

A Conversation

Coles: You know, Stanley, when I first read your response to me in “A Haunting Possibility,” I was tempted to *affirm* your suspicion (following your Augustinian response to the questions I posed to Yoder) that your response to me could be read as a problematic “attempt to change the subject.”¹ I found interesting and valuable your sense of how “Christians might help contribute to the work of radical democracy. . . . [which] requires the facing down of death, making possible a politics alternative to the politics of glory.”² Yet I wondered if there were questions of jealousy and heterogeneity that you avoided in your response, and hence I wasn’t entirely persuaded that changing the subject was wholly a good move. The more I ponder it, however, the more I think that this question of the relation to death and the possibility of an alternative to the politics of glory goes to the heart of the matter.

Thus I want to respond to your response with some questions about the politics of death and fear, which I think are related to some of the questions that Peter Dula and Alex Sider raise to you in their article in “Radical Democracy, Radical Ecclesiology” in the Winter 2006 issue of *Cross Currents*.³ As I read it, your interpretation of Augustine is quite close to themes that Rowan Williams pursues in an essay he wrote on Augustine a couple decades ago.⁴ Williams is critiquing the politics of Roman pagan glory as a terrible terror-driven consequence of not having

1. See page 28 above.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Dula and Sider, “Radical Democracy, Radical Ecclesiology,” 482–505.
4. Williams, “Politics and the Soul.”

come to terms with death. He argues that Augustine's critique is not only right concerning the Romans, and is not only pertinent to the cruder incarnations of empire and greed in our times, but moreover that the deleterious consequences of striving for immortality through glory are visibly at work in the writing of Hannah Arendt. I think he is partly right. Yet the question that concerns me here is to what extent Williams's critique might be generalized as a wider suspicion about non-Christian radical democracy? Will radical democracy inexorably tend to (de)generate patterns of immortality-seeking and impatience that undermine its best intentions? Stanley, my strong hunch is that your essay is deeply animated by this worry, even if you are too modest in this context to say it outright. My guess is that this is where you suspect Christianity can make a contribution to radical democracy that not only supports radical democracy's best aims, but without which they are incoherent and probably untenable.

My questions, then, concern what *political practices and institutional consequences* might flow from this line of thinking (both within the church and in relation to the wider world). In your response to Peter and Alex, you have defended orthodoxy—which risks a kind of hierarchy—and I think you do so out of a sense that it is a crucial condition for engendering a people who don't fear death and who, therefore, might resist the politics of empire, capitalism, and the megastate (and the cultures that come with these). Do you end up with a paradox here? Namely, that, undemocratic institutions linked to orthodoxy often would be the condition of radical democracy? As is obvious from my discussion of authority in the "Of Tensions and Tricksters" essay in this volume, it should be clear that I think some version of this paradox is immanent in radical democracy itself. But it is strung differently, and I think there are important political stakes. The direction in which I'm thinking and acting is that a radical-democratic ethos might be cultivated from a variety of traditions and emergent struggles, and that key to cultivating a people with capacities for this engagement is the proliferation of liturgies—body practices—that habituate people to patience, receptive generosity, dialogue, care, the expression of eccentric gifts, courage to resist injustice and subjugation, and so forth. This requires a certain articulation of authority (with a certain resonance, oddly, with orthodoxy—Ella Baker is a member of the community of democratic saints, which also means she was *not* perfect). Yet this is an articulation of authority that is democratic precisely for its capacity to invigorate an insurgent dialogical ethos and in-

surgent dialogical practices and powers “from below,” and “from beyond” those currently countenanced. As such, democratic authority must find its expression there and thus again and again. This is part of what I mean by the radical ordinary. I suspect that this liturgical sensibility is quite close to what Peter and Alex are getting at—quite close to what animates their concerns about orthodoxy. Might not institutional hierarchy vitiate the liturgies of radical *ecclesia*—and therefore *its* authority? One could say that Yoder, Williams, and Vanier are radically orthodox in some important senses, yet they articulate this orthodoxy in ways that might also be called more radically democratic than *some* of your articulations (e.g., when you name your position “high-church Mennonite”). Can you help us get clearer about your understanding of the entwined tensions, paradoxes, and liturgical-institutional stakes here?

Hauerwas: The first thing I need to say is that I defend “orthodoxy” because I think the hard-won wisdom of the church is true. Too often it is forgotten that, for example, that the canon of the Scripture is “orthodoxy.” If the church had not decided against Marcion—that is, if the church had followed Marcion in eliminating the Old Testament and the Gospels because they were too Jewish—then we would have appeared more coherent, but we would have lost the tension that is at the heart of the Christian faith: Christians worship the Lord of Israel. It is too often forgotten that “trinity” names a reading rule that demands Christians read the Old Testament as “our” scripture. That means we can never avoid the challenge of Jewish readings to our readings. So “orthodoxy” is not the avoidance of argument. Orthodoxy is the naming of arguments across time that must take place if we are to be faithful to Jesus.

