The Leap of Faith

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According to Rabelais, Panurge exclaims in the midst of a raging storm at sea: "Why, O Fates, did you not spin me a cabbage planter's lot? Few and signally blessed are those whom Jupiter has destined to be cabbage-planters. For they've always one foot on the ground and the other not far from it." While yearning for security and without a risky "leap" is understandably human, so is also the admiration of courage, albeit more often other people's courage. This provides both opportunities for trivialization and the exploration of the authentic "leap of faith" as a symbol for the existential dimension of faith. In this statement, I shall concentrate on the latter.

I

What joins the following interpretations of the "leap of faith" is a personal experience of faith, dependent on St. Augustine (354-430) for the radical definition of human sinfulness and the equally radical affirmation of the redemptive presence of God's grace, which enables and encourages the act of faith. The existential dynamic of the situation was underscored by St. Augustine's famous dictum that "our heart is restless until it comes to rest in you." The stormy and anguished autobiographical circumstances of the experience of St. Augustine were subsequently shared, with numerous variations, by other God-seekers.

Martin Luther (11483-11546) characteristically accented the redemption of the sinner as a life-long process - and therefore as always in the situation of risk. Hence the "leap of faith" was not an isolated act, but the characteristic shape of all life of faith.

Luther's clearest statement on the "leap of faith" can be found in his Commentary on the Book of Jonah, 1526. The plot of the Book of Jonah is vividly existential: called by God to prophesy to the wicked city of Niniveh, Jonah chooses to escape from God by taking a ship to Tarshish. Of course, no such escape is realistically possible, as God
follows Jonah in a fierce storm. Superstitious sailors cast lots in order to discover the guilty person on board – and discover Jonah, who confesses quickly enough. The guilt-ridden Jonah now advises the sailors, “Take me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.” (Book of Jonah, 1.12). And so it is done, quickly. Martin Luther comments:

Here ... you must not view Jonah with his entire story in mind. Since we are familiar with the end of his narrative and know that he was delivered from it all, this phase of his life seems relatively insignificant to us and fails to move us very much. But you must visualize Jonah’s frame of mind in this dilemma. He does not see a spark of life left in him nor any hope of rescue; nothing but death, yes, death, death confronts him, and he must despair of life and surrender to death. If it would please God to let us perceive life in the midst of death, or if He showed our soul its ultimate dwelling place and room and the manner and way in which it should maintain itself and reach its goal, death would not appear bitter, but it would seem like a leap across a shallow stream, with safe and solid banks on both sides. But as it is, God does not show any of that to us, and we must leap from the safe shore of life into this abyss without seeing or feeling a sure footing under us. We must leap, as it were, at random, merely trusting to God’s supporting and saving hand. That is the way Jonah is thrown out of the ship; he plunges into the sea, feels its bottom, is deserted by all creatures, and looks solely to God’s sustaining power.¹

Luther had had some very personal experience for the understanding of the story of Jonah. When summoned to the council of Worms in 1521, it initially appeared that Luther had to choose whether to preserve his faith or life. He chose the former and was quickly placed under the ban of the empire and excommunicated, remaining an outlaw and a heretic for the rest of his natural life.
it is out of his own anguish that he came to understand the prophet Jonah. Namely, Jonah is not merely fearing death, hence the basic issue is not Jonah’s finitude. Jonah is fearing God’s eternal wrath, and that on account of his own sin and guilt. Comments Luther, “... death would be tolerable and not so acutely painful if it would not result from God’s anger.” But now it is, hence “no worse burden on earth than sin and conscience,” yes, conscience, too, because it is conscience which discloses the reality of the situation to the sinner. And that is simply terrifying. Luther notes in reference to Jonah,

“What a battle must have raged in his heart! He, too, might well have sweat blood in his agony. He is compelled to contend simultaneously against sin, against his own conscience and the feeling of his heart, against death, and against God’s wrath. His soul must have been suspended by a silk thread over hell and eternal damnation.”

