

WHY CARE ABOUT HUMAN DEVELOPMENT?

By ELEANOR STONEBRAKER

MY DIRECTEE WAS DESCRIBING her workaholism. I asked her if workaholism was her own assessment of her condition or her doctors'. She claimed it was her own, but her medical doctor and therapist had certainly helped form it with warnings to slow down or else continue to be plagued by a series of illnesses. Speaking of their admonishments and of her desire for health, she said, 'The only one who can change this is me'. I said, 'Or the last one who can change it is you'. The reversal of her statement caught us both up short. I wondered aloud why she did not shout at God. So we did shout. 'This is your business, God! How can Emily quit working compulsively if you don't help?'

Donald Capps writes in his book *Reframing* about paradox and playfulness. When humour or surprise lend a fresh perspective to a difficult situation (like workaholism), it is possible to get beyond one more reasonable suggestion (like taking days off) to the admission that the whole premise that defines the problem is skewed (freedom from bondage is not ours but God's to effect). Fancy footwork throws common-sense off balance; then God's outrageous grace may break through with a scandalous new reality.

Capps argues that Jesus manoeuvred in this way with parables. Good Samaritans, welcomed prodigals and full-time pay for part-time work do not make sense in our fallen world. But in the new world of the parables, God's foolishness is shown to be wiser than human wisdom, and our tired theories about how things should be are cracked open yet again. We dare not boast that we know what we are up to, warns St Paul, in the presence of God. In spiritual direction and in learning with spiritual directors, we are clearly in a setting where God's presence makes foolish the wisdom of the wise (1 Cor 1:19).

I remember learning the wisdom of the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator (MBTI). This instrument, which placed me on a continuum between poles of introversion and extraversion, sensing and intuiting, feeling and thinking, judging and perceiving, was a boon to me not only in my self-understanding but in my moving out more courageously to be just-who-I-was-created-to-be in broader arenas. It

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was in the Church that I learned the value of the MBTI, and many of our churches have relied on it. One's gifts and liabilities for ministry, one's preferred styles for leading, teaching and even praying are defined by the MBTI. Church vocations committees use the MBTI as a tool to aid in the discernment of a candidate's call to ordination. Spiritual directors use the MBTI as a way of recognizing and appreciating the spiritual preferences of directees.

Sometimes at Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, where I am part of the spiritual guidance staff, associates identify themselves immediately by their MBTI type in a way reminiscent of the Age of Aquarius when so-called flower children offered, 'I'm Penelope; I'm a Gemini'. At a recent programme residency, associates began collecting their types on a piece of newsprint taped to the wall. The thinking was, I gather, that it would be interesting to know how many of the spiritual directors present were introverts, how many intuitives and so forth. What a comfort it might be to find a bunch of INF's in one place!

Curiously, the second day that the data were being gathered on the newsprint, some anomalous types began to pollute the sample: ABCD, PQVW. Gremlins were afoot! Or was it God's Wisdom reminding us of our foolishness in that playful, mischievous style of hers? Something or Someone in our teachings and learnings about spirituality wanted us not to take too seriously either our self-definitions or our systems for self-definition.

It is not only that God may throw us a curve just when we think we have ourselves figured out; it is that God may throw us a curve when we think we have figured out some ways of getting ourselves figured out. When Christians gather for teaching and learning about spirituality, there is probably some willingness to be surprised and to give up cherished concepts about self and God. It is not always clear, however, how thorough our unlearning and unteaching may be. Again and again we step gingerly into the Cloud of Unknowing only to find it rushing down on us like a storm. Must we give up all our 'worldly wisdom' (even the MBTI) when we seek the company of the Wisdom of God?

There may be an assumption, of course, that worldly wisdom about human nature and human development is compatible with teachings and learnings about spirituality and spiritual development. Or there may be some concern that psychological systems necessarily fail to address spiritual realities and even, at times, are at odds with those realities. Our programmes for teaching and learning about spirituality may be confident about employing tools like the MBTI, or quite cautious about setting aside analytical and diagnostic methods.

Teachers and learners with an academic or professional background in psychology have a special need to find a way between spirituality and human development, but, since popularized forms of psychological theory are pervasive, we all must find a place to stand.

At Shalem in my first meeting with Fred, he extended his hand and said, 'I am Fred; I'm a three'. I had no idea in the world what a three was, although I knew that nine numbers were now following four letters like a raging fire through the Church. Having defined clergy, candidates for ordination and lay leaders with the Myers-Briggs, now churches are defining them with the Enneagram. But I was not an initiate and did not know whether to congratulate Fred on this three-ness or commiserate with him. It seemed like part of my professional responsibility suddenly to gain at least a passing familiarity with the trendiest techniques for personality typing.

