
Attunement

Men do not know how
what is at variance
agrees with itself.
It is an attunement of opposite tension,
like that of the bow and the lyre.

HERACLITUS

THE TUNING OF AN orchestra is a more recognizable performance than any familiar symphony to follow. It is unmistakable; yet there is no score. Each tune up is different, and those in the audience can tease out the different instruments—all those sounds are there for the sifting. Noise gives way to the discovery of notes. And yet wherever this happens anywhere in the world, it is obvious what is going on.

Perhaps we can explain this phenomenon by saying that if you were to hear this once, forever would you know that there is only one possible explanation for that kind of noise and cacophony. We can say that the noise is so bad that it is forever seared into the mind and for that reason it strikes us as unforgettable and unmistakable.

But this traumatic disclaimer fails to resonate with our highest intuition and the deeper intuition. Simply, a tuning orchestra doesn't sound that bad. It sounds kind of fun and playful. It conveys an almost spiritual striving for an ideal as the strings are tightened, and as the keys are turned a keen listening is happening.

No. Not quite. A little more. There.

Attunement

Perhaps what is most recognizable is the human struggle for attunement. The search for balance. This inquiry into spiritual midwifery in the classical tradition relies on that kind of balance and tension.

Form and Function

Theological books have changed. While we may go through tomes of systematic theology as part of the graduate level education (although it is more likely that we go through chosen excerpts), the kind of text that today's practical theologian reaches for as a field guide has changed considerably. Gone are the pages and pages of abstract theology that might be found in Tillich. There is no longer the comprehensiveness of Calvin or Barth. We no longer wade through the Victorian prose of Wesley. And Kierkegaard's idea of spiritual formation and training through a readership would never work today. The written word has changed. It looks different. It's organized differently. Its function is different. It's written for the reader who is "on the go." There are subheads and subdivisions, all structured to help the reader find something quickly—and it better be useful.

Herein lies a peculiar tension. Because anyone who is any good at this curious work of the care of souls knows that quick answers don't work—and that has probably been true since the book of Job. Any therapeutic or transformative process is actually hindered and encumbered by the easy answer. These simple ideas of the obvious create resentment, resistance, and spiritual blockages for all those who must endure them. These quick answers short circuit the labyrinth-like journey on which the soul must go.

So here's the question: if we know that easy answers don't work when we are offering pastoral care or in doing some type of counseling, why does today's literature gravitate toward that kind of writing? How can authors say all there is to say but expect their readers to not say too much? Most texts today have a little bit of telling theory with some intricacy, but instead of taking the reader on a journey they put in just enough case studies so that the theory feels like a narrative.

As we go forward, this will be one of the central tensions that we hold. This is meant to be an applied resource and it therefore must be accessible and comprehensible. But at the same time, there is an implicit understanding that the subject matter is numinous and large. There must be a little bit of mystery in a manual about the care of souls. And to preserve that mystery, we're going to look for tensile language and multivalent metaphor.

Attunement

In a beginner's creative writing class, the constant admonition is "Show, don't tell." We live in an instant coffee kind of culture, where everything is on demand, and we expect to be told, and hunger for the tell-all. This is where we are. So you can expect both show and tell.

More pointedly, there are some tensions here that I want you to hold with me. My project does build an argument, but I am asking you to circumambulate with me along a discursive path. I'm introducing a significant concept, but feel the need to preserve digressive movements that are a natural part of any dialogue. I'm charged with the task of providing credible information, but I'm asking to offer the gift of formation.

Midwifery and Pastoral Care

One of the things that became apparent in this study is that the intrinsic metaphor here, that of the midwife, is problematic. This is the metaphor before us today, this is the metaphor that we receive from Jesus and Socrates.

Here's why the metaphor is problematic: a metaphor rightly consists of a vehicle and a tenor—that is, a meaning. Midwifery is our vehicle, and its implied context of birth easily overpowers its tenor, which seems to be an abstract technique in the care of souls. Birth is an existential and experiential reality with powerful memories engrafted into our very bodies.

