



Towards a Theology of Experience – Through an Exploration of the Practice of Healing Ministry

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When Christianity first came alive for me in my twenties it happened in creative tension between my upbringing within the Church of Scotland, and my integration into the Christian Union at Edinburgh University. I experienced these expressions of Christianity as very separate worlds. I could exist in both, but it was easiest to be in one or the other. However I remained in both, living with the creative tension that brought, and this allowed something new to happen in me. That something new was neither a carbon copy of my Church of Scotland upbringing nor a carbon copy of the Christian Union. Both communities knew and expressed that somehow I was not ‘at home’ with them. My parents felt judged by me and were worried at the edge of fanaticism that they could see. The Christian Union saw an ambivalence about my commitment to their articles of faith, and I was a biology student and so evolution was always a bit of a problem. (As it turned out this itself was yet another creative tension.)

When I try to find words for what was new in me, I realise that there was another crucial factor – that I had passionate questions. Creative tension alone does not describe the process I was following: a crucial additional factor was something that created an impetus of movement. My passionate questions had energy and also prevented me from being caught in a conflict between two schools of thought that otherwise might have drowned me or required me to conform to one or the other.

One of those passionate questions was how the Holy Spirit worked in a group of people. I could not make sense of how it was possible for people to be individuals, to express themselves fully, and listen to something inside that would guide them together. Needless to say I did

not get intellectual answers to that question, but at the moment this is not the point. The point is the process which I now observe looking back on my life.

I seem to have constantly chosen to live with tensions. When I have done so in conjunction with a burning question, new life has emerged. My contention is that, more out of instinct than reason, I stumbled upon a theological methodology that is characterised by the concurrent holding of tensions and passionate questioning. I would like to show how this has enabled me to exist within the world of Christian healing, providing a theological framework for my experience. Further I suggest that this process has then given rise to the beginnings of a theology of healing. What follows are three areas that I have been exploring in my role as chaplain to the Christian Fellowship of Healing (CFH), a small ecumenical voluntary organisation based in Edinburgh, whose ministry is formed around small groups working with Bible study and intercessory prayer.

The first tension I experienced was one I had already met earlier in my life – that of integration of my own identity as a biologist and my identity as a person of faith. The tension might otherwise be expressed as being the world of science and the world of religion. The burning question for me was how to have integrity in, and remain faithful to the traditions of both.

The question of evolution had been accompanying my life for twenty years, since I studied biology, and had settled within me in a way that allowed both my identity as biologist and as a minister to co-exist without any personal turmoil. I saw the biological theory giving the best possible explanation at this moment in time to integrate the current knowledge and measurable data. There are gaps in the theory, in particular, the jumps between major phylum, for example between reptiles and mammals or between mammals and birds. However, having taken a philosophy of science course at university and been familiar with T. S. Kuhn (1962), I understood that evolutionary theory is just that, a theory which will itself evolve! Occasionally, a complete re-orientation may occur and a theory be completely re-written. This

is simply how science proceeds; as new scientific evidence is collated, additions and adaptations are expected to follow. As a person of faith and a minister I am content that the Genesis expression of the beginning of existence be seen primarily from a mythical perspective. This does not reduce its truth – for me, very far from it. For a healthy sense of identity I see all of us in need of stories that help us make sense of our lives and find our place in the world with a secure sense of identity. In this I am following the work of psychologists such as Jung as well as theologians like Stanley Hauerwas (2001) who have expounded a narrative theological approach.

The last paragraph has described the theological process I am seeking to express. For it was the creative tension between a scientific world-view and a Christian faith world-view held together by inner questioning that took me into new and creative territory. The questioning as a undergraduate, led me into taking a course in the philosophy of science in the last year of my degree and also a course in psychology. Both gave me life and led me to exploring new subjects. That experience of ‘newness’ has become a hallmark of the process that I am describing. Perhaps also the word ‘uniqueness’ comes close to articulating the significance. I recognised the importance for self identity at the time because no-one else in my family had been interested in these subjects, no-one had told me or encouraged me to pursue them. They appeared to arise from inside me and fire me. What I describe may seem very straightforward and simple. Indeed it has become that within me. Yet this was the product of several years of sitting on the edges of confusion and being prepared to stay there consistently until some clarity took me forwards.