Richard Rohr's is one of many voices speaking on the Enneagram. He relates the Enneagram to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. The goal of the Exercises, he says, is Christian freedom. The Enneagram is a similar and 'still more precise tool, for reaching the same goal'.¹ In my own learnings with the MBTI and the Enneagram, I found the former to be primarily concerned with the giftedness of my character and the latter to be concerned primarily with my deficits. Yet both suggest that, however I may be gifted or flawed, I can 'develop', that is, I can change for the good. I can become better 'integrated', gaining strength in the areas where I am weak and becoming more able to respond flexibly to a variety of challenges. I have to tell you that I accepted the possibility that I could change in the direction of Christian freedom as very, very good news.

Wolfgang Pannenberg writes in his little book *Christian spirituality* that theology may be so divorced from piety that a beautiful teaching may contribute to an ugly practice. His argument is that the Protestant Reformation's central theme, justification by grace alone through faith alone, gave birth to a penitential piety that he calls a 'particularly subtle and pernicious form of masochistic self-aggression'.² While Pannenberg is describing the Protestant way of equating faith in a gracious God with conviction of one's total depravity, others will identify with the feeling engendered. Readers of Thomas à Kempis, for example, will remember his prayers that he might cast off all self-esteem, and his teaching that 'self love certainly does more harm than anything else in the world'. What Pannenberg identifies as spiritual self-aggression had kept me resolutely on the *peccator* side of Luther's equation about being always simultaneously saint and sinner: for grace to be grace, 'consciousness of sin must be kept at a boil'.³

That there might be a glitch in the theology that informed my piety occurred to me when it was first suggested that 'underdevelopment or negation of the self'⁴ might possibly be what 'does more harm than anything else in the world', not self-love or self-esteem. When I heard about the potential for self-denigration to be as displeasing to God as self-aggrandizement, I enrolled in seminary. I resisted the abandonment of my penitential piety, but its reframing had begun: its whole premise about self-regard might be skewed!

Because our image of human possibilities is built on what men have done and what men have said is possible, we have not been able to conceive of more than 'man' as so far defined. We are left believing that while many people have impulses that are generous, kind, and responsive to other human beings, at bottom, they are selfish, self-seeking and out for themselves. Self-interest, we say, is basic. But it is not *the* basic element. It is just one possibility.⁵

Another article in this *Way Supplement* will deal specifically with how women's perspectives are affecting learnings and teachings about spirituality. For me the surprise that broke open the old world-view was that anyone, male or female, should propose that change for the good was not only possible but permissible for a Christian. To my astonishment, I recently heard myself ask my workaholic directee, 'Do you know your Enneagram number?' Where was that coming from? Did I think that if we could pinpoint her reasons for overwork we could encourage her to 'follow her arrow' (as the Enneagram literature says) and counter her compulsions?

Joann Wolski Conn would not condemn that impulse. While I have no knowledge of her opinions about the Enneagram, she does assert in *Spiritual and personal maturity* that 'promoting human maturity is promoting Christian development, and supporting authentic Christian life is contributing to psychological health'.⁶ This is a strong stream in the teachings about spirituality in our day. Not just in therapy but in spiritual formation, direction and practice, we will heal our inner child, learn to love our shadow, develop our inferior functions, go with our arrow, self-differentiate to become a non-anxious presence, welcome our hairy man if we are males and run with wolves if we are females. From the proliferation of books on spirituality that now crowd out some of the self-help shelves of the bookstore, it appears that spirituality can fix almost anything.

Christians accept a priori that life on this planet is not as it should be. Our cities' homeless eat garbage; our priests abuse acolytes; our day

care centres are bombed; our natural resources are depleted or polluted without respect for the earth and its future. While any one of us may be having an OK life in general right at the moment, there is no denying that something is amiss: whatever creation was meant to be or ought to be, it falls short. Can what is wrong with us as individuals and societies and ecosystems be fixed? Or can there at least be an encouraging of development in the right direction? What is a Christian workaholic to do?