Simply put, you can have a book about midwifery, even spiritual midwifery, without ever referencing Jesus or Socrates. And those books and articles have been written in the spiritual direction literature by Margaret Guenther, Karen Hanson, and others. But the converse is not true; you cannot have a book about this Socratic approach without returning to the vitality of the metaphor. Socrates needs the metaphor in a way that the metaphor does not need Socrates. There are specific ideas, structures, and techniques mapped out by Socrates but they are all enhanced by a rich appreciation of the metaphor. Sometimes it is not yet clear how the theories apply and the only guide we have is the metaphor of the midwife.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says the following about metaphor: "To tell what it really is would be a theme for a divine and a very long discourse; what it resembles, however, may be expressed more briefly and in human language."¹ He's saying that we are constrained to the world of metaphor. We have to find comparisons.

1. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 28.

Attunement

This is not a book that seeks to tell the truth about women's bodies. That is a profound truth, resting quietly beyond the capability of this author. But that said, the collective influence of the Jesus movement and the Socrates movement has been enormous. If for no other reason than the caliber of who is speaking, an audience is demanded. This is a tenor that is powerful and can be amplified within this metaphor. Simply, they are describing a profound subject, which will be our subject if possible, and the metaphor for this is midwifery.

It is also worth noting, repeatedly, that Jesus and Socrates were men. Midwifery typically belongs to women. What's going on here? There is a problem here, but the problem is not an accident of the work. It is the work.

It's also probably true that women who are spiritual caregivers have also embraced midwifery as a metaphor for many of the same reasons. Some readers remind me of the neglected nature of women's work. The neglect is real, metaphorically and otherwise. Many spiritual directors are a part of theological traditions that question the spiritual authority of women, and so spiritual midwifery remains as an understated power.

If we wanted to be gender accurate, we could constrain spiritual midwifery to women and something else to men. Fatherhood is not the right relation; that analog goes with motherhood. But we could come up with some kind of husbandry if we needed to say that there was a spiritual work that typically fell to men.

But it remains very significant that neither Jesus nor Socrates took that recourse. They, very much as men, wanted this feminine metaphor, this rhetorical gender-bending. Those who heard their language were confounded, and it seems as though not accidentally. Margaret Guenther, who has done groundbreaking work in spiritual direction, also has explored the treasures of the midwifery metaphor. She says, "Like the midwife, spiritual directors are with-women and with-men. While biological birthing is the prerogative of the female and midwives are traditionally female, in the ministry of spiritual direction, anatomy is not destiny."² It is my hope, as a male author, that she is right, and that these luminaries that I so admire, like Jesus and Socrates, can be held creatively with this metaphor that I respect and this image that humbles me.

And while this is not a book that can tell the truth about women's bodies, this is a book about spiritual midwifery, and this historical nugget in the tradition of the care of souls so readily benefits from its conjoined

2. Guenther, *Holy Listening*, loc. 1040-41.

Attunement

connection to the metaphor. Time and again, the comparison to the art of the midwife shows a new insight and manifests a different value that is congruent with the methodology we are exploring. Indeed, much about midwifery is a lost art. For centuries, women have carried this information from one generation to the next, whispered over cries, transmitted during transition, and told as contractions take hold. That information and wisdom is largely lost to us today. We don't see much about birth in popular culture; birth seems anything but natural.

And spiritual midwifery also conveys a wisdom that has been lost, but it has certainly been out there for all to see since the beginnings of Western civilization. The texts are there and have been there. But other questions have taken center stage and spiritual midwifery has become hidden, buried, and forgotten—certainly only more so in the last hundred years.

And the point is that this is another rich point of comparison between this vehicle and this tenor that add to the power of this metaphor. And there are many more comparisons. So in many ways, this book about the care of souls so very much is and is not about midwifery.

History and Practice

As my research unfolded, so did my excitement about this unappreciated gem in the history of pastoral care. My research became influenced by all kinds of projections I had toward my subject. I began to see it as a maligned orphan, an idea birthed by the worthiest of worthies only to be abandoned to historical obscurity. But when you allow those projections to take hold, you can't describe your research effectively and you sound like a wild-eyed conspiracy theorist.