“Bishop” is the name of the office that God has given the church to ensure that the dead—who are not dead, but who live with God in the communion of the saints—get to continue in the debates that are Christian tradition. Bishops do not need to be theologians—though some have been spectacularly so (Augustine)—because their task is to be agents of memory (Yoder⁵) for the church across time and space, to ensure that the arguments and conversations that the gospel demands are not cut short. Put differently, the bishop is the agent of unity, to ensure

5. For Yoder’s account of the church’s “agents of memory,” see *Priestly Kingdom*, 30.

that one liturgical assembly does not isolate itself from other liturgical assemblies in such a manner that the complexity that is the gospel is lost: which means, for example, that the American church cannot tell the story of our reception of the gospel without being challenged by how the gospel is being received in Africa or Asia. I realize that this may seem “ideal,” but I think it rightly suggests how God has given the church gifts over time to make us vulnerable to challenge by the Holy Spirit.

Does this mean that I am a Catholic? Do I think that the bishop of Rome has a special place in the church? Yes, I do. For no other reason than that the office of Rome can be held accountable for the disunity of the church. That John Paul II confessed Rome’s sin for the division of the church in the Reformation is significant. People tend to think, and Rome too often acts to confirm, that Rome is a tyranny that puts the lid on difference. But that is not what Rome does. Because the unity of the church is to be found in Eucharistic assemblies around the world, not all have to be the same. Protestant demands that we all have to have the same reading of Scripture are unknown to Rome. Because the unity of the church is given through the Spirit, Rome exists to encourage many readings of Scripture. If you think Rome is the office of uniformity, then you have never been in the same room with Jesuits and Dominicans.

I realize that this may not seem the kind of answer you, Peter, or Alex wanted—you are responding with ecclesial examples—but I want to say that if you understand hierarchy this way, then there is a sense that the church has always exemplified the kind of conversations that you name as radically democratic. Such a response may seem too “easy” because it fails to deal with the abuses that seem more the rule than the exception. But crucial for me is the reality of God, who never lets his people alone, which means at the very least that authority in the church is exemplified in lives of holiness—lives that always call those “in power” to account.

Jim Burtchaell, CSC, was fond of using the example of a mass in India at which Mother Teresa was present. The priest had the power to celebrate, but no one doubted who had authority in that liturgical assembly. The first task of those who hold power in the church is always to point to those who are holy. That the church must recognize that it is always in need of reform (this includes the Anabaptists) is the condition of possibility for the rightful exercise of authority. When the papacy does not recognize that it is less than it should be—just to the extent that it

fails to acknowledge the gifts it receives from the Anabaptists—it is not fulfilling its office.

This is my way of responding to what you identify as the “paradox” that undemocratic institutions linked to orthodoxy may be the condition of radical democracy. I do not see why that is a paradox. Hierarchy is a given. The question is, what holds hierarchy accountable to the service it is to perform for the community? To be a “high-church Mennonite” is my way to suggest that I believe the time in which we live is one in which God is leading us back to the profound unity of Christians—a unity found in our refusal to kill one another in the name of national loyalties. However, with Yoder, I have am quite open to the different ways that the church might find to organize itself institutionally. For example, I think it quite possible that those called to the ministry of word and sacrament (and I understand that some may not like the language of sacrament) be chosen by lot. I think it a very good test to ask, what kind of community do you need to be for those in leadership to be chosen by lot and, after a time, to return to what they were doing before they were chosen? I think it is, moreover, crucial for the church to produce a leadership capable of acknowledging mistakes and, even more important, wrongs done in the name of being “responsible.” I assume that the ability to acknowledge wrongs is a given, because integral to the liturgy that makes the church the church is the confession of sins. The question I must ask you is, what do radical democrats do if they do not have confession of sin?