The importance is not my personal history or even the content of my story – what I draw attention to is the process by which a shift of energy came into my life. What I am seeking to describe is not easily put into words for it is the phenomenology that I am particularly interested in seeking to express in language. Through my next example from my own life as a chaplain, I attempt to find language for the feeling content of the process which I hope some other people can recognise.

I came as chaplain to CFH with no background in healing ministry. I found two streams of Christian healing ministry working alongside each other. Some people had been deeply influenced by the charismatic movement and focussed on gifts of the Spirit, hoping and expecting that those coming for help would be healed instantly or in a few sessions. Others had come from the tradition of counselling and concentrated on offering a loving and caring presence consistently over a period of time, trusting that this would bring healing. I am interested to report that this same pattern has been present in most churches offering healing ministry with which I have been involved. Present also has been a strong tendency of criticism between the two groups. These two differing paradigms of healing ministry were working alongside each other in CFH, and the burning question for me was how to maintain the unity of this particular body of Christ?

As in the previous situation of holding a theological and scientific world-view, I found myself drawn into holding the tension in some way within myself. At times this was quite literally physical: I might find myself in our small chapel in the midst of a Bible study when someone stated with authority that their way of practising the healing ministry was right and the other inferior. I would often feel the tension inside, partly because I was aware the conflict existed in some way within me too, and also because I was struggling with how to deal with the conflict expressed without taking sides. So I found myself, initially defensively, stating that it was important to acknowledge that other members of our Fellowship, equally part of the organisation, held different views and both views had a right to be heard and acknowledged. This statement gave me, literally, breathing space. As I got more confidence with this strategy I found that the experience of space emerged externally as well. Other people as well as myself found more confidence just to be with the difference, not to pretend it was not there, not to try and resolve it, just simply to be with it. The tendency to move into conflict abated. I should add that my appreciation of a shift in our community took probably at least a year of constant practice.

I was discovering that creating the feeling of space in the midst of tension was itself making a difference. I am suggesting that this space began within myself, was physical and emotional, and was related to my breathing relieving the tension within my own body. This was my experience. I began to take more seriously that the Holy Spirit can equally validly be translated as Holy Breath (Douglas-Klotz, 1990). I experimented with the effect of becoming aware of my breathing and consciously thinking of this as a prayer that invited spaciousness and peace. I found my experience was not a ‘pure’ one. The feeling of space and breath was accompanied by anxiety, by trepidation, by personal memories of insecurity and getting things wrong, yet also something about it ‘felt right’ and that trust took me forward.

Gradually I found more words to express the tension I was feeling inside and was better able to articulate the difficulty with more reason and suggestions for finding a way through apparent conflict. I encouraged people to rely on the Holy Spirit, who had brought us all together, and to consider looking for a way to hold all this variety of healing ministry together. Without realising it initially, I was encouraging them to hold the tension with me and live the question “what was the way forward?”

The practice in speaking about this out aloud also seemed itself to build my confidence, my anxiety reduced and so my awareness expanded. I could now recognise that part of the problem often related to insecurities in the person expressing them and that their words were as much because they wanted affirmation as they were about criticising other people. This began to make sense to me. I reflected on that and changed my behaviour, affirming the person who made a judgemental statement, in addition to continuing to affirm the right of everyone to have a place in the organisation. This practice seemed to defuse tension. With the defusion of tension and less feelings of pressure, I experienced more space and found I had reached a new stage inside myself. Out of the tension something new and creative was emerging.

Part of the difference for me was that I found I was not any longer alone with my question of how to maintain unity. I began to experience support. We did not know the way forward but the question was being shared and held. This was also a form of space, as if the breath or spirit inside me was now being experienced outside me within the community as well. The consciousness of the question, the safety of a shared question, allowed more space for the experience of unity – the tension was now being dealt with less as a conflict where people were taking sides, and more as a shared problem to be resolved. Yet the creation of space only seemed to work when I was present. I knew that because the tensions still kept arising. Although I had a strategy to keep people from actively arguing with one another, the feeling was one of tolerance rather than one of resolution. I felt that I was putting all my energy into creating a space that was not yet stable.