Reviewing the historical development of an idea is not necessarily the best way to communicate either the idea itself or its useful demonstration. In other words, getting wrapped up in the need to establish a historical foundation for spiritual midwifery is essentially a different project than creating a tool to teach it. That project has an academic quality and academic motivations that really don't fit here. There are also academic maneuvers, to which we are not confined. We are not required to find consensus, nor constrained to certainty. Indeed, the academic argument is something that can be fought and won, but spiritual midwifery isn't about winning.

But it is neither the case that the historical context is irrelevant, nor that it is unimportant. The historical context can clarify the ideas and

Attunement

contextualize what is being said. The historical context can elucidate the theory, and it's the theory that forms the practice. Again, you can be so theoretical as to cloud and confuse the practice, but you do need some kind of theoretical frame of sufficient rigor that can help you inhabit the practice. As the practice gets into difficulty you need a strong enough theory to guide you through the questions. Theory is important, but the care of souls is not theoretical.

Moreover, the historical story behind spiritual midwifery is itself a story worth telling. It is no small thing that spiritual midwifery attaches itself to such luminaries as Jesus and Socrates. Clearly these figures have made an indelible footprint on the path of Western civilization. It seems to me that anyone in the work would be interested to know more about spiritual midwifery just from its historical import alone.

To be clear: we will not be exploring the history of everything that has ever been called spiritual midwifery. There are specific ideas, concepts, technologies and values at the core of the Jesus and Socrates movements, and like the lily to the sun there we turn. When we look at the dialogue and rhetoric accompanying these two traditions, we see both specific instantiation that carries a precise and complex rhetorical technology and a general underlying constellation of values that define a perspective. That's our focus: to look at this kernel coming from the classical tradition because it has been overlooked and hidden. Trying to recover it may even shape living theology today. None of this is meant to marginalize or take away from other excursions into midwifery.

Our project is an applied understanding of spiritual midwifery. There's going to be some history involved. Bringing Heraclitus into the dialogue, for instance, makes the ensuing conversation about midwifery that much richer. And there's going to be some theory because there are some pretty significant ways that the concept of spiritual midwifery runs in a very contrary trajectory to other developments in counseling and the care of souls in the Western tradition.

Religious and Secular

There are always divisions in spirituality and religion. Who is the Christian or pagan? The Jew or Gentile? Where do we draw the line between the sacred and the secular? The *fanum* and the *profanum*?

Attunement

This tension immediately tightens around our discussion of spiritual midwifery. With all of the claims about Jesus that have been made across history, it becomes no small claim to say that this methodology was employed by Jesus. Midwifery is not a Christian commodity, but it ought to be of interest to Christians, especially those who are involved in pastoral care and those who want to offer such care in the name of Christ. And on that point, the obscurity of spiritual midwifery is a most peculiar indictment. If a religion has a founder, and that founder has a demonstrable pattern of working, why has so little attention been paid to that pattern? Nearly half of Jesus' recorded ministry in the Gospels occurs in the same one-on-one paradigm that is so often found in pastoral care. It seems like certain aspects of Jesus' group work, community building, and controversial actions have been highlighted to the exclusion of the lonelier work with individuals. That is most curious.

It is also true that spiritual midwifery in itself does not carry any faith claims about the nature of divinity or the Godhead. To the point, Socrates is able to wield the tool with amazing skill, both as a secular philosopher and as a pious pagan.

It is worth noting that as spiritual midwifery has significant ties to the origins of Western philosophy and Western religion, it is remarkably resonant with religious philosophies in general. Taoism reverberates powerfully with midwifery. The Socratic tradition permeates Islamic philosophy. Dialectical thinking, which lies at the core of spiritual midwifery, has a proud heritage in Buddhist thought. Perhaps the point is as simple as this: the very philosophy and religion embedded in midwifery's history easily engage other sophisticated belief systems, because they are all like parts of like machinery. It translates well because the core technology is native.

