Faith seeking wisdom

by David F. Ford in the November 30, 2010 issue

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It is by living and dying that one becomes a theologian, Martin Luther said. With that comment in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939 and asked theologians to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, questions and hopes as people of faith and to consider how their work and life have been intertwined. This article is the tenth in the series.

My wife, three university-aged children and I spent last Christmas at a Christian center for genocide survivors in Kigali, Rwanda. We spoke at length with survivors of the 1994 mass slaughter in which about a million Tutsi were killed in 100 days. We heard stories of whole families slaughtered by neighbors and fellow Christians, of women raped and mutilated and now HIV positive, of horrendous torture and humiliation. We worshiped with these survivors (an extraordinary mixture of tears, as testimonies to the genocide were given, and joy, as Christmas was celebrated with music and a survivors' dance group). We learned how the center helps with counseling, treatment for HIV/AIDS, education, housing, economic assistance and above all with providing a kind of family for those with no family. We visited memorials and sites and talked to Rwandans and among ourselves.

As I have tried to absorb the experience, the genocide has seemed both more understandable than before and also much more mysterious and disturbing—and certainly not yet over, as its effects, its implications and the attempts to come to terms with it continue. By comparison, the question of how I have changed my mind seems rather unimportant.

Yet the forming and transforming of minds, with their thoughts, ideas, ideals, intentions, attitudes and descriptions of reality, is always significant—and certainly was in enabling the Rwandan genocide.

So how has my mind changed? One way of approaching the changing of a mind over the years is to draw, fairly arbitrarily, a dividing line between early formation and later transformations.

My formation included being brought up as an Anglican in the Church of Ireland in Dublin (a religious minority, only 3 percent of the population), playing a great deal of sports, and being gripped by the deep questions of life and death after my father died when I was 12. It included studying classics (Greek and Latin) at Trinity College Dublin for four years; being active there in politics, debate and student journalism; meeting a lifelong friend, the poet Micheal O'Siadhail (beginning over 40 years of changing each other's minds and hearts), and then nearly accepting a job to train as an executive in a large corporation. The business career was interrupted (permanently, as it turned out) when I took a scholarship to study theology at Cambridge. This was followed by a master's degree at Yale and then a doctorate at Cambridge on Barth's hermeneutics, with a semester at Tübingen University.

The result was a classical foundation (especially focused on text study, rhetoric, history, Greek and Latin poetry, Greek art and drama and Plato) and a lively inner and outer debate about a range of theological issues stimulated by a variety of teachers—at Cambridge, Yale and Tübingen.

What, apart from books, have been the mind-shaping surprises since then? What was to prove most transformative during the coming years, 15 spent in Birmingham and then 18 in Cambridge?

I went to my first teaching post at the University of Birmingham rather skeptical about whether I would like the city and almost at once fell in love with it. The years there were packed with new involvements: teaching for the first time; immersion in a remarkable Anglican parish (including five years as a church warden) located in an inner-city, multiethnic and multifaith district. The parish work—with church schools, youth groups, home groups, a secondhand shop and much else—was energized by a report called "Faith in the City," initiated by Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie. My experience included work with a housing association that succeeded in renovating a large swathe of decrepit buildings; all sorts of university and city commitments; relationships with several Pentecostal and black-led churches through the Center for Black and White Christian Partnership; marriage and children.

Inseparable from all this was a theological transformation which had a definite epicenter: conversations with Daniel Hardy. He was my closest colleague in the theology department, 18 years my senior, widely read not only in theology and philosophy but in the natural and social sciences, literature and much else, strongly committed to university, church and city and a profound, independent thinker. It was a theological springtime. We co-taught and did some other things jointly, but above all we set aside several hours every Thursday morning just to talk together.

Those conversations went everywhere: freely exploring, critiquing, speculating, arguing, proposing, imagining, deliberating, planning, and coming to verdicts and decisions. There was no question about what was central and comprehensive: the reality of God. To be able to think freely and hard about God and before God; to experiment intellectually and imaginatively together, alert to many disciplines, practices and spheres of life, relating all to God; to take leaps and move fast but also to have the time to dwell on some particular thought, thinker, period, text or problem for as long as we wanted—all this and more made up the "change of mind" I went through.

