it, of suggesting how Yoder's account of the church might satisfy some of the aporias in MacIntyre's work.

It was not long before I was given the opportunity to "go public," that is, to expose what I was learning from Yoder. Sometime before I had arrived at Notre Dame, its department of theology and Valparaiso, a Lutheran school, had started a yearly get-together on the grounds that it was a good ecumenical idea. It was my first year at Notre Dame, but I was asked to give the paper when our faculties met. Given all I had read of Yoder's, I decided to write a paper on his work.

I began by noting that I was a Methodist with a doubtful theological background, since it goes without saying that a Methodist has a doubtful theological background. I noted further that I was representing the most Catholic department of theology in the nation, speaking to a bunch of Lutheran theologians, to argue that the Anabaptists

had been right all along. I then suggested that I hoped to show, by directing attention to Yoder's work, how much Lutherans and Catholics had in common; that is, when all was said and done, they both assumed it was a good idea to kill the Anabaptists. Of course, that is exactly what happened, both historically and in response to my paper. The Lutherans and the Catholics joined in a common effort to show why, if you are to act responsibly, you will need to be ready to kill.

It simply did not occur to me that being identified with Yoder might be a bad career move. I was ambitious. I wanted to make a difference. I was writing as fast as I could. I had not learned to write well. I thought the ideas mattered — not the writing. David Burrell, a colleague at Notre Dame, forced me to recognize that what I had to say could not be separated from how I said it. I slowly became a better writer by writing. I still find it painful, however, to read some of my early work.

In 1974, I was promoted to associate professor with tenure. As usual, I paid little attention to the process. I suspect that Notre Dame had not yet developed the tenure review process that now dominates research universities. I assume I must have been run through some university procedures, but I certainly had little sense that I might be in any trouble. I remember Burrell telling me I had received tenure. He reported that the only worries about me were that some faculty thought I had come up a year too soon and that I needed to be more careful with my language.

Being careful with my language meant that I should not, as I was wont to do, use profanity. I had continued to talk like a bricklayer. There were certain words that I knew how to use and that were, not surprisingly, offensive to people at a place like Notre Dame. I also used a wide range of other words that people might have thought offensive. I used those words because that is the way I had learned to speak. I confess that I often found the middle-class and upper-middle-class etiquette that dominated university life oppressive. I certainly was not above sometimes using words that I knew would offend precisely because I knew they would offend. It took an article some years later in *Lingua Franca*, in which I was described as "the Foul Mouth Theologian," to make me quit using the most offensive words. I simply became tired of and bored with having that aspect of my life made into such a big deal.

I have the reputation for being the perennial outsider. There is some truth to that characterization. I am the working-class kid in the world of the university. I am the radical Christian challenging an accommodated church. The list could go on, with each description an invitation to self-deception. In truth, I have no desire to be the outsider, the critic, the dissident. I want a home. I want to play a constructive role.

Through my writing, and without quite realizing it, I was beginning to stake out a quite distinctive position. I was not trying to be creative. And I do not think theologians should try, as some philosophers do, to have "a position." Positions can give the impression that our task is to represent something new. I believe that through the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth we live in a new age, but that is why theologians do not have a position. Rather, our task is to help the church know what it has been given. But I was beginning to sense that I had quite a particular take on that given.

Fearing immodesty, I hesitate to make such a claim. But then I have never trusted modesty because I suspect that the attempt to be modest is betrayed by the very fact that it must be attempted. I do not know how to evaluate the significance of what I have written, but I have learned from others, often those who hate what I have done, that what I think is different. Still, it took time for me to recognize this difference.

Although I began to sense this difference at Notre Dame, I think it was after I arrived at Duke in 1984 that I began to recognize the significance of the difference. That recognition came through teaching. One of my primary responsibilities at Duke was to teach the core course in Christian ethics. The course would often have more than a hundred master's students. I would lecture several times a week, but small seminar-style sessions led

by teaching assistants from the doctoral program were a weekly requirement. I met every week with the teaching assistants to think about these sessions, and I would ask them to tell me of any difficulties the students might be having in getting what I was trying to do. Inevitably, they would tell me that some students grasped immediately the argument that shaped the course, but for others what I was trying to do seemed incomprehensible. I remember clearly that in one of these sessions a doctoral student named David Stubbs stated the problem quite simply: in my course the students were confronted by "a wholly different Christianity."

I think this is an apt description of my work, but I also think that the "wholly different Christianity" I represent is in deep continuity with Christianity past and present that is found in the everyday lives of Christian people. You do not get to make Christianity up, and I have no desire to be original. If I represent a wholly different Christianity, I do so only because I have found a way to help us recognize as Christians what extraordinary things we say when we worship God.

What many people find hard to understand, or at least what strikes them as unusual, is how I combine what I hope is a profound commitment to fundamental Christian convictions with a socially radical ethic. At bottom, the convictions involve the claim that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. If he is not fully both, then we Christians are clearly idolaters. A socially radical ethic follows from this theological conviction because our worship of Jesus is itself a politics through which a world is created that would not exist if Jesus were not raised from the dead. Basic to such politics is the refusal of violence that many assume is a given for any responsible account of the world.

I discovered that I had to write to explore this set of convictions. I continue to do so. My writing is exploratory because I have no idea what I believe until I force myself to say it. For me, writing turns out to be my way of believing. That my writing has taken primarily the form of essays is not only because of the exploratory character of my work, but also because, given my other responsibilities, essays have always seemed doable. *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (1977) and *A Community of Character* (1981), both collections of essays I wrote while at Notre Dame, are books that can be read as my attempt to develop the conceptual tools that resulted in *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1983). I was finally able to write a book, I suspect, because of what I had learned through writing more occasionally.

I suspect it is all there in *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Most of what I have said since, I said there. But if so, then everything remains to be done, insofar as everything is projected toward the future. What I had discovered in my teaching and writing at Notre Dame is the difference it makes when you refuse to ignore the eschatological character of the gospel, a discovery that Barth made in the second edition of his commentary on Romans and that Yoder made as he wrote pamphlets for display in the back of Mennonite churches. Barth's discovery, bound as it was by the possibilities of European Christianity in 1921, awaited and required rediscovery. And Yoder helped me see that God has freed the church from its cultural captivity to the world that, after all, the church had helped create. In *The Peaceable Kingdom*, I tried to think through what this freedom might entail. In doing so, I reframed how Christians should think about our political responsibilities, our willingness to have children, our understanding of marriage, our regard of death and our care of one another through the agency of medicine, and our understanding of medicine itself. I reframed all of our questions about these topics by stressing that any answers we might offer entail an understanding of the contingent character of our existence.

To say that our lives are contingent is to say that they are out of our control. Being out of control is the central image that runs through *The Peaceable Kingdom* and much of my work. Certainly that image described my marriage to Anne, but I do not think this image is autobiographical. In fact, I think the image came to me because of the influence of Yoder, who taught me to think that following Jesus means you cannot anticipate or ensure results. Learning to live out of control, learning to live without trying to force contingency into conformity because of our desperate need for security, I take to be a resource for discovering alternatives that

would otherwise not be present.

In this sense, the notion of being out of control is one that stands as an alternative to Niebuhrian realism. The problem with realism is that it can shut down the imagination.

This essay is adapted from Stanley Hauerwas's book Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir, just published by Eerdmans. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.