How did Jonah survive? Without immediately anticipating and pointing to the conclusion of the story, Luther acknowledges: “Oh, a mighty work was wrought in his heart by the power of God to sustain and to preserve him!” Clearly, even in the midst of despair, there was grace to sustain – yet supplied through a process rather than given all at once. Jonah, thrown from the ship into the raging sea, falls, and lands into the open jaws of a great fish, which Luther calls a “whale.” And now just imagine, what will happen next!

It must have been a horrifying sight to poor, lost, and dying Jonah when the whale opened its mouth wide and he beheld sharp teeth that stood upright all around like pointed pillars or beams and he peered down the wide cellar entrance to the belly. Is that being comforted in the hour of death? Is this the friendly glance in dying, that dying and death are not even sufficient? This is real faith, it seems to me; yes, a battle and struggle of faith. Here we find victory and triumph concealed in the greatest weakness. How mightily God here demonstrates the power of His Word and of faith! No creature is able to rob Him of it, not even God’s anger itself can work it harm, no matter how fiercely and furiously all may rage.
If his personal experiences may have schooled Luther in understanding and empathy, his theological presuppositions supplied a structure for interpretation. That is, (1) by referring to a “throw,” now interpreted as a “leap,” Luther describes his understanding of the dialectic of Law and Gospel: while one offers a painful diagnosis, the other supplies gracious healing and acceptance. In this way the divine mercy does not let one perish but sustains and redeems. (2) The sequence is developed in analogy to the vicarious sufferings of Christ and His resurrection. Thus through death one awakens to eternal life. (3) The relevance of the Jonah story consists in its existential clarity. It offers a profile of faith, which begins in disobedience, then in penance confesses sin and guilt, and finally accepts punishment in a way where despair and trust are dialectically present. (4) Even though the sinner cannot engender faith through one’s own efforts, s/he can now come to experience the graciously granted faith. The experience itself is active and filled with risk. The so-called “leap” does not expect a reward. In repentance, one submits in obedience, and is then joyously surprised that instead of a fierce punishment, faith and love are awakened. Consequently Luther’s formula of *simul iustus et peccator* (justified and a sinner at the same time) is not to be understood as a 50% / 50% condition, but rather as a “leap” which has to be continued with a “leap” after “leap.” (5) In reference to Jonah the situation is personal; there is a dynamic encounter between God and Jonah. At the same time Luther did not limit the “leap” to such strictly individualistic circumstances. Often the model was pluralistic as the believer was assailed from many sides, particularly by the Devil and his cohorts, operating widely through Church and state. In this way the model of a momentary “leap” was extended to a continuous and life-long situation of risk. Had Luther’s numerous “leaps” ended in religious and political failure, Luther would have been burned at the stake.

II

For Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), however, the experience of the risk of faith was most deeply felt in situations of personal religious failure. In a lengthy and circuitous reflection on Lessing’s *zufällige Geschichtswahrheiten können der Beweis von nothwendigen Vernunftwahrheiten nie werden* [freely translated: accidental/contingent historical truths can never become proofs for
necessary truths of reason] Kierkegaard appeals to Aristotle’s \(\mu\varepsilon\tau\omicron\alpha\omicron\omicron\sigma\iota\ \varepsilon\iota\ \alpha\lambda\lambda\omicron\ \gamma\omicron\omicron\omicron\sigma\) [ascent to another level of thought]. Lessing had admitted that for him this \textit{Sprung} or “leap” had not been possible despite numerous attempts. Kierkegaard agreed: “the chasm” is “infinitely wide” and our attempts to bridge it only increase it.\(^{11}\)

Kierkegaard understood that the transition from unbelief to faith can not be “quantitative,” that is gradual in approach, but must be a “qualitative transition.” As such it is only a divine possibility. Hence Kierkegaard warned:

... it is important not to allow oneself to be deluded by determinants of approximation: a ‘more’ cannot bring forth the leap, and no ‘easier’ can in truth make the explanation easier. If this is not held fast, one runs the risk of suddenly meeting a phenomenon in which everything takes place so easily that the transition becomes a simple transition, or the other risk of never daring to bring one’s thought to a conclusion, since a purely empirical observation can never be finished.\(^{12}\)

Accordingly, religious truth is not analogous to information, which can be gathered and stored. In seeking religious truth, the mode of perception is a subjective encounter. Repeatedly, Kierkegaard underscores the significance of passion, that all-involving essential personal quest which Paul Tillich would later label “ultimate concern.” At the same time, Kierkegaard, rather like Martin Luther, knows that to describe is not to do: “For my part I can well describe the movements of faith, but I cannot make them.”\(^{13}\)

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard’s description is a powerful account, a story which he writes himself rather than borrows, as had Luther. Namely, Kierkegaard speaks of “the knight of infinite resignation.” His existence is characterized by ambiguity and anxiety: “... he knows the bliss of the infinite, he senses the pain of renouncing everything, the dearest things he possesses in the world, and yet finiteness tastes to him just as good as to the one who never knew anything higher ....”\(^{14}\)“And yet,” although “in the world,” he lives with a notable difference: “he exhibits...a new creation” and that, as Kierkegaard describes it, “by virtue of the absurd.” That is to say,
what is humanly impossible, that for which no arguments persuade, and no ethical foundation enable – this new creativity nevertheless impacts on life! Not automatically, but surprisingly, it comes to light in the situation of total risk, which Kierkegaard details by way of a story:

It is supposed to be the most difficult task for a dancer to leap into a definite posture in such a way that there is not a second when he is grasping after the posture, but by the leap itself he stands fixed in that position. Perhaps no dancer can do it – that is what this knight does. Most people live dejectedly in worldly sorrow and joy; they are the ones who sit along the wall and do not join in the dance. The knights of infinity are dancers and possess elevation. They make the movements upward, and fall down again; and this too is no mean pastime, nor ungraceful to behold. But whenever they fall down they are not able at once to assume the posture, they vacillate an instant, and this vacillation shows that they are strangers in the world.15

The story is by no means easy to interpret. On the surface it may indeed appear that the ballet dancer is the person of faith. And there may be some truth on this level as well. But Kierkegaard, complex, even contorted, presses on. I will suggest that here the paradigm for the believer is not the success in reaching, but the awareness of failing – and the readiness to risk again, "absurd" as such an option appears. Hence the infinite resignation in Kierkegaard’s sense does not suggest inactivity, but precisely the opposite, that is, the undaunted courage to continue to try, and try again, and despite failure encounter redemption as a totally unexpected gift of grace.

For his reflections, Kierkegaard assumed a biblical foundation. Neither the paradox of weakness/power nor of death/life were his inventions, but are clear borrowings from the Christian understanding of the redemptive meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Theoretically, then, Kierkegaard celebrates the priority and initiative of grace. Yet, experientially, Kierkegaard points to the awareness of failure as the existential turning point. But a question

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remains. Without explicitly returning to the theology of the Late Middle Ages, is not Kierkegaard, nevertheless, utilizing the old formula of *facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam?* [to those who do the best they can, God does not deny grace]. The old sacramental system, coupled with merit, is now replaced by existential introspection: in the awareness of failing one succeeds, because at this point God freely grants grace. Human activity accounts for the divine gift!

III

Karl Barth (1886-1968), particularly in his epoch-making *The Epistle to the Romans*, paid relatively little attention to the “leap,” yet elaborated the situation in which it must occur. Here with remarkable poetic beauty Barth celebrated the glory of divine transcendence: “But we who stand in this concrete world know nothing, and are incapable of knowing anything, of that other world.” Moreover, “No road to the eternal meaning of the created world has ever existed, save the road of negation. This is the lesson of history.”