We eventually tried to shape and distill these conversations in a book, first called *Jubilate: Theology in Praise* (in its current edition: *Living in Praise: Worshipping and Knowing God*). It does convey something of the essence of those transformative years, which might be summed up as learning how to think freely and rigorously in constant amazement at and response to the superabundant God of joy, wisdom and love.

The learning has continued, not least through celebrating Christmas with genocide survivors and through learning more about the dark mystery of evil, whose unavoidability, insolubility and intractability had first been imprinted on my mind by my Cambridge teacher Donald MacKinnon.

Two further developments that took place in Birmingham have had long-term effects. The first was another sustained series of conversations, beginning later than those with Dan Hardy and still continuing today. These were with my Birmingham colleague in New Testament and patristics, Frances Young. We shared a background in classics and a passion for the New Testament, and our five-year collaboration on the book *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* proved formative for my own way of seeking to combine scholarship, hermeneutics and theology in the interpretation of scripture. I am now trying to take this work further by beginning what is my greatest academic and spiritual challenge so far: writing a theological commentary (commissioned by Westminster John Knox Press) on the Gospel of John.

The personal was inseparable from the theological. Frances herself during these years was going through deep changes as she pursued her vocation to the Methodist ordained ministry and wrote the prose and poetry of her remarkable book *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering,* about her severely disabled son, Arthur. At the end of my time in Birmingham, Frances, because of Arthur, got to know Jean Vanier and the L'Arche communities he founded for people with developmental disabilities and those who live with them. She introduced me to them, and together we began a relationship with L'Arche that has grown stronger over the years. When I came to the final chapter of my recent work *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love,* I realized how deeply Jean Vanier and L'Arche have affected me. They had become a fundamental point of reference, the natural culmination for a book on wisdom in line with the gospel.

The second change was in my theological horizon. I undertook the preparation of a textbook, *The Modern Theologians.* A course developed by Dan Hardy that I co-taught with him was the starting point, but that did not cover the whole field.

The logic of the project, now in its third edition, led to my appreciating more and more the variety and productivity of theologians and trying to do some justice to their global scope, the number of relevant disciplines and media, the particularity of Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, and the significant new voices (women, African Americans, Africans, lower-caste Indians, lay Roman Catholics, Latin American farmers and workers and many more). Looking back, I realize how vital a part of my theological education it has been to become literate to some extent in this range of Christian thought and practice, and in many cases it has led to meeting with the theologians themselves.

I have recently been asking myself, in the light of over 20 years' involvement in this editorial task: what are the essential elements of theological creativity? The emerging answer involves wisdom in four interrelated dimensions: retrieval of the past (scripture, tradition, history); engagement with God, church and world in the present; descriptive, critical and constructive thinking; and creative expression and communication. One 20th-century theologian who exemplifies all four dimensions in ways that are for me continually generative is Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Moving to Cambridge in 1991 was a drastic change: a shift of teaching from undergraduate to graduate; new conversation partners; a whole new level of institutional responsibility; and far more national and international involvements in academy and church, then later with other faiths. It was a very different intellectual ecology with some remarkably stimulating elements, such as the challenge of taking part in the most thorough transformation in the history of the faculty of divinity, engaging in cross-disciplinary conversations in colleges, serving on a promotions committee that covered all fields in the university, and every two weeks for 12 years participating in the Cambridge University Press multidisciplinary "Syndicate" at which academics and editors scrutinized every book recommended for publication. This was an entree, via the readers' reports, into academic debates in every subject (and a constant reminder of just how little I knew).

Such responsibilities made it necessary to think hard about both the field of theology and religious studies and the shaping of universities in the contemporary world. Most of this effort was ad hoc and practical (policy debates with colleagues, syllabus revision, judgments on cases for promotions and book proposals, presentations to benefactors and other funders), but the questions pressed for joined-up answers, and slowly a future-oriented conception of the field and of the late modern university emerged.

Having been educated in theology in three very different university settings (Cambridge, Yale and Tübingen), I became convinced that the uniting of theology with religious studies on the British model (as distinct from German confessional theology and the American tendency to separate theology from religious studies) is the most fruitful way to engage with the various religions in a university setting. It allows for a full range of relevant disciplines to be pursued, for questions to be raised by and about the religious traditions, and for conversations to take place between people of different traditions and none. In our complex secular and religious world such settings are vital for the sort of high-quality study, thought and debate needed to encourage wiser faith and wiser secular understanding. It is a small but desperately needed niche in the intellectual and educational ecology of our world. And such thinking in relation to the religious traditions has a contribution to make to the shaping of universities.

