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Preparing A Place: A Theological Reflection on Pastoral Care

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The comprehensive term “pastoral care” is generally used to define the practice of ministry. Yet “caring” is not what distinguishes the pastoral caregiver or professional helper from other human beings. In fact, what we designate as unique about ministry - caring - is precisely what is most common and fundamental about being human. Caring is about how a person evolves as a human being. It is rooted in our birth and introduction to our first caretakers, followed by an ongoing history of relationships weaving the psychological and spiritual textures of care from which we are born again and again into the human family.

Rather than a specialty of professional care, “caring” is a universal quality of being human. Biblically grounded in the Genesis account of our creation in the image of God, caring for the world around us is our human vocation. In a time of increasing awareness of the fragility of our planet in conjunction with the disparities and diversities among its people, caring is a systemic concept including both the intimate sphere of interpersonal relations and the larger social, environmental and political contexts of our lives. In timeless, but not inclusive, words, written a generation ago, Milton Mayerhof defined the meaning of caring as it organizes and structures our place in the world:

In the context of a man's [sic] life, caring has a way of ordering his other values and activities around it. When this ordering is comprehensive, because of the inclusiveness of his carings, there is a basic stability in his life; he is "in place" in the world, instead of being out of place or merely drifting or endlessly seeking his place. Through caring for certain others, by serving them through caring, a man lives the meaning of his own life. In the sense in which a man can ever be said to be at home in the world, he is at home not through dominating, or explaining, or appreciating, but through caring and being cared for.¹

The above image of being "in place" in the world will be the guiding metaphor for this essay on pastoral care as a ministry of preparing a place. These reflections grow out of a diversity of personal experiences in my wandering career-journey in pastoral care and counselling.

Immigrants: Old and New

As a young immigrant from The Netherlands I started parish ministry in Canada with largely first generation Dutch immigrants. My pastoral role at times included facilitating new immigrants getting settled into the new country. I encountered anxieties and conflicts which seemed intimately related to the immigration experience. I wondered whether these problems reflected primarily displacement in the "new country" or whether the immigration itself reflected a prior displacement in the "old country". It seemed evident to me that those with firm roots are less likely to take the radical step of immigration. In conversations with parishioners, the ravages of war, limited work prospects, and family conflicts, were chief among many other frustrations cited as contributors to the decision to emigrate to Canada.

In my second congregation, strategically positioned in Kitchener, Ontario, I had the opportunity to enter my first Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program. There I met Dr. Delton Glebe as one of the facilitators in action-reflection learning based on questions arising from our experiences in ministry. I was introduced to grief theories which seemed to fit the cultural transition experience of those uprooted in immigration. I remember two books in the 1970s which emphasized that, with the acceleration in societal change, people do

not need to cross oceans anymore to become immigrants. Margaret Mead wrote: "Today, everyone born and bred before World War II is such an immigrant in time - as his forbears were in space - struggling to grapple with the unfamiliar conditions of life in a new era."² Alvin Toffler described the displacement which occurs when change surpasses human adaptation. The human *Sitz im Leben* is mapped along five relational areas: things, places, people, organizations and ideas. When rapid change impacts these basic anchors of our life situation, we face the threat of displacement:

To survive, to avert what we have termed future shock, the individual must become infinitely more adaptable and capable than ever before. He must search out totally new ways to anchor himself, for all the old roots - religion, nation, community, family, or profession - are now shaking under the hurricane impact of the accelerative thrust.³

Madness: Human and Divine

After eight years of hyphenated, Dutch-Canadian parish ministry, I came in contact with immigrants of a different kind. I combined graduate studies with more CPE in a one year residency program in a psychiatric hospital in Michigan, followed by two years in a women's prison and a halfway house for women parolees in California. In these institutional settings displacement dynamics stand out. My M.Th. thesis framed the psychiatric hospital and its patient population as a place of internment for displaced persons.⁴ I visualized patient stories not from a medical model perspective, where the sickness is primarily located within the patient, but in the context of the person's place in the world. The following case study of Jonah⁵ presents such a story:

Jonah, a 34 year old man, is admitted to the hospital on account of an apparent suicide attempt with religious delusions. Jonah's wife reports that she comes from a prior marriage and is still impacted by her first husband's rejection and his ongoing interference in the present marriage through disputes related to support payments. In order to gain some distance and space for themselves, the new couple had moved to another state where Jonah who, with a M.A. degree in library science and a Ph.D. short of a dissertation, secured a job as a librarian. After some work-related conflicts Jonah

accepted a university library position several hundred miles away, a position which soon was terminated in a reorganization of the institution. Jonah was unsuccessful in locating employment for over a year, even though he applied for a variety of positions throughout the country.