Now if one seeks to make a systematic account of the thought of early Barth, the result is filled with dissonances – many obscure statements, plain contradictions elevated to the status of a paradox, not to speak of absurdities. Yet Barth can be enjoyed and appreciated as a modern interpreter of Kierkegaard who has taken upon himself to proclaim that the divine mystery cannot be explicated – but must be above all celebrated – and that religious people as well as religious thinkers need to learn humility by recognizing their finitude and hence their essential inability to reach saving insights with their own efforts. In an era of liberal theology, which in Germany was succumbing to Nazi ideology, Barth’s unwavering appeal to the transcendent Word of God as the only source of saving truth was an explosive proclamation. At the same time this was not merely an abstract, scholarly insight, but a bold challenge to act in faith, specifically in the exercise of Protestant Christian faith. Hence there was a definite place for a “leap:”

There is no such thing as a mature and assured possession of faith: regarded psychologically, it is always a leap into the darkness of the unknown, a flight into empty air.
By faith the primal reality of human existence in God enters our horizon; by faith the incomprehensible step is taken; by faith the conversion from which there is no return occurs; to faith no looking back is permitted; to faith, in the light of the absolute ‘Moment’ and of the death of Christ, there is no supposition, but also reality: to faith there is not only vacuum but also fullness, not only human belief, but also divine faithfulness.¹⁹

Many famous theologians of German Lutheran liberalism were quickly absorbed by the National Socialist movement. Barth’s intolerant Christocentrism offered resistance and helped to organize the Confessing Church movement. Its platform, the so-called Barmen Declaration of May 29-30, 1934, pointed to God’s self-disclosure in Christ as the foundation and norm of the life of the Church, and quickly rejected other “revelations,” be they located in nature or in racial history. In this way Barth’s own life embodied a great “leap of faith” – for which he was expelled from Nazi Germany and forced to return to his native Switzerland. There Barth continued to write his large tomes of Church Dogmatics, which among many other insights, contained many criticisms of Luther. Yet in his interpretation of Luther’s understanding of the “leap,” Barth offered a positive reaffirmation: the starting point of faith is always God, speaking through his holy Word, proclaimed in the Church. It is always under the impact of the holy Word, as the courage to “leap” emerges as a reality. Thus God’s saving act is always prior to any human activity, and the Bible, proclaimed in the Church, is the foundation and hence the origin of all “leaping.” Here Barth seems to be in a good accord with Luther.

IV

However, the story of the “leap” is by no means completed. When wars and persecutions end, the survivors can sometimes report that authentic courage, the daily expression of the “leap” is not always and necessarily ecclesially nurtured. Paul Tillich (1866-1965) witnessed to this reality in a difficult but profound book entitled The Courage to Be. This volume cannot be superficially tasted; rather, it needs to be thoroughly consumed. Therefore I shall not seek to

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summarize the understanding of courage throughout the intellectual history of the West. Instead, I will risk misinterpretation and turn to what I regard to be Tillich’s key insights.

The sources of Tillich’s understanding of courage are wide, but marked by a central appreciation of Stoicism and Christianity. With the former Tillich affirms the self vis-à-vis fate and death, and with the latter the self over against sin and guilt. Subsequently Tillich makes clear that this courage is no mere fortitude of self-affirmation. While individualistic in expression, courage is not limited to the individual, since its roots are in eternity. Boldly and insightfully, Tillich first of all scorns the all too popular understanding of faith as belief. Then it is merely “belief in something unbelievable.”

Here both Kierkegaard and Barth, one obliquely and the other more explicitly, come under fire, since they, as exponents of sola gratia have misunderstood their heritage and all too often ended up by offering human pronouncements and spelling out doctrines to be believed – and all that in the name of faith and as an expression of it. Tillich, with deep roots in the union church of Lutherans and Calvinists, understood that the Christian tradition had meant by grace a redemptive awakening of human response. Hence Tillich formulated it this way: “Faith is the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself. The courage to be is an expression of faith and what ‘faith’ means must be understood through the courage to be.”

