

EPILOGUE

As Kingfishers Catch Fire . . .

Forty years ago I found myself distracted. I was being tossed about by “every wind of doctrine” — except it was not winds of doctrines that were distracting me, but the winds of the times. It was the sixties and there was a lot going on: charismatic personalities like Kennedy and King, revolutionary goings on in the south, Timothy Leary and the drug culture, Earth Day and the flower children, Vietnam. . . . There was so much going on in the world, in the culture — so many important things to do, urgent voices telling me what had to be done. There was no “one thing needful” — there were many things needful, all clamoring for my attention.

I was living in small town twenty miles from Baltimore, a town that was fast becoming a suburb. I had been assigned there by my denomination to gather a congregation and organize a church. I started out with a fair amount of confidence and with much energy. I was well supported organizationally and financially; the personal encouragement was strong. The mission that I had been called to lead was clearly articulated.

But as time went on I found myself increasingly at odds with my advisors on matters of means, the methods proposed for ensuring the numerical and financial viability of the congregation. I was given books to read on demographics and sociology. I was sent to seminars programming strategies for appealing to the suburban mindset.

It wasn't long before I was in crisis: a chasm had developed between the way I was preaching from the pulpit and the way I conducted our planning committee. I sensed that my attitude toward the men and women I was gathering into the congregation was silently shaped by how I was

planning to use them to succeed as a new church pastor with little thought to serving their souls with the bread of life. I found myself thinking competitively regarding other churches in town, calculating ways in which I could beat them in the numbers game.

I had become very American in all matters of ways and means. I never wavered in my theological convictions, but I had a job to do — get a church up and running — and I was ready to use any means at hand to do it: appeal to the consumer instincts of people, use abstract principles to unify enthusiasm, shape goals using catchy slogans, create publicity images that provided ego-enhancement.

And then one day my wife and I attended a lecture in Baltimore at Johns Hopkins Hospital that showed me another way of being. Given my distracted condition, the timing was just right. The lecturer provided a defining image that has given shape to my life, both personally as a follower of Jesus and vocationally as I have been a companion to other followers of Jesus as a pastor and writer.

The lecturer was Paul Tournier, the Swiss physician who in midlife shifted the location of his medical practice from a consulting room with its examining table and supporting laboratories and surgeries, to his living room before a fireplace. For the rest of his life he used words, listened to and spoken in a setting of personal relationship, as the primary means for carrying out his healing vocation. He left a way of medical practice that was primarily focused on the body and embraced a medical practice that dealt primarily with the whole person, an integrated being of body, soul, and spirit. He wrote many books and I read them all. I don't think any of the books are still in print, and in retrospect I don't judge that they were great books. They were anecdotal in style, personal and storied, but there was a spirit of discerning grace that permeated the books that I found very attractive.

Driving the twenty miles home from Johns Hopkins, my wife and I commented appreciatively on the lecture, in the course of which she said, "Wasn't that translator great?" And I said, "What translator — there wasn't any translator." At which she said, "Eugene, he was lecturing in French. You don't know twenty words of French; of course there was a translator." And then I remembered her — a woman about his age, standing to the side and a little behind him, translating his French into English. She was so unobtrusive, so self-effacing, so modest in what she was doing that I forgot that she was there, and ten minutes after the lecture didn't even remember that she had been there.

But there was something else, Paul Tournier himself. During the lecture I had the growing feeling that who he was and what he was saying were completely congruent. He had been living for a long time in Switzerland; what he was now saying in Baltimore came across as an accurate and mature expression of all he had been living. Just as the translator was assimilated to the lecturer, her English words carrying not just the meaning but the spirit of his French words, so his words were one with his life — not just what he knew and what he had done, but who he was.

It was a memorable experience, the transparency of that man. No dissonance between word and spirit, no pretence. And the corresponding transparency of the woman. No ego, no self-consciousness. Later I remembered T. S. Eliot's comments on Charles Williams: "Some men are less than their works, some are more. Chas. Williams cannot be placed in either class. To have known the man would have been enough; to know his books is enough. . . . [He was] the same man in his life and in his writings."¹

That's the sense I had that day about Tournier: he wrote what he lived, he lived what he wrote; in the lecture that day, in person in Baltimore, he was the same man as in his books written in Switzerland. A life of congruence. It is the best word I can come up with to designate what I am after in this conversation in spiritual theology.

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The Christian life is the lifelong practice of attending to the details of congruence — congruence between ends and means, congruence between what we do and the way we do it. It is what we admire in an athlete whose body is accurately and gracefully responsive and totally submissive to the conditions of the event: Michael Jordan, for instance, at one with the court, the game, the basketball, and his fellow players. Or a musical performance in which Mozart, a Stradivarius, and Yitzak Perlman fuse and are inextinguishable from one another in the music. But it also occurs often enough in more modest venues: a child unselfconsciously at play, a conversation in which words become movements in a ballet revealing all manner of beauty and truth and goodness, a meal bringing friends into a quiet awareness of affection and celebration in a mingling of senses and spirits that brings something like a eucharistic dimension to the evening.

