The experience of hoping for experience

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American theologian Stanley Hauerwas has repeatedly asserted that because he could not "get saved," he became a theologian. While Hauerwas may have been responding to the kind of experiences on offer in the context of his Texan upbringing, his assertion is more than a light, off-hand comment. Rather, Hauerwas directs us to consider what might qualify as "spiritual experience"; therefore, we are encouraged to reflect on what it is we search for in our lives and long for in our practices as we pursue the encountering of God.

Perhaps the best place for me to begin my reflections is to deny that encountering God is coterminous with feeling good.[1] Attempts to equate certain sensory experiences with encountering God carry with them the danger of domestication, as Rudolf Otto convincingly warned in his classic study of these matters.[2] Annie Dillard's more popular warning deserves attention:

> *Why do people in churches seem like cheerful brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? . . . On the whole I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone else have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely evoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us*

1 Rowan Williams, addressing the basics of the Christian faith, shows that great writers on the Christian spiritual life have emphasized that encountering God through prayer is not about feeling good; he gives the example of Mother Teresa's descriptions of the years in which she felt practically no spiritual comfort, only isolation and darkness. Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 8–9.

2 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 12–24.

> *to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.*[3]

These warnings against domestication are essential in the consideration of encountering God, engendering as they should significant humility in the legitimate Christian desire for encountering the God whom we worship.[4] Though essential, these kinds of warnings should not have a deadening effect on that legitimate Christian desire. I suggest that we consider what might be called a more indirect approach to encountering God, by way of participation in practices and relationships that may allow for the possibility of experiences with God, always remembering that such experiences are not under our control. Put another way, a legitimate desire for encountering God can be pursued indirectly by "positioning" ourselves in such ways and putting ourselves in places where we can dare to hope for an encounter with God. Therefore, I will briefly describe two practices in my life that constitute pursuit of such positioning.

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The first of these indirect possibilities involves pursuing relationships with people who are part of the work of L'Arche Winnipeg. I have served on the board of L'Arche Winnipeg for nine years—an experience best described as an encounter with friends, which itself creates the possibility of encountering God, so it seems to me. I was introduced to the work of L'Arche through reading Hauerwas, subsequent to which I was invited to join the Winnipeg board through my friendship with a much-admired uncle, who was also a board member. This involvement led, in turn, to developing friendships with other board members. One of the practices in this community is that board members, prior to our monthly meetings, have dinner at the

3 Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 52–53.

4 A more fully developed study of encountering God would also consider the role of the senses in the perception of God. See, for example, Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

homes where our core members (people with disabilities) and assistants live. Core members also participate in the board's fundraising activities. These connections between core members and board members are an essential part of conducting our business as we seek to embody a vision of mutual transformation.

One of the most significant experiences involving the L'Arche community for me is attending our annual Christmas pageant. The core members take on the various dramatic roles in full and elaborate costuming; assistants and other volunteers lead singing, organize details, and do whatever else needs doing. This pageant may include a non-verbal Mary, Joseph in a wheelchair, and so on. The pace of the pageant is determined in large part by the ability of the actors. If it takes a long time for a shepherd or an angel to make their way across the stage, to finally arrive at the right spot, perhaps accompanied by an assistant, then that is the time it takes. The impact of seeing the pageant performed in this way always presses me to consider again the miracle of the incarnation in ways that I cannot recall experiencing elsewhere.[5] Briefly put, working with L'Arche Winnipeg, through participation in the friendships and activities that make up that community with board members and core members all together seeking mutual transformation, creates the possibility of encountering God.

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Even as I offer this assertion, I am aware that a danger lurks at the door. I am mindful of the temptation to embrace a view of people with disabilities that can veer dangerously close to utilitarianism—that is, of engaging with core members for reasons that are self-centered. For example, if I am convinced that my desire for encounter with God may be fulfilled to some degree by working with people with disabilities, then it becomes possible to use such work as a tool to pursue my personal good. Nonetheless, despite this (and other) cautions, my opportunity to be involved

5 To be clear, other Christmas pageants have affected me deeply—for example, seeing our daughters take on various parts when they were young girls. Fictionalized accounts of pageants that include unexpected "actors" or plot twists have also provided memorable opportunities to embrace the beauty of incarnation. See, for example, the pageant scenes in Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972); John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (Toronto: Ballantine, 1990).

in the L'Arche Winnipeg community remains an important part of my Christian life and practice.[6]

A second practice in which I participate also holds the possibility of encountering God (so I hope)—namely, the study of theology. My current position at Canadian Mennonite University calls for me to teach primarily in the field of theology. But long before I was hired to do this work on a vocational basis, like so many other people I read theology (narrowly and broadly understood) as a way of pursuing the practice of faith in God, not the pursuing of knowledge for its own sake. Teachers of theology are too often suspected of being "too academic," of not "being practical," of not being able to move that short distance from "the head to the heart" (whatever that phrase means), of being esoteric. Indeed, for some, describing a talk, a sermon, or an article as "too academic" serves as a knockdown critique—nothing more needs to be said as justification for ignoring the piece described thusly. I disagree. At the risk of self-justification and defensiveness, I want to argue that the study of theology, since it is an inquiry after God, carries with it the possibility of encountering the God after whom we inquire. As Ellen Charry puts it, "Theology is properly speaking a religious undertaking that seeks to draw readers into understanding God and interpreting themselves and reality on that basis."[7] Charry pushes her description of theological study further by pointing out that it is a "practice in which God's grace may reshape the seeker. . . . Engaged theological study itself *renders one vulnerable to God*."[8]

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That last phrase encapsulates what I am trying to articulate about the possibility of encountering God in my life, about the hope of experienc-

6 Another, perhaps more obvious temptation, is that of assuming that work in this field consists in the clear identification of the one who helps and the one who needs help. L'Arche seeks to resist such a stance with its long-standing emphasis on the possibility of mutual transformation.

7 Ellen Charry, ed., *Inquiring after God: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), xvii. The quotation comes from Charry's introduction to the book.

8 Charry, *Inquiring after God*, xxiii; italics added for emphasis. Charry goes on to assert that authentic theological study "ought to transform as it informs" (xxiv).

ing God through the practices of being involved with the L'Arche Winnipeg community and studying and teaching theology. So much of these practices cannot be controlled, predicted, or harnessed, especially not for our own purposes, not even for the express purpose of encountering God, who is beyond our understanding and most certainly impermeable to our manipulations. We cannot break through to God, but God breaks through to us. However, perhaps I will encounter God's gracious love and presence as I engage in practices that at least render me vulnerable to God. And so I continue experiencing the perpetual hope of experiencing God.

About the author

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