Appropriately, Tillich could also write a book on the Dynamics of Faith (1957), exploring the power and the structures of the enabled self-affirmation, expressed in every single deed of courage. When Tillich ventured to formulate that “Faith is the experience of this power,” he was certainly not analyzing how we perceive, feel and understand, but how finally by way of a risk-filled and totally serious decision, we seek to follow the truth in faith. This Tillich defines as follows:

Faith is not a theoretical affirmation of something uncertain, it is the existential experience of something transcending ordinary experience. Faith is not an opinion but a state. It is the state of being grasped by the power of being which transcends everything that is and in which everything that is participates. He who is grasped by this power is able.
to affirm himself because he knows that he is affirmed by the power of being-itself. In this point mystical experience and personal encounter are identical. In both of them faith is the basis of the courage to be.”

Of course, Tillich was a Christian theologian. But being a Christian for Tillich was not merely identical with subscribing to historical formulations; rather, it meant the obligation to grasp and to reformulate the insight, the structure, and the intent which had initially brought about the formulation of a given doctrine. As a matter of fact, it also must be acknowledged that Tillich did not neglect any traditional Christian formulations, but always thought to understand their spirit and purpose. And that meant that embedded in the reality of faith was the dynamic of overcoming, of being changed and of changing at the very center of one’s self. Hence Tillich’s illuminating question: “Is there a courage which can conquer the anxiety of meaninglessness and doubt?” Now it is at this point – as if with an infinitely refined irony – that Tillich introduces the paradigm of the “leap.” Having spoken of the “risk” of faith in a positive way, he now comments:

There is an inclination in some Existentialists to answer these questions by a leap from doubt to dogmatic certitude, from meaninglessness to a set of symbols in which meaning of a special ecclesiastical or political group is embodied. This leap can be interpreted in different ways. It may be the expression of a desire for safety; it may be as arbitrary as, according to Existentialist principles, every decision is; it may be the feeling that the Christian message is the answer to the question raised by an analysis of human existence; it may be a genuine conversion, independent of the theoretical situation. In any case it is not a solution of the problem of radical doubt.

Tillich’s basic critique is that the “leap” is a category employed by the ones who do not sufficiently explore what enabled the leap in the first place: “It gives the courage to be to those who are converted
but it does not answer the question as to how such a courage is possible in itself." Moreover, in the Kierkegaardian version among its popularizers there is an assumption that it is possible to begin the "leap of faith", as it were, from within the faith. Then the beginner's faith emerges into a mature faith due to one's risk taking! In this way, risk earns a reward, practically automatically and the dynamic of faith is overlooked.

To put in another way, as Tillich has repeatedly criticized the quest for salvation which is based on one's own initiative in the realm of ethics, so he also rejects the possibility of self-liberation when confronted with doubt and meaninglessness:

He who is in the grip of doubt and meaninglessness cannot liberate himself from this grip; but he asks for an answer which is valid within and not outside the situation of despair. He asks for the ultimate foundation of what we have called the 'courage of despair.' There is only one possible answer, if one does not try to escape the question: namely that the acceptance of despair is in itself faith and on the boundary line of the courage to be. In this situation the meaning of life is reduced to despair about the meaning of life. But as long as this despair is an act of life it is positive in its negativity.

Here Tillich points to Descartes' *dubito, ergo sum* (I doubt, therefore I am) and notes that it becomes a celebration of "despair". Psychoanalytic insights enrich the interpretation. Tillich affirms that the "power of being" is overarchingly present. Not in the denial of doubt, but in an honest acknowledgment of doubt such doubt is overcome. And so it is with all other modes of estrangement. "Cynically speaking, one could say that it is true to life to be cynical about it." And this is no fleeting flirtation with cynicism, but rather a no-holds-barred cynicism, open and honest in its anger and pain. Tillich records this insight in his characteristic terminology: "The act of accepting meaninglessness is in itself a meaningful act. It is an act of faith .... [This faith] ... gives him the courage to take the anxieties of fate and guilt upon himself. The same is true of doubt and meaninglessness."
In order not to misunderstand Tillich, we may recall that “Faith is in the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself.” ¹² Here destiny in freedom emerges in its polar correlativity. ¹³ The wider implications of this insight cannot be spelled out here. We shall only summarize that according to Tillich nonbeing also belongs to being. This is the ontological basis of Tillich’s affirmation of the so-called “absolute faith,” which “transcends both the mystical experience and the divine-human encounter.” In other words, “absolute faith” also includes “an element of skepticism.” ¹⁴ As such it is faith in the “God above God.” ³⁵