It is also important to acknowledge that where matters of Christian interpretation invariably arise because of Jesus' use of spiritual midwifery, those matters will be explored from a Christian perspective. Midwifery inherently calls for integration and embodiment.

But this tension also stretches to the secular. Both Freud and Carl Rogers toyed with the term in describing their work. Who am I to say spiritual midwifery is this and not that?

There are also intrinsic incongruences with the project of academic psychology, not so much because spiritual midwifery is a response to psychology, but because it precedes psychology. Pastoral care and academic psychology have both shared a pragmatic interest in the behavioral

Attunement

sciences, but it may be helpful to remember that these different streams of thought do come from different sources. Some of these incompatibilities will be explored later, but for now it is enough to realize that if the spiritual midwifery directly contrasts to the kind of project of Rogers or Freud, it is needful to realize that we are talking about at least two different things, and fair to wonder who is the rightful holder of the term.

But given the centrality of the Jesus movement and the Socrates movement in the Western tradition, we are justified in saying that there is a definition of spiritual midwifery in the classical tradition, and this is it.

Is and Is Not the Classical Tradition

There remains one more powerful centering paradox as we approach this work. Spiritual midwifery both is and is not a part of the classical Western tradition.

The word *classical* itself is cumbersome because it carries so many superlative associations. The advantage of the word is that it captures the historical period in question. By itself, though, it does not invoke or engage the Jesus tradition. I could have used some Athenian-Judeo construct, but that could have locked the entire conversation into a Judeo-Christian context, and I think the spiritual midwifery is bigger than that. Philosophy and Christianity were later yoked by Rome and centuries of Latin scholarship, although it was Greek that afforded the rhetorical apparatus for the development of Christian theology.

It is not maintained that the “origin” of midwifery is specifically tied to the Jesus or Socrates movement. Both Jesus and Socrates make constant references to sources much older than themselves, and it is tragic that many of those references are lost to us as they are. And this does not seem limited to these thinkers. Lao Tzu frequently refers to the “ancients.” These ideas are very, very old, and there are traces of them wherever we find human thought. If religious thought is anchored in mythology, then we can and should dig into the myths behind the myths, out of Rome and into Greece; indeed, out of Greece and into Egypt.

At the same time, something did happen in the course of the Western tradition. If we try to sit back dispassionately and look at the millennia of recorded human history, the intellect initially suggests that human history has unfolded at a uniform rate. Which is fine, except for the fact that that’s not how it happened. We know that there are times where not many

Attunement

changes, and then we see periods of tremendous change. Thinkers like Karl Jaspers and Eric Vogelin have coined the terms “Axial Age” and “Great Leap of Being,” respectively, to describe the global explosion of philosophy and religion just prior to the classical period. Undeniably, Jesus and Socrates were very important thinkers at a very important time in world history. There is much to be gained from scrutinizing a methodology that they seem to have shared. There are insights to be found of interest to anyone, but also specifically interesting to those who want to make a stand in this tradition particularly—those who celebrate identity here.

But it is hard to make the case that spiritual midwifery is a part of that tradition when it has been traditionally ignored or overlooked. If it is a part of the tradition, it seems to be only in the negative; that spiritual midwifery has been there from the very beginning, and also overlooked from the very beginning.

Many of the academic criticisms of the classical Western tradition (here understood not as the historical events and thinkers themselves, but as the grand Project to assert a conceptual lineage more than a millennium later) may have much light to shed on why midwifery itself has been buried. Insofar as the history of the world is the history of power, it stands to reason that a modality to embrace powerlessness would disappear from the lexicon. If the ideas around the history of power are just as polluted by the power that they are trying to describe, there will be no room for this seeming weakness. The desires of colonial imperialism are essentially incongruent with the accompanying values of spiritual midwifery. Spiritual midwifery is not about taking over the world with an idea.

I’m speaking generally and abstractly here, but this happens in remarkably precise and personal ways. Readers pointed out to me, that if patriarchy has relegated midwifery to “women’s work,” then that same patriarchy is going to be disinterested in spiritual midwifery; such a patriarchy will have little interest in either the vehicle or the tenor of this metaphor, no matter how beautiful or exquisite either may be.

