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## Concluding Reflection: “Where Do We Go From Here?”

W. Wayne Soble

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In keeping with the reckless speed with which *paradosis* develops and becomes *paradogma*, I will honour the tradition established at this consultation and begin by disclosing my “context”: “If it looks like a man, walks like a man, talks like a man, it’s probably a man.” Ergo! I am a man! Although I hasten to add that I want to maintain a certain “hermeneutic of suspicion” with respect to what that means either by accident or by design!

In fantasy, I imagine myself to be “a sensitive man of the ‘90s”, complete with consciousness fully aroused and raised, all my attitudes and actions fully in solidarity with my sisters’ feminist agenda, tirelessly working with my brothers with respect to that agenda, because *it is ours as well* and because, to crib a phrase from those early heady days of liberation theology, “the world should not be the way it is”. In reality, however, I know myself to be a “recovering sexist”, constantly discomforted by reminders that, my Baptist heritage notwithstanding, conversion is an ongoing and never-ending process, and I must ask daily as well as “by night”: “How can *this* man be born again when he is old?”

In fantasy, I imagine myself to be a beloved former pastor, a much-sought-after preacher, a respected theological educator, a wise interpreter of congregational life. In reality, however, I know myself to be an unemployed dabbler in matters both sacred and profane. Yet I have been assigned the pleasant duty of paying attention to what has been happening at this consultation—to listen! That I have done. I have been listening with this man’s ears, this man’s fantasies, this man’s realities. Now I have been asked to recall what I’ve heard, muse out loud

about the perennial and perplexing question: "Where do we go from here?" I have heard many things, recurring themes, words of both judgement and grace. But I simply want to pull on a couple of threads that have unravelled my own soul a little more than usual.

1. The first was named in the opening address by Jean Stairs. She spoke of "ambiguity, dislocation, disorientation". She is, perhaps, not the first person in the world to do so. It was Adam who said to Eve or Eve who said to Adam, depending on who's telling the tale—it was one of them who spat out a seed, tossed away the core, and said to the other: "My dear, we are living in an age of transition!" Nothing much new about ambiguity, disorientation, transition. But it sure *feels* new. Something is shaking. As Jean described it, "everything nailed down is coming loose". While some subsequent speakers, workshops and overheard conversations have suggested that a *few* things remain nailed down (or are desperately being *re-nailed* down—as Abigail Johnson remarked to me yesterday: "Every time something comes loose it seems there are always people running around with hammer and nails to fasten them down again!"—an image I find somewhat christological, if not downright soteriological), the theme of ambiguity has been prominent throughout the consultation.

If I perceive in that some hint about the future of our intentions, let alone our actions, it is the invitation to embrace that ambiguity in what Robert McAfee Brown has called "creative dislocation". It is the need to be aware that women and men are *both* dislocated, disoriented, in ways that are sometimes similar and sometimes dissimilar. While I haven't figured the future out yet, it appeals more to both my head and my heart that, during our time of creative dislocation, we reach out to one another in all the life-enhancing ways women can be with women, men can be with men, and women and men can be with each other, rather than grab for the nearest hammer and handful of nails. (An aside: Donna Runnalls spoke of the yearning for *communitas*. For men, especially, that may be more than a yearning. It may well be a challenge that is a matter of life and death!)

2. The second thread I want to tug at has to do with the tension between this mystery called "tradition" and this other mystery called "the alternative vision". I have become a tad

suspicious of notions of “paradigm shifts”. To the best of my knowledge, paradigms, when they shift at all, shift ever so agonizingly slowly. A paradigm shift is simply that: a “shift”, an almost imperceptible nudge, especially at the still point where, with slender levers and puny fulcrums we are trying to budge the world. Rather, I am drawn to the more radical and apocalyptic vision of daring to live alternatively. There is an urgency about our times that demands it. And I have been conscious, in this consultation, of the sub-themes of both pessimism and hope which have always been the twin stimuli for apocalyptic. Christians are those who are called to live “even now” the vision of that which is “not yet”, having no illusions whatsoever about either the threats or the promises inherent in doing so.

3. The third thread is related to the second: I can't quite shake the ancient assumption (more doxology than dogma) that only God creates *ex nihilo*. I hope we can resist any human arrogance, however gendered, that presumes we can build a brand new future out of nothing. Maybe God can, but I'm doubtful about us. However radical we are or think we are, we're forever sifting through ashes and broken shards. Our part in the new creation is to let our quite marvellous imaginations run barefoot through our dreams or rummage about with reckless abandon through junk in search of treasures. And while some of us fumble about trying to live alternatively, apocalyptically, I *do* want to risk calling for a touch of tenderness towards those who choose to tinker with tradition. John Young helped us recover some kindness towards the stewardship of Judas even though the moment called for the stewardship of Mary. If, for the moment or for a lifetime, the “alternative vision” is required of me, I hope I can find space in my soul for some understanding and even appreciation for those whose moments and lifetimes call them to be “creative tinkerers”.

This is not a lame excuse for justifying tradition, as if tradition were nothing more than *status quo*, man-made at that. Tradition is anything but static. True tradition is evolutionary, even dynamic. While it may be that we reject some traditions and recover others, we are also shapers of tradition, every bit as much as were our patriarchs and matriarchs. If some of us choose to live in the trajectory of the apocalyptic tradition, persuaded that God is up to something new and radical,

I want to try, at least, to hear the tradition of Sapientia when she suspects that there is very little really new under the sun. If paradigms do shift, albeit ever so slowly, it may be that the creative tinkerers among us, like aerospace engineers, will make the microscopic adjustments necessary to send us boldly going—and I choose the original quote with intent—where “no man has gone before”.

4. The fourth thread is this: What I have heard here, and publicly recovenant to attend to here and hereafter, is that *naiveté* is no longer possible, either for the traditionalists or the apocalypticists. Naiveté is never possible between paradises. Wherever we go from here in gendered relationships generally, in theological education and the myriad ministries of God’s people in particular, we *go*. We do not stay where we are. Going, I have heard and truly believe, will be costly as women well know and we men had better learn. But, as Scott Peck tells us, “life is difficult”. Actually, I think Jesus may have told us that already, but the point, I think, is that if authentic and abundant life is what we seek as women and men in theological education and elsewhere, both the gift and the task come at a price. It is long past the time for us men especially, who have either been given or have grabbed so much more than our share, to pay our dues.

I close on the same personal note with which I began. There is a story about a student (it must have been a theological student!) who despaired of the enterprise as it is, packed it in, and went off on a journey of discovery both of self and all those marvellous things that exist beyond self. There was much consternation among family and friends: Was the student lost? injured? ill? dead? Finally, a brief letter was received by a friend. It said all that needed saying:

I hope this note arrives sooner or later and, whenever, finds you well and assured of my love. . . . Do not worry about me. My journey is far from over. I have discovered much that amazed me. Sometimes, I admit, I have been lonely and afraid, but there is much that beckons me on. To tell the truth, I have no idea where I am right now. But, as I write, I believe that I am somewhere just left of the evening star.

To my partner in life,<sup>1</sup> to you who have been my companions in conversation and consultation these last few days, I must say that I’m not sure exactly where I am. But do not worry

about me. For, in your generous and gracious company, I am both comforted and challenged by the assurance “that I am somewhere just left of the evening star”.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Wayne Soble is married to Jean Stairs, the first keynote speaker of the Consultation.