At the time of its publication, this formulation was often severely criticized for its patent obscurity and possible dualism. The charges were not fitting as Tillich had merely used a key insight of Martin Luther, who often wrote about the dialectical complexity of God’s self-disclosure. Here Law/Gospel and Predestination/Freedom were familiar contraries experienced in despair, which led to the God of Love, encountered in Christ. ³⁶ While both sets of encounters were real and continued throughout life, the thrust of these contraries – somewhat comparable to Tillich’s “polarities” – guided, even compelled, the believer to seek refuge from the God of Wrath to the God of Love. Somewhat analogously, Tillich’s absolute faith is recognized in the human struggle with fate and death which then culminates in “the state being grasped by the God beyond God.” ³⁷ Appropriately, at this point Tillich does not speak of a “leap,” but points to the effective role of the courage which is rooted in God. ³⁸

Yet while acknowledging the similarities between Luther and Tillich, notable differences remain. Luther’s faith is nurtured by biblical insights and categories in the context of an ecclesial community. Tillich’s definition of courage, while nurtured on the Christian soil and imbued with Christian wisdom, has nevertheless extended beyond the ecclesia. Not only Christians but also secular people can be embraced by God and saved. While faith has been extolled, authentic doubt has also been rehabilitated.

V

In conclusion, it can been observed that the “leap” offers a useful model, but with some limitations. The “leap” can acknowledge the finite and sinful subjectivity of the individual, the uniqueness of one’s personal existence and the seriousness of the challenges with which
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one is confronted. Tillich’s definition of courage is more inclusive. Here the individual is seen in encounter not only with sin and guilt, but also in confrontation with fate and death. In both instances human efforts are redeemed not by mere diligent perseverance but from the other side, from eternity and by God, known or unknown, identified or even denied. In either case, the role of the risk is seen as authentic and significant.

In an overview, Kierkegaard and Barth recede in the background. Although important in their own time, and in many ways relevant to the present, they lack the paradigmatic clarity of Luther and Tillich. Luther, exclusively biblical, and Tillich, reaching out to the secular wisdom of the world, both join in acknowledging the perennial dynamic of faith, essentially exposed to the winds of temptation and therefore also to risk. A secure, unchallenged faith, may belong to heaven, but not to this world where storms rage, the Devil roams, and unbelief is endemic.

Notes

2 "et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te," *Confessiones*, I.1.
3 D. Martin Luther’s Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar: Hermann Boelhau Nachfolger, 1897, 19.217.9-12, [subsequently referred to as WA] ); Luther’s Works (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), 19.65-66 [subsequently referred to as LW].
4 WA 19.217.28-29; LW 19.66.
5 WA 19.218.7-8; LW 19.67.
6 WA 19.218.12-17; LW 19.67.
7 WA 19.218; LW 19.67.
10 Ibid., 261 ff.


Ibid., 51.

Ibid., 51-52.


Ibid., 87.

Ibid., 98.

Ibid., 201-202.


Ibid., 172.

Ibid., 173.

Ibid., 172.


*The Courage to Be*, 172-173.

Ibid., 174.

Ibid., 175.

Ibid., 175.

Ibid., 172.

Ibid., 175-176.


*The Courage to Be*, 176.

Ibid., 172.


The Courage to Be, 177.

Ibid., 186-190.

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The Courage to Be, 188.

Ibid., 190.