And this seems exactly right: a negative methodology like midwifery has been there from the beginning.

What’s to Come

This work has been divided into three parts. The first part is called, “Poetics, Aesthetics, and Ethics.” This metaphor rests in an image, and the image

Attunement

invokes poetics. What is the meaning of the metaphor? Moreover, what does it mean to work with figures of speech like metaphor at all? But if we are dealing with poetics and art and a ministry that claims to be an art, how does the art appear? If the art and art form has a form, how is it, then, that the art is to be formed? And finally, if this complicated art is bound by certain meaning and interpretation, how is it that the art is to be used, both effectively and ethically? If this metaphor offers a prescription, how is the prescription rightly filled?

The second part is called “Physique and Physics.” The similarity between the two words already begins to reveal. The essence and science of what something is closely relates to how it moves. The movement shows us anatomy, and anatomy predicts movement. This is the technical part of the work, so there’s some theory here. We need to understand as best we can what are the elements of spiritual midwifery, knowing full well that the spirit cannot be placed under a microscope. We need to try to comprehend what the operative forces are, even though the most important forces lie beyond comprehension.

The final part is “Immanence and Emanations.” This part is not what the reader may most anticipate: perhaps a comprehensive survey of examples which may illuminate all of the ideas that have been explored. But if this inquiry into spiritual midwifery is only a little accurate; that is, accurate about the human personality and human relationships and human nature, then this endeavor must have all kinds of resonances with the natural world; these emanations must be everywhere. So the third part is more of a springboard than a summary.

Where It Came From

Initial research for this project began in 1999, and the earliest expression of the ideas followed in 2000, although some of the seminal questions can be traced back to 1992. Since these ideas crystallized in 2000, I have had over a decade to experiment, refine, and field test how these concepts really lived, moved, and functioned. I have had the chance to study the pneumakinesiology—how the spirit moves and the motion of the soul.

At the beginning, there was a rigid and theoretical quality to the idea of the spiritual midwife—perhaps then as rigid and pristine as one of Plato’s forms. And there was a very real disconnect between the abstract idea and the embodied people that I was trying to serve. Over time, and use, things

Attunement

became more ergonomic; the way objects become smooth by wear, like an old, wooden spoon.

A meaningful partnership in this process has always come from the chaplaincy interns that I have worked with since 2002. Since then, some fifty to sixty interns have generously spent their time with me, and several in painstaking detail, trying to flesh out these very ideas. Some of them have labored greatly, to whom I'm greatly indebted.

In trying to explain things, I have been forced to understand myself, again, and again, and again. Sometimes the partnership has worked like polishing sand, and what was needed was a source of friction. Sometimes the partnership has worked by a useful question, a good interrogative light can bring clarity everywhere it shines and especially where it's focused. But in a good number of cases, I learned directly from them, watching them employ the concepts more effectively and adaptively than I ever could have, seeing them achieving transformation in the process of helping others. It is no accident, then, that this resource has evolved as a teaching guide. It is structured to help very busy pastoral caregivers see a very different way of doing pastoral care.

Additionally, this project was significantly enhanced as a granted Pastoral Study Project from the Louisville Institute. Through the grant, there was a Symposium for Spiritual Midwifery, on June 22, 2012. And there are many people to thank for their work at the symposium, which has been partially captured as an afterword to this text.

It might also be helpful to stress that this first volume is only that: a first volume. It is not meant to be exhaustive, and there are many questions that would be missing for it to be so.

The Missing Piece

The dialectical terrain has been initially mapped out, but a piece is missing. From reviewing tomes of husband-coached birthing, one line is seared in my mind: "The prepared husband does not need to ask when sips of water are necessary. That's just sloppy." Much of our preparation deals with the delicate balance of attunement, but the other piece calls for a level of attentiveness that transcends listening. Feel out the needs of this text. Where are its gaps? What is missing? The reader is encouraged and charged to bring that listening to this text, so that the text might become a dialogue.