Congruence is what Gerard Manley Hopkins demonstrates in "As

Kingfishers Catch Fire,” the sonnet that has provided the primary metaphor for this conversation in spiritual theology. We began with this sonnet, hoping that it would set the tone as Hopkins piles up a dazzling assemblage of images to fix our attention on this sense of rightness, of wholeness, that comes together when we realize the utter congruence between what a thing is and what it does: kingfisher, dragonfly, a stone tumbling into a well, a plucked violin string, the clapper of a bell sounding — what happens and the way it happens are seamless. He then proceeds to us men and women — “each mortal thing” — bodying forth who and what we are. But what kingfishers and falling stones and chiming bells do without effort requires development on our part, a formation into who we truly are, a becoming in which the means by which we live are congruent with the ends for which we live. But Hopkins’s final image is not of us finally achieving what the dragonfly and plucked string do simply because it is determined by biology and physics; his final image is of how Christ lives and acts in us in such ways that our lives express this congruence of the inside and outside, this congruence of ends and means, Christ both the means and the end playing through our limbs and eyes to the Father through the features of our faces so that we find ourselves living the Christ life in the Christ way.

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The words of Jesus that keep this in focus are, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

For much of my life I have been trying to find ways to talk and write about the Christian life that will give witness to what is involved as God’s Holy Spirit dwells formationally in us — which is to say, the Jesus way. Only when we do the Jesus truth in the Jesus way do we get the Jesus life.

I haven’t found it to be easy.

It is easier to talk about what Christians believe, the truth of the gospel formulated in doctrines and creeds. We have accumulated a magnificent roster of eloquent and learned theologians and scholars who have taught us to think carefully and well about the revelation of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Many of us have studied them with appreciation and profit.

And it is easier to talk about what Christians do — the behavior that is appropriate to followers of Jesus, listed in commandments and moral

codes, formulated in vision statements and mission strategies; life as performance. We've never lacked for teachers and parents and pastors to instruct us in the morals and manners of the kingdom of God.

But what tops the agenda for me is the Christian life as *lived*, lived with this sense of congruence between who Christ is and who I am; lived at this busy, heavily trafficked North American intersection with the kingdom of God; Christ playing in my limbs and eyes.

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Two things absolutely basic to the Christian life are, unfortunately, counter to most things North American, which makes this intersection a confused place, clogged with accidents, snarled traffic, and short tempers. To begin with, the Christian life is not about us; it is about God. Christian spirituality is not a life-project for becoming a better person, it is not about developing a so-called "deeper life." We are in on it, to be sure. But we are not the subject. Nor are we the action. We get included by means of a few prepositions: God with us (Matt. 1:23), Christ in me (Gal. 2:20), God for us (Rom. 8:31). *With . . . in . . . for . . .* : powerful, connecting, relation-forming words, but none of them making us either subject or predicate. We are the tag-end of a prepositional phrase.

The great weakness of North American spirituality is that it is all about *us*: fulfilling our potential, getting in on the blessings of God, expanding our influence, finding our gifts, getting a handle on principles by which we can get an edge over the competition. And the more there is of us, the less there is of God.

It is true that sooner or later in this life we are invited or commanded to do something. But in that doing we never become the subject of the Christian life, nor do we perform the action of the Christian life. What we are invited or commanded into is what I want to call prepositional-participation. The prepositions that join us to God and his action in us and in the world — the *with*, the *in*, the *for* — are very important, but they are essentially a matter of the ways and means of being in on, of participating in, what God is doing.

These ways and means are the second thing basic to the Christian life and also counter to most things North American. Ways and means must be appropriate to the ends they serve. We cannot participate in God's work but then insist on doing it in our own way. We cannot partici-

pate in building God's kingdom but then use the devil's methods and tools. Christ is the *way* as well as the truth and the life. When we don't do it his way, we mess up the truth and we miss out on the life.

My Montana neighbor, philosopher Albert Borgmann, is our most eloquent and also most important spokesman in these matters, exposing the dangers of letting technology determine the way we live our lives, dictate the means by which we, in his phrase, "take up with the world." It doesn't take a long while in his company, whether personally or through his books, to realize that the methods that we use today have plunged us into a major crisis, a crisis in the *way* we live. We have permitted a technology-saturated way of life to disengage us from what is essential to our humanity, whether in relation to things or people. As a result we live at secondhand: relationships atrophy, enjoyment diminishes, life thins out. Borgmann places the "culture of the table" — the preparing and serving and cleaning up after meals — at the center of the well-lived life. At the table everything involved in the preparation, serving, and eating of a meal requires *engagement* (an important word for Borgmann) — unless, of course, we use the available technology and buy TV meals and disengage from dealing firsthand with food and turn on the TV set as a substitute for human conversation, a corollary disengagement. Used without discrimination, technology discarnates our lives, the polar opposite of what takes place in Jesus in his incarnation, the *em-body-ment* of God among us. We can't live a life more like Jesus by embracing a way of life less like Jesus'.² Dr. Borgmann is head of the philosophy department at the University of Montana and has given a lifetime of sustained attention to understanding and discerning the ways technology affects the way we live, how the ways and means by which we do things (technology), if used unthinkingly or inappropriately, corrupt or destroy the very thing we set out to do. Borgmann is not anti-technology; in fact, he is very respectful of it. He just doesn't want it to ruin us — and it is ruining us. In great and thoughtful detail he is answering the question posed so brilliantly and insistently by Walker Percy in his several novels: "How does it happen that we know so much and can do so much and live so badly?"