As I looked at the medieval Christian origins of universities and their modern transformations, especially on the model of the University of Berlin, I was impressed by the need to rethink our conception of the university and above all by the need to incorporate wisdom-seeking (besides the seeking of knowledge and know-how) at all levels and in all fields.

My conception of the church changed during this period too. It had in practice been largely local. But a series of involvements at other levels (being a member of a restructuring commission for a diocese, the Church of England's Doctrine Commission, the archbishop of Canterbury's Urban Theology Group and the 1998 Lambeth Conference) and doing Bible studies for the archbishops of the Anglican Communion gave existential evidence of the value of those dimensions, even when fraught with conflict.

But the greatest surprise came in my involvement in interfaith activity. In the grassroots multifaith environment of Birmingham, I had become convinced of the great importance of the world's faiths engaging with each other conversationally and collaboratively (on the analogy of much Christian ecumenism). But I had not seen ways of doing so that allowed people to relate explicitly from the core of their faith, that enabled the engagement to be sustained long term and that sought to benefit the rest of society beyond the religious communities.

Then, while I was on sabbatical at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, Dan Hardy (who by this time was both my father-in-law and the director of the Princeton Center) introduced me to the Jewish philosopher and theologian Peter Ochs. As a result Dan and I sat in on meetings of a group called Textual Reasoning, cofounded by Peter, at the American Academy of Religion. We were riveted by what we saw: young Jewish philosophers and text scholars (of the Tanakh and the Talmud) engaged in argumentative discussion (with much humor thrown in) of classic texts and of works by such thinkers as Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas. Soon some members of the group joined with us and other Christians to form Scriptural Reasoning, and subsequently Muslims (led by Basit Koshul) joined too. The focus was on reading the Tanakh, Bible and Qur'an together.

For several summers Dan, Peter and I spent three or four days at a time together at Dan's family house at Twin Lakes, Connecticut. These memorable conversations, lasting morning till night, covered vast areas but always came back to how to conceive and practice Scriptural Reasoning. A core understanding of it was forged through the intensity of three-way engagement, with much argument and much laughter.

In between these meetings Scriptural Reasoning began to spread, with a core group having a milestone residential gathering on Long Island and then twice-yearly meetings, one in Cambridge and the other at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. (For more on Scriptural Reasoning, see the website of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning and David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold's *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*.)

Scriptural Reasoning has transformed my understanding of both Judaism and Islam and led me to much rethinking of Christianity. To study the Tanakh and the Qur'an for hour after hour with Jews and Muslims who know and live their traditions; to be able to question, argue and differ deeply but with respect; to try to see the Bible through their eyes and to articulate my Christian faith in response; to explore contemporary and practical implications of texts in all three scriptures (for prayer, ethics, daily living, teachings, philosophy, politics, economics); above all, to find deep friendships developing with fellow readers with whom I have considerable theological differences—all this has amounted to a fulfillment of what I was only partly aware of longing for while in Birmingham: long-term interfaith collegiality that can lead me deeper into my own faith, deeper into the faith of others and deeper into commitment to the wider common good.

Strange to say, it is not mostly about becoming clearer regarding any of the faiths. I was much clearer about Judaism and Islam before getting to know so many Jews and Muslims. To plunge into a sea of Talmud or Hadith while trying to interpret a scriptural text is often more bewildering than clarifying, and to hear Jews or Muslims arguing among themselves subverts many textbook generalizations.

The same suspicion of neat religious packages has also grown in relation to my own Christian tradition. I increasingly see wise faith as a faith that is wary of the common dominance of clear assertions and imperatives, but rather is exploring and, above all, desiring more and more of God's infinite and superabundant blessing, wisdom and love. Desire for God and God's purposes is, I think, the embracing orientation of wise faith.

Institutionally, much of my first decade in Cambridge was spent on faculty and facility development, which included a new building, new posts and syllabus, stronger collaboration with the Cambridge Theological Federation, and the founding of the Center for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies. After the building was completed it was possible to take a fresh initiative, and the Scriptural Reasoning group chose to concentrate on the three Abrahamic faiths. In 2002 the Cambridge Inter-Faith Program was founded—one of the most satisfying enterprises I have taken part in.