A few weeks before his hospitalization Jonah returned to Detroit where his parents live. At this point he had received "a divine message" convincing him that a position at the Detroit library would be offered to him. Jonah grew up in Detroit alongside a younger brother who was popular with friends and the shining star of his parents, in sharp contrast to Jonah's withdrawn and socially inept self-presentation. However, Jonah did well academically and went well beyond his brother in advanced graduate work. When Jonah failed to get the librarian position in Detroit he developed further religious illusions, increasingly identifying himself with Jesus. In a visit to the parental home, Jonah, in a sudden state of agitation, jumped out of his parents' second story window, fortunately to land in some dense bushes.

The dynamics of displacement tell the Jonah story. Regressed to the perceived inadequate child position in the parental home, he literally displaces himself by jumping out of a high window. His debilitating childhood experiences continue to dominate his adult work and love relations. In his marriage he is displaced by the first husband in the same way that he as a child felt overshadowed by his younger brother. The first husband never leaves the marriage but inhabits the mind of his exwife, interfering in the new marriage by ongoing disputes. Jonah's major life strategy, academic compensation for a life of social maladjustment, fails to secure a place in the workplace. His chosen world of books does not build a secure base. The cruel stripping process culminates in a year of dislocating moves across the country and failed job applications.

An intriguing part of Jonah's story is the place of religion. Anton Boisen, the founder of the Clinical Pastoral Education movement, introduced ministers and theological students to the psychiatric hospital in order to learn from patients, the "living human documents". The chaotic disorientation in emotional disturbances was reframed as a human struggle to solve spiritual and ethical problems. Boisen believed that psychological disorders can manifest the process of seeking health and salvation; that madness can be the soul's journey to wholeness. In his autobiography, *Out of the Depths*,⁶ he describes

in painful detail his own psychotic delusions and hospitalizations. In listening to his deranged fantasies he appropriates the language of faith to make sense of his delusions as a religious search for personal integration.

Jonah's identification with Jesus is open to a variety of interpretations. The diagnostic language of psychology describes Jonah's experience in terms of the crisis impact of environmental stressors on his fragile self-definition which employs dissociation as an emergency defense. Developmental psychology tracks the infant from the initial fusion and identification with the caregiver to the long and risky process of separation towards a stable place for the healthy self. Paradoxically, a secure attachment to the caregiver is seen as the key to a successful process of differentiation from the caregiver.⁷ From this psychological perspective Jonah's identification with Jesus illustrates a regressive search for basic security in the face of the disintegration of his place in the world.

Theological language can open up other perspectives, not restricted by the language of pathology. Anton Boisen presented his own psychotic breakdown "as a case of valid religious experience which was at the same time madness of the most profound and unmistakable variety."⁸ In his religious delusions Jonah dissociates and adopts Jesus as an icon of grandiosity to be imitated. In his hospitalization, however, Jonah's faith connection with Jesus becomes the marker in his search for a religious reorientation in the world.

A similar story of "divine" madness in search of a "safe place" is told by Timothy Findley in his novel, *The Piano Man's Daughter*. Lily's bizarre escapades, intimate involvements with strangers, fascination with fires, and hospitalizations at Toronto's Queen Street, have estranged her from her son Charlie. It is only after her death that Charlie begins to understand her "madness":

I have already mentioned Lily's capacity for strangers- the habit she had of putting our lives in the hands of what she called *desperados*. She took this word, I think, from a book she had read, or the dialogue cards in the movies.

Of course, her definition of a desperado was different than the given. To Lily, a desperado was not a man with a gun who went around robbing banks-but a man or a woman who was lost-someone who would only find themselves in you. *Surely it is right and proper,*

Charlie, she said, that a person should help another person find his way home. It doesn't matter if you don't know who they are; it only matters that you get them there.

"That's our job, Charlie," she said. "To get other people to the one safe place."

It was not until after Lily's death that I came anywhere near beginning to understand this. Her own *safe place*, which had seemed to be fire, was in fact other people. Other beings.⁹

Heavenly Places

The life of Jesus reflects the Hebrew Scriptures as a collection of stories of human displacement and migrant journeys.¹⁰ Displacement is the theme of the Genesis account of the fall. God calls Adam: "Where are you?" As Paul Tournier comments in his intriguing book on the significance of human places: "Adam hid himself. The place had already ceased to be paradise for him. His hiding-place among the trees was not his place, but an alibi...He had already begun to flee from place to place..."¹¹

The God of creation now becomes a God of care, preparing a place for those who have none. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. The Jesus story runs parallel to the Genesis theme of "preparing a place", culminating in the Joseph story. His own people do not accept him and desert him in a place of death which, paradoxically, becomes the place of life for all.