This is the concern motivating a "kingfisher" life, the concern of spiritual theology: a focused attention on the *way* we live the Christian life, the *means* that we employ to embody the reality and carry out the commands of Jesus, who became flesh among us.

As Kingfishers Catch Fire . . .

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I want to say one more thing. This is slow work and cannot be hurried. It is also urgent work and can't be procrastinated. Life is deteriorating around us at a rapid pace. Life at the center — gospel life, kingdom life — is being compromised, distorted, and degraded at an alarming rate. At the North American intersection, slow and urgent are not compatible, they cancel one another out. But in the Christian way, patience and urgency are yoked. Urgent as this is, there is no hurry. There cannot be any hurry. Impatience is antithetical to a congruent life.

So what I want to say is, patience is prerequisite. Formation of spirit, cultivation of soul, realizing a lived congruence between the way and the truth — all this is slow work requiring endless patience. Unfortunately, patience is not held in high regard in our American society. We are in a hurry; we are addicted to shortcuts; we love fast cars and fast food. One of the most appreciated features of our vaunted technology is how fast we can get things and get things done.

But human life is endlessly complex, intricate, mysterious. There are no shortcuts to becoming the persons we are created to be. We can't pump up congruence by taking steroids. Patience is a difficult condition to come to terms with in a technology-saturated culture that is impatient — worse, contemptuous — of slowness. As a consequence, patience is jettisoned. And what happens is that the faster we move the less we become; our very speed diminishes us.

To talk about the spiritual theology under American conditions sometimes seems just absurd. It is such a seemingly fragile way of life in this culture of massive technology, arrogant leadership, pushing and shoving, insatiable consumerism. A Jesus way? Kingfishers and dragonflies? Stones tumbled over rim of roundy wells? So inefficient, so ineffective. And yet. And yet Jesus tells us to do it this way.

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Rick Bass, a very good writer, is another Montana neighbor of mine. He lives in the Yaak, a wilderness area seventy miles north of my home. Besides being an excellent writer, he is a fervent environmentalist. I don't know him personally but have seen him in action, and like very much what I see. Environmentalists care deeply about this creation; but a lot of

them are also pretty mean — angry, sometimes violent. Rick Bass is small of stature, elf-like, energetic and laughing, it seems, most of the time. He holds parties for the loggers and miners, working for common ground, developing a language of courtesy and understanding. He wrote an essay recently that I count as required reading for anyone who cares about living well, especially living well as North American followers of Jesus who are immersed in this impatient, shortcut-addicted culture.

He writes that it used to be that whenever he was confronted with a complex and difficult task he imagined himself patiently laying down one brick after another until eventually he got the job done. Slow, steady, careful work, brick by brick by brick. But he has recently changed his metaphor. He had been reading about glaciers. A glacier is the most powerful force the world has ever seen. Nothing, literally nothing, can stop a glacier. A glacier is formed by the falling of snow that accumulates over a period of time — an inch today, a quarter of an inch yesterday, a mere skiff of powder last week. As the snow deepens, the weight compresses. Ice is formed, and then more snow, which becomes more ice, year after year after year. Nothing happens for a long time, but when the glacier is sixty-four feet thick it starts to move, and once it starts nothing can stop it.

This is the metaphor that Rick Bass has embraced as he continues to do the writing and witness that is his vocation. He notes that one theory regarding the origin of glaciers is that they are “the result of a wobble, a hitch, in the earth’s rotation. . . . glaciers get built or not built, simply, miraculously, because the earth is canting a single one-trillionth of a degree in *this* direction for a long period of time, rather than in *that* direction.” And then this comment: “When I am alone in the woods, and the struggle seems insignificant or futile, or when I am in a public meeting and am being kicked all over the place, I tell myself that little things matter — and I believe that they do. I believe that even if your heart leans just a few degrees to the left or the right of center, that with enough resolve, which can substitute for mass, and enough time, a wobble will one day begin, and the ice will begin to form, where for a long time previous there might have been none.

“Keep it up for a lifetime or two or three, and then one day — it *must* — the ice will begin to slide.”³

Or, to replace the metaphor with ours, we’ll see . . . Christ playing in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, lovely in eyes not his, to the Father through the features of men’s and women’s faces.