I have become increasingly convinced that the early 21st century is a *kairos* for interfaith engagement, especially among the Abrahamic faiths, and that there are likely to be serious consequences if we miss the opportunity. Asked recently to look to the future of theology for an article in *Modern Theology,* I named this as one of the five areas of greatest potential (the others were theological interpretation of scripture, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, theology and the sciences, and theology through poetry). Like the ecumenical movement at its best, the massive interfaith challenge requires substantial institutional and organizational creativity, locally, nationally and internationally, as well as conversation, collaboration and thorough theological work and education. The thinking required for all this has hardly got going, and it needs above all to be done jointly through intensive conversation, study and deliberation. As a catalyst for this I have not found anything as helpful as Scriptural Reasoning.

I spent nearly a decade on each of the books I wrote in Cambridge—a slowness that reflects both the ruminative way my thinking tends to develop and also the time I gave to other activities. The books were lifesavers, always drawing me back to fundamental questions, stimulating fresh reading and conversation and encouraging the attempt to interweave the practical and the theological.

Self and Salvation: Being Transformed followed on from the God-centered *Living in Praise* by exploring how the self before God is to be conceived and to live, continually being transformed in the relationship. It is a theological anthropology that tries to perform in writing the sort of hospitable, conversational, other-oriented, worship-centered theology and ethics that I have found so fruitful. Its key trope is "facing": living in the Spirit before the face of God embodied in Jesus Christ (the whole book might be seen as a theological improvisation on 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 4:6) and facing other people in that light. Writing it not only allowed me to engage with both the Bible and some of the thinkers and saints who have affected me most—Emmanuel Levinas, Eberhard Jüngel, Paul Ricoeur, Thérèse of Lisieux and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It was also an attempt at a sort of theology that might fulfill the main aims of classical systematic or doctrinal theology, but do so through a set of genres that tries to unite the intellectual and imaginative, the philosophical and theological, the theological and ethical, the liturgical and biographical, and the traditional and contemporary. I think the main overall effect on me of writing the book was a sense of having found in a new way my own voice as a theological writer. There was more of a convergence of conversation with text.

That sense was stronger in my work on *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love.* I decided to risk writing on the things that grip me most—the cries of scripture and of our world, suffering and joy, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, God as the one who blesses and loves in wisdom, church and worship—and some involvements that have occupied me over many years: Scriptural Reasoning, universities, learning disability. Above all, two inseparable, inexhaustible themes fascinated me more and more: love and the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the Holy Spirit, the sharing of God's own superabundant Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, is such a transformative reality that it is almost impossible to be sufficiently astonished at it or to take it sufficiently seriously and joyfully day by day. If this is our reality, doesn't everything have to be radically affected by it? How can we ever be sufficiently responsive?

I am brought back to the genocide survivors' center in Kigali. The six-hour worship service our family took part in on the Sunday after Christmas showed a blend of traditions, including the Pentecostal and charismatic, with praying in the Spirit and prayer for healing. The graphic testimonies about massacre, torture and rape could easily have dominated the minds and imaginations of the 700 worshipers, and it was clear that recovery of anything like a normal life after genocide was a complex daily struggle. Yet the genocide was not allowed the last word. The ultimate word was sung, read, preached, prayed and danced in the Spirit. This was the Spirit that had led Jesus the way of the cross before being poured out to overwhelm the disciples and others at Pentecost.

The experience of shaping one's life in the midst of being overwhelmed—by suffering, joy, gratitude, fear, truth, beauty, goodness, problems, evil, God—had been the main theme of my only popular book (and perhaps my favorite), *The Shape of Living*. Far more personal than my more academic books, it is more concerned with ordinary living and was written during a difficult period in my life. Writing it, and sharing it chapter by chapter with a small group of mainly elderly members of my Cambridge church, St. Benet's, was not just therapeutic but theologically fruitful. The words were being weighed and tested against decades of Christian experience, and two of the draft chapters had to be completely rewritten. The group somehow gave me the confidence to speak from what was utterly central—the Bible; Micheal O'Siadhail's poetry; core relationships and experiences; what I had learned from and with my mother, wife, children, friends and enemies; and prayer.

So what has my mind become through all this changing? That is not really for me to say, but the daily hope and prayer for continuing change is simple: Come, Holy Spirit!