This is the point where I became aware that some mental picture or conceptual framework was needed to enable more people to consistently experience spaciousness around this recurrent difficult issue without the need for my presence. The metaphor that came to me was that of seeing God's healing love flowing to each of us and that different people receive what is relevant to them. I began to talk about God offering us all healing threads and that part of our role individually and as a community was to search with the person requesting help to find which ways of receiving healing prayer might bring life to them. This meant that some people would resonate with a charismatic approach, others with a counselling or listening approach. Indeed this concurred with my experience of requests for help. People with experience or trust in the charismatic approach were looking for that style of prayer with a focus on healing happening quickly and thoroughly. People who had no such experience would often say to me something like 'I do not want anything strange, just someone to talk to'. In addition we were finding that more people were interested in meditation and we had two regular groups praying together in this way and several volunteers who had trained in spiritual accompaniment through the Ignatian tradition. So here were three clear threads of God's healing love: charismatic prayer, prayerful listening and contemplative reflection. Underpinning and alongside these ways of offering healing prayer, our community

has always offered daily intercessory prayer and regular celebration of communion. Another thread of God's love in our midst are our weekly small groups. These are often 'home', a place of belonging for people whose lives had not had stable beginnings. Some people simply needed a regular community to encourage, affirm and strengthen them from which many 'befriending' relationships grew. Here was a form of healing practised by many churches and yet rarely recognised as part of our ongoing expression of Jesus' healing ministry. All these threads of God's healing love are valid. The question is more about which form of healing prayer is appropriate for each person, or what combination might allow the individual to experience change, growth and healing? The other advantage of this metaphor has been its flexibility to include other healing disciplines of medicine, massage, nutrition and to offer a picture through which they can be threaded together with prayer.

This way of expressing healing ministry has continued to be an invaluable resource for me. I find it especially helpful in seeking to communicate to ordinary church members how they might already be participating in the ongoing healing ministry of Jesus. Their ability to offer an encouraging word, speak to someone who is often rejected, listen to someone's story can be a crucial thread in the love God is conveying to an individual in need.

The theological process seems to result in expanded awareness. When I had held together the apparent conflict between science and religion, supporting my way through with a passionate question, then I found my horizons of personal interest expanding. When I had similarly held the expressed conflict between a charismatic approach to healing and one based on listening skills, again nurtured and contained by my questioning, then the metaphor that emerged had, too, an expansive quality, able to hold and affirm several different views within one framework.

Yet another tension took sharper form within me as I continued to preach this message. It was the tension between the commonly held view of Jesus' healing ministry residing wholly and exclusively in the miracles and my daily experience that the majority of people coming

to CFH for help were healing through slow and incremental growth of mind, body, emotion and spirit. Miraculous healing is often reported to us through our intercessory prayer ministry. Yet of those coming to the organisation regularly for help, gradual growth, often over a few years, is what we experience in our small groups. I was convinced in my guts that there was a connection between ways of experiencing healing – the passionate question was – How?

This is essentially the same tension as the one just explored, which is interesting in itself. Focussing on the current situation in Christian healing ministry was leading me backwards to the underlying theology of healing practised by Jesus. Experientially the tension intensified. It was a movement that felt like being in a pressure cooker. How could I justify theologically, from the beginning of our faith, the approach that I was finding working for me in expressing and enabling healing to happen now?

The experience of finding my way through this new tension had the quality of turning a kaleidoscope. A whole lot of things tumbled into different shapes and colours and I was seeing the gospel texts from all sorts of different perspectives. Concepts that had been stable were shifting, the feeling was of aliveness and excitement and a wonder that I had not seen things like this before.

First I realised that what I was exploring had resonance with the Historical Jesus approach. Theologians looking at Jesus from this perspective are paying more attention than previously to the historical reality of the time and in particular to the Jewish context.

Sanders (1985), Borg (1988) and Crossan (1991) point out that often what was radical about the miracles for the Jews with positions of authority was not so much the physical healing but that someone who was unclean and begging outside the Temple in the morning was in the sanctuary in the evening. This clarified for me that our current view of the miracles has been blinkered so that what we see immediately is physical healing. We do not seem to notice so readily that often the self-esteem of the individual is radically changed, and

also their potential relationship with other people. As part of his healing ministry Jesus gave people the opportunity to change from being social outcasts to fully participant members of their society, and so issues of emotions and social status are part of the healing stories. It seems a very obvious thing to note, yet my experience is that this aspect of Christian healing is rarely articulated or recognised. Our fascination, or maybe even obsession, with the physical aspect of healing is actually severely restricting. From this perspective our persistence as church communities to keep miracles in the narrow box of instantaneous physical healing is clouding our ability to recognise God's unfolding healing, then and now, in issues of increased emotional strength, deeper understanding of personal and communal justice, and fuller participation in communal life.