Genesis migrant stories lead to the Exodus "macro-story"¹² of the migration of a whole people. The Hebrews are displaced as slaves in a foreign land, their future cut off by pharaoh's command to kill their male children at birth. God hears Israel's cry of desperation and sends Moses, a survivor of pharaoh's ethnic cleansing, to guide them to the land promised to Abraham.

The exodus story of the wilderness wanderings of the people of Israel is reflected in Jesus' journey with no place to lay his head. The desert represents the barren place of deprivation and, consequently, the stage of devilish temptations of bread, the kingdoms of the world, and power. Rather than residing in the pseudo-places sanctioned by cultural comforts and norms, Jesus continues the journey of faith

which defines his place with God.

Jesus' resurrection is the ultimate migration story by its transforming message. Resurrection faith spells hope for every place on the human journey. Not localized in holy places, Christianity becomes a thoroughly secular religion by not excluding any place from hope. As the church confesses, he who "descended into hell" is the same who on the third day "rose again from the dead". With this faith believers go non-places in defiance.

The theology of places culminates in Christ's ascension which creates both a vacancy and an abundance of places: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2). Rather than stressing a pietistic or romantic line that Jesus is with us in our earthly places, the ascension proclaims the forensic reality that we are seated with Christ in the heavenly place at the right hand of God (Ephesians 4:8-10, Colossians 3:1).

From this ascension perspective, our earthly places are provisional, penultimate. We go mad with the patient Jonah in thinking that our lives depend on achieving a secure place in an inhospitable and competitive world. Jonah's messianic delusions inform the divine madness which defines the self not in relation to earthly positions but to the heavenly position with God. Stepping out of a second storey window can be understood both as a step of suicidal despair and as a step of faith in transcending our earthly non-places.

Earthly Places

The cosmic culmination of Christ's ascension to heaven, paradoxically, is linked with the Spirit's descent in conceiving a faith community on earth. Rather than occupying a place in heaven, the church becomes an extension of Jesus' incarnational presence in the world. It is a presence found in the encounter with those who have no place: the hungry and thirsty, strangers, those naked, sick, and in prison (Matthew 25:35-40).

At a halfway house for women parolees in California I worked with people between places: not in prison anymore but not yet part of society. The most popular music record in the house, played over

and over again, was Bessie Smith's "Back Water Blues" sung by Dinah Washington at the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival. It is the cry of a woman who once again has to evacuate her home to escape devastating floodwaters:

When it thunders and lightens and the wind begins to blow.
 Can't you hear the thunder, see the lightning,
 and feel the wind beginning to blow?
 Lord, it makes you think about all these people
 that ain't got no place to go.

Then I went and stood on a high, old, lonely hill.
 I looked down with tears in my eyes
 on the house where I used to live.

Somebody, somebody please tell me
 where is a poor, poor girl like me to go?
 Can't you see I'm tired.
 And I don't feel like moving no more.

Displacement encountered at this halfway house was largely systemic. The people I met were women, parolees, poor, with deprived and, often, abusive family and social backgrounds, many of them visible minorities: a toxic cocktail of damaging and stigmatizing variables. Pastoral care became visible through prison visiting programs, residential services, and reentry care packages of educational and vocational supports.

It takes courage for pastoral care in "places of displacement" to stay grounded in an earthly rather than heavenly geography. It is the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who in the course of his pastoral vocation actively opposed the Nazi regime and went to prison where, just as the end of the war came in sight, he was hanged. Bonhoeffer's life and death story follows the Jesus story in locating pastoral care in the penultimate realm of earthly solidarity. To quote Bonhoeffer's words:

Why am I often unable to open my mouth, when I ought to give expression to the ultimate? And why, instead, do I decide on an expression of thoroughly penultimate human solidarity? Is it from distrust of the power of the ultimate word? Is it from fear of men? Or is there some good positive reason for such an attitude, namely, that my knowledge of the Word, my having it at my finger tips, in other words my being, so to speak, spiritually master of the situation, bears only the appearance of the ultimate, but is in reality itself

something entirely penultimate? Does one not in some cases, by remaining deliberately in the penultimate perhaps point all the more genuinely to the ultimate, which God will speak in his own time?¹³