That fallen humanity can fix what is wrong or even develop toward what is right is not a feature of classic Christian thought, but neither is despair that nothing broken will ever be whole. Our faith is that creation is directed toward an end, and that the promised end is already evident in the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and the messianic community, the Church. Humanity, fallen but also redeemed, has a part to play while God brings the fullness of the future to bear on the incompleteness of the present. What is our part? In our various traditions we may be urged: to accept forgiveness for our part in the world's wrongness and to rest in the passive righteousness that is ours in Christ; to trust in what is good by nature and still more in the goodness of God, by whose grace we can orient ourselves toward the glory to come, and even approach it in some measure; to immerse ourselves in the promises of baptism and in the presence of the Holy Spirit so that confidence in our made-rightness allows us to live now as if the fullness of the future were here today.

A workaholic like Emily might wait in trust that God will change her habits if and when it pleases God. She might pray to give herself over into God's hands and quit thwarting God's transforming love at every turn. She might claim boldly the new creation that she already is and run with perseverance (in the direction of her arrow!) surrounded by a cloud of cheering witnesses and looking to Jesus. Probably we have done all of these to varying degrees at various times.

In the teachings and learnings about Christian spirituality and human development in our time, however, there are few books or programmes advising, 'Wait passively'. (Those would be very short books, and who would enroll in those programmes?) There are numerous voices advising, 'If you let down your resistance to God, God will bring you closer to the fullness that is promised you'.⁷ And, increasingly, there are books and programmes advising, 'Since God is for you, what can be against you? Go for it!'⁸

I am not able to say that one of these perspectives is the right or best one for programmes to tout, for authors to promote, for spiritual

directors to epouse. I am able to say, from the testimony of Scripture and my own experience, that our worldly wisdom (including advice on what to do until the *eschaton*) will, at some point, be tossed to the wind and come down looking empty because of the foolishness of God. God loves us before the end time, 'while we are yet sinners', underdeveloped, overdeveloped or misdeveloped. Theoretically, this is charming of God; existentially, it is absurd to us.

I am a fan of God's absurdities. It seemed to be in light of Emily's 'the only one who can change this is me', that my mouth uttered, 'or the last one'. It seemed to be in light of (another directee) Clark's saying, 'if I had prayed, this would have gone better', that the contrary words came out of me 'or worse'. It seems to be because teachers and learners about spirituality are so persuaded of the value of spiritual disciplines that, in my seminar on the disciplines, I wear a T-shirt which says in two words all I really know on the subject; it is the much loved, severely truncated and seemingly irreverent Luther quote, 'Sin boldly'.

Our wisdom is going to be thrown on its ear by the foolishness of God, says St Paul. If it has not been, we have not heard the gospel. If we are not scandalized, we have not apprehended the cross. In the Christian scheme of things, life precedes death and follows it. The cross, inadmissible in the court of our wisdom, is uncontestable in God's: what is raised transformed is what has first been slain. The rustling of a leaf might slay you, Luther wrote. 'Jesus loves you' might slay you. 'You are justified by grace alone through faith alone for Christ's sake alone' might slay you.

In other words, the Church, our programmes on spirituality, the hottest best-sellers on human development might slay you. And since there is the slaying that is against God's fondest hopes for us and the slaying that is part of it, we pray that our teachings and learnings are the kind by which God reduces to nothing things that are in order to bring to be things that are not (1 Cor 1:28).

When I first read *Personality type and religious leadership* from the Alban Institute, I got mad at Roy Oswald and Otto Kroeger. I did not like being told what kind of prayer ought to suit me, and I especially did not like being told that the necessity of meeting my shadow meant, from the authors' perspective, that my spiritual breakthrough was going to come through my inferior function.⁹ If I recall, I did not allow this teaching any room at all to slay me for the sake of changing me! Instead, it simply happened some years later that I met my shadow, feared her, loved her, and was knocked off my feet by my inferior

function. And, yes, it happened on retreat; it was surrounded by prayer; it seemed that God (not Carl Jung, Isabel Myers or John of the Cross) was the author of the event. It seemed that God must be the author because its shattering of my regnant wisdom was so like Jesus' scandalous story about a good Samaritan. Whatever I thought the world was like or ought to be like, I was wrong. A new reality broke through.

I am suggesting that the outrageousness itself occasioned a killing that was part of God's fondest hope for me. It was a sudden and thorough reframing of my ugliest self, not a repainting, that opened up a painful process of change. It was the reframing, too, of Oswald and Kroege's theories, not a rewriting. When our programmes are theorizing about the dyings and risings that are part of life in Christ, there will be plenty of time and respect given to the wisdom of the wise; when our programmes are actual settings for those dyings and risings, pre-eminence will be given to the Wisdom of God, which mercifully exposes the false premises even of our theories themselves.