Secondly, I began to see that once I could accept the above perspective another new horizon opened up, one that had been staring me in the face all my Christian life but which, due to rigid thought patterns, I had not noticed. Jesus was involved every day in healing ministry with his disciples. He used situations as they arose naturally and he encouraged, challenged and re-formed his close companions. The psychological world had similarly taught me to observe that habits of family and my personal journey could be restricting me. Through taking this seriously I had found much liberation. Likewise I had followed the Ignatian courses in prayer and spiritual direction, and had lived a year in the ecumenical Christian community of Taizé where I was directed by a nun trained in the Ignatian tradition. Through this I had touched a whole language and experience of prayer that was about re-formation of identity and exploring purpose in my life. Psychology and spiritual direction had taught me that daily discipline brought slow, incremental growth, sometimes imperceptible, and very often the experience was not linear or rational. Further I discovered that the range of meanings of the words translated as healing in the Bible encompasses all of the above, frequently conveying renewed relationship with God, safety, and more abundant life (Wilkinson, 1998).

My kaleidoscopic experience brought together these worlds I had been holding in nice, neat separate compartments inside myself.

I found them jumbled up and re-formed within me. I realised that indeed I was experiencing another expansion, an internal integration, a re-organising and connection of my all personal history and faith experience in one story. Even the world of biology suddenly found its place. For our cells are re-forming all the time. Some cells renew every day, others much more slowly. The bread and wine of communion are literally broken down, as in all normal digestion, and re-formed and separated into what feeds us and what does not. This natural forming and re-forming process is at the heart of our physical being. Looked at in this way, then the languages of spiritual direction and psychology are mirroring a process that is foundational to our natural existence. So is this the root of the healing Jesus was teaching? Is this a valid expansion of the understanding of the theology of healing?

If the theological model I have been exploring – of holding creative tensions in conjunction with a passionate question – is to hold meaning beyond my personal experience, then I need to offer possible echoes of this practice in Scripture and in the way Jesus related to people. I conclude with some possibilities.

Firstly as Jesus lived alongside his disciples he interacted with them in a way that could be seen as raising tensions and questions within them which he then supported them to resolve. I suggest that the words we read in the gospel narratives allow this possibility. I would point out that this way of looking asks for attention to be given not only to the words we read on the page but also to the spaces between the words in which much living and experience happened. I further suggest that this means considering Jesus less as a didactic teacher and more as a teacher of wisdom, stimulating in those around him something of the kaleidoscopic experience articulated above. Thus he enabled them to make sense of themselves and their history and to live expressing more of their potential. Is this also what Jesus was doing in the stories of miracles? For in the majority of them he raises huge tensions and questions for the Jews in authority. Somehow in that melting pot of creativity, tensions, and questions he facilitates healing to happen. This points to some relationship between tension and healing.

Secondly my experience has been that encounters in small groups has significantly supported my ability to engage and resolve questions raised within me. This appears to be the model Jesus used with the disciples: allowing the sharing of tensions and questions with enough safe space and freedom from judgemental and rigid patterning to enable growth. It seems that he worked primarily with situations as they arose, placing value on daily living and leading people into an expanded or deeper reality, bringing healing and wholeness through this process.

In my experience the holding of questions in the above process has a stabilising quality around which thoughts and feelings can flow, move, interact and re-form. The metaphor of a rope seems apt and fits with the experience of expansion. In some situations the rope leads forward into new territory and expanded horizons, in others it threaded backwards to my faith tradition, linking the present and the past. This brings me to my final possibility of an echo in Scripture. Is it possible that Jesus was linking with the healing tradition of the prophets, most especially of Elijah and Elisha? Was that connectivity, apparent during the Transfiguration, a thread in Jesus' healing ministry?



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