Preparing a Place

The California halfway house was an example of providing a concrete place for those who have none. Other examples include Kitchener's "House of Friendship" in Ontario and similar church and community resources offering food and accommodation to the homeless and transients, safe houses for abused women and their children, support groups for ex-psychiatric patients, and church programs sponsoring refugee families. The church is uniquely positioned to practice this kind of social systems care. Its theological identity as the body of Christ on earth fits the social role of a therapeutic community. As the representative of Christ, the church extends Jesus' ministry for the displaced on earth. Richard Niebuhr speaks about the church in its role of representational responsibility: "Where this responsibility is being exercised there is no longer any question about the reality of the church. In pioneering and representative action of response to God in Christ, the invisible church becomes visible and the deed of Christ is reduplicated."¹⁴

In pastoral care, both in parish and community ministry, the church's identity as a welcoming community is central. Hospitality to strangers, the mark of "madness" in Lily's life, is the mark of divine playfulness by which "some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13:2). It is precisely bodily solidarity which makes the church remember "those who are ill-treated, since you also are in the body" (Hebrews 13:3).

In pastoral care as well as in pastoral counselling the focus is on the person *in situ*, the person in context. In counselling theory, the helping relationship itself constitutes the primary place of healing. The core counselling conditions, first formulated by Carl Rogers, focus on the relational trinity of congruence, acceptance and empathy. Though not seeing himself as a religious man, Rogers, towards the end of his life, spoke of moments of transcendence when truly being with the other: "At those moments it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relation-

ship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger.”¹⁵

In the context of a person-centred, one-to-one counselling relationship, there is the analogy of the “heavenly place” offering full attention and unconditional acceptance. The pastoral caregiver represents a transcendent point of reference which symbolizes an enduring place. This is the pastoral care function of *supporting* and *sustaining*. However, such intimate moments of pastoral care can easily degenerate to an idealization of the affirming and loving stance of the pastor, with the abusive potential for dependency distractions or romantic distortions.

Current pastoral care and counselling models have maintained an emphasis on the core helping conditions but go beyond the pastoral relationship to the larger context of the person’s place in the world. This is in keeping with the traditional role of the church as a structuring community which orientates the person to a world of values and meanings. Don S. Browning, in emphasizing the moral context of pastoral care, states: “Pastoral care must first give a person a structure, a character, an identity, a religiocultural value system out of which to live.”¹⁶

Rather than a moralistic focus on what the person is to do or not to do, pastoral care moralizes by preparing a place of orientation in the world out of which to live. Traditionally this has been expressed in the pastoral care function of *guiding*.

If pastoral guidance informs the moral context, it is family counselling which defines the relational context of pastoral care and counselling. Marriage and family counselling is shaped by the theology and psychology of the individual’s corporate identity. The ministry of *reconciliation* is the traditional pastoral function which builds and restores relationships with the “significant other” - God and neighbour. Family therapy maps the dense geography of the “ties that bind”, analyzes scripts of dominant family narratives and legacies, and explores the black holes of “emotional cutoffs”. Contextual therapy locates itself in the “in between” territories of “give and take”, in the covenants of relational ethics articulated in the delicate balances between multiple obligations and entitlements, and builds the bonds of mutual loyalty and trustworthiness.

In this brief exploration of pastoral care in its historic functions of

supporting and sustaining, guiding, and reconciling, the common theological theme which emerges is the human need for a place. The human condition presents a constant challenge to our place in life, forever shifting the precarious balance between being "in place" and "out of place" in the world. Migration narratives of the search for a place script the history of redemption and provide the horizons for the practice of pastoral care. Pastoral care and counselling are active participants and faithful companions in migrant journeys, creating a place when life is at a loss.

Notes

- ¹ Milton Mayeroff, *On Caring* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 2.
- ² Margaret Mead, *Culture and Commitment* (New York: Doubleday, 1970) 70.
- ³ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970) 35.
- ⁴ A provocative sociological analysis of the mental hospital is found in Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates* (New York: Doubleday, 1961).
- ⁵ Identifying details have been changed in order to preserve confidentiality.
- ⁶ Anton Boisen, *Out of the Depths: An Autobiographical Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).
- ⁷ The journey from symbiosis to individuation is mapped in Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1975). See also John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).
- ⁸ Boisen, 9.
- ⁹ Timothy Findley, *The Piano Man's Daughter* (Toronto: Pebble, 1995) 324, 325.
- ¹⁰ This is a narrative style of interpreting the Jesus story; an approach which is further developed in Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).
- ¹¹ Paul Tournier, *A Place for You: Psychology and Religion* (London:

SCM, 1968) 39.

¹² Borg, 122.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 105.

¹⁴ Unpublished paper

¹⁵ Carl R. Rogers, "A Client-Centred/Person-Centred Approach to Therapy," in Kutash & Wolf (eds), *Psychotherapist's Casebook* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986) 198.

¹⁶ Don S. Browning, *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 103.