I learn and teach in a programme where there is mischief to be done when staff or associates think that being an ENFP explains so very much, or being an adult child of an alcoholic, or being in Teresa's third mansion. Labels that come from the wisdom of the world explain something. And 'it is very good to know something of how we come to be the way we are and the kinds of things that can go wrong with us, [but] we must be vigilant not to let such knowledge get in the way of our wonder'.¹⁰

Defining oneself or anyone else is of limited value and may even be problematic if the definition is the basis for a spiritual prescription. Let mischief be done! And yet recently I sat with a woman who told me that she was hoping, praying, trying to become more assertive, and I was aware that this is a critical developmental task for many women and perhaps particularly women who seek out programmes on spirituality. I was, then, within myself, seeing that God might smile upon this person and her desire to express herself more fully. When she told me that she was a five who need to move towards her eight (a quiet intellectual needing to become more active and engaged), I confess that I saw God beaming – I who two years ago did not know what a five was. Now, many interpreters of the Enneagram later, I not only 'knew' exactly who this five woman was, but 'knew' what she needed, what kind of personal development would make God glow with approval. Enneagram wisdom was tramping around on my wonder.

I notice that I seem to have come to care about human development! I am not sure how much God cares about it. It seems to me that God

cares as much for a deteriorating Alzheimer's patient as for a child prodigy; so when human beings are not developing, I do not see evidence that they do not love God or that God does not love them. However, I no longer think that God is against our development but that God is against idolizing it.¹¹ Emily and I have plenty of permission (if the psalms are an indication) to shout or plead about her workaholicism. We also have plenty of evidence that God may not serve as a means to our end. We may, in other words, die just as undeveloped as we are today, trusting nevertheless that we and the whole groaning creation are coming alive just as God has promised we will.

It is God's business to fulfil God's promises, not our programmes' business. Spiritual growth 'cannot be packaged, programmed or taught',¹² Gerald May asserts. It may happen more freely, however, if, in our teaching, attitudes on development matter more than theories. We teach about twelve steps in recovery, six stages of faith, seven dwellings on the way to spiritual marriage, and call it human development or spiritual development, but dyings and risings will happen apart from 'plausible words of wisdom, in a demonstration of the Spirit and power' (1 Cor 2:4). Plausible words of wisdom will be around, of course, as long as there are books, journals and programmes on spirituality, but must we be so deadly serious about them?

I have a directee who is seventy. Her life experience allows us to mention the MBTI or the Enneagram to each other as if we were playing a game or reading a poem. What fun we can have and how much we can learn when we know we are exploring together, that none of this is the last word, that God will always surprise us! Her age is a great advantage! A little irreverence about development (and whether human beings may or may not do it) is a great advantage, too. After all, it is not our own wonderful true selves that we chiefly desire, but God. Robert Farrar Capon, who has plenty of irreverence to go around, says that searching for God is a sport, and 'hunting the divine fox', as he calls it, is just about the purest enjoyment a person can have. 'It's perfectly serious and perfectly silly at the same time,' he says. 'It's like making love: you can laugh while you do it.'¹³ God has an expressed interest in foolishness; the best argument for human development might be that it makes spiritual development more fun.

NOTES

¹ Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert, *Discovering the Enneagram, an ancient tool for a new spiritual journey* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p 11.

² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian spirituality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), p 19.

³ *Ibid.*, p 25.

⁴ Valerie Saiving, 'The human situation' in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds), *Womanspirit rising* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p 37.

⁵ Jean Baker Miller, *Towards a new psychology of women*, second edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976, 1986), p 71.

⁶ Joann Wolski Conn, *Spiritual and personal maturity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p 3.

⁷ See, for example, Jack Welch, *Spiritual pilgrims: Carl Jung and Teresa of Avila* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), pp 20–21: 'The journey to God in the castle, she [Teresa] makes clear, is also a journey to self, to the fullness of one's life. These two goals are concomitant aspects of the same journey. Movement toward one goal affects movement towards the other goal.'

⁸ See, for example, Sandra Schneiders, *Beyond patching: faith and feminism in the Catholic Church* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), p 73: '[Spirituality is] "consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives"'. (Emphasis added, quotes in the original.)

⁹ Roy M. Oswald and Otto Kroeger, *Personality type and religious leadership* (Washington DC: The Alban Institute, 1988), p 118.

¹⁰ Gerald G. May, *Care of mind, care of spirit* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p 147.

¹¹ Gerald G. May, *Will and spirit* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p 293.

¹² Gerald G. May, *Addiction and grace* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p 105.

¹³ Robert Farrar Capon, *Hunting the divine fox* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), p 21.