Coles: Ok, I’ll try to respond to that a bit further on in our conversation. But first let me follow with a question about what you just said, namely, that the church needs to *recognize* the need for reform, and that it *includes* the Anabaptists. This seems an important insight, and yet it also skirts a difficulty that perhaps drives home the paradoxical character of the tensions here. Do Anabaptists want to be *included*? Within the current high-church institutional and liturgical power structure? Don’t they by and large seek a communion that would radically reform this structure? So the issue isn’t really inclusion and recognition (you’re starting to sound like a “liberal,” Stanley!) as much as reformation in the face of a vine that needs to be clipped back to the roots (Yoder’s imagery). And reformation aims at ways that the principalities and the powers—and sin—endlessly reestablish themselves in the church and need to be taken away, given up, in the name of reforming a penitent politics of Jesus: reformation aims at

re-beginning, deepening and extending dialogical liturgies of reconciliation. Those invested in powers and unclipped vines rarely give them up. Since we're in Durham, North Carolina, and it is summertime, kudzu is never far from my mind. The question, then, is how to think about liturgies and institutions that can both better articulate and better sustain the tensions that emerge when one realizes the illuminating power of two non-identical insights. On the one hand, *authority is an integral element of radical democracy and radical ecclesia that enhances flourishing* insofar as nurturing conversation, patience, and intense struggle that remains dialogical is an incredibly difficult art. Sustaining conversation, patience, and struggle is a craft requiring those who are skilled, such that they can keep memories before us when we'd rather forget, recognize people who are not getting heard in the present, and call us to the heights of energetic daily investments in such practices in a world where we'd rather shop. On the other hand, *radical democracy and radical ecclesia are integral to any worthwhile authority* insofar as the authority begins to lose sight of and become a barrier to insurgent grassroots practices, or to the politics of Jesus, as soon as it ceases to be not only accountable to but also fundamentally formed by dialogics from "below and beyond." I'm asking less for "strong views" here and more for how you might inform our thinking about this tension, which I think you and I both want to acknowledge. I want to name it as tension and paradox, because when we cease to do so, our yearning for consolation, comprehension, and so forth, tends to slide us into relations of power that become profoundly bad. It seems to me that Yoder is willing to venture into discussions of church practices and institutions in ways that are at once provocative and shaped, and at the same time that avoid a certain dogmatic stance or tone. Is your strategy in relation to the tensions more to avoid these institutional questions? Can you, given how integral these would seem to be if one is to take the liturgical formation of peoplehood seriously in either Christian or radical-democratic terms? I'm looking less for answers and more for further ways to inform the questions, such that the dangers of hierarchy are addressed in a way that is—what?—more robust? more supple? more intransigent? Do these questions seem fair and pertinent to you? In other words, what kind of church practices and institutions might be more disposed not only to recognize and include, but also to listen to and to risk radical reformation in the face of those such as, say, Yoder, Romero, King, and Day—past, present, and future? Perhaps this has to do with

memory? A church that could keep a memory of an insurgent St. Francis? Rather than a memory that echoes the assimilated memory that the U.S. government keeps of MLK Jr.? I'm asking—provocatively—whether a church articulated through profoundly hierarchical power structures and temporal imaginaries of endless unclipped growth is inherently invested in obfuscating practices of memory, much analogous to the way nation-states tend to be so?

Hauerwas: I wish that I had said what you just said. Putting the matter of authority in terms of memory seems just right to me. You know that you have a problem when Saint Francis is remembered primarily as someone holding a rabbit, preaching to birds. Holding rabbits and preaching to birds is a good thing, but you can forget that he was about reforming the church by challenging the presumptions about wealth. I am reminded of Dorothy Day's response when it was suggested to her that she was a saint: "you are not going to get rid of me that easily."

I once asked Rowan Williams why we should remain Protestant. He said we remain Protestant to remind the Romans of the sinfulness of the church. Interesting enough, that was also John Yoder's view. No institution, no set of offices, can ensure that the church itself is free of sin. The question is always what forms we need to help us name the powers that possess us.

So you are quite right to draw attention to Yoder's vine image. The church does need pruning. Indeed, this is what I assume is happening in our day. The church is losing its power over the "West." I think that a very good thing. So you are quite right that the Anabaptists do not want to be included, but rather from the Anabaptists we might learn (and they have lost many of the skills) as church to live by our wits, because we no longer can assume a power position.

But this still does not get at the challenge that you rightly present, namely, what institutional forms do I envision that need to exist in order that the ongoing need for reformation not be repressed? I think my answer (and I would be the first to recognize that it may not be adequate) is that a polity must exist that refuses to silence the "lesser member." Every time the pope has anything to say, I wish he might think, "what must the church be to sustain the work of Jean Vanier?" The same principle, I assume, would apply to radical democracy. That is why I think you are quite right to see the liturgical significance of footwashing. A people who have

learned to have their feet washed just might be able to remember Martin Luther King Jr., and by remembering him to know that they cannot go to war.

Coles: I'm interested in pursuing further the question of the communion of saints. In "A Haunting Possibility," you argue that this communion is that of those who seek to live toward an alternative glory in having "died victorious because they broke forever the fatal victim/victimizer logic." For Christian Roman martyrs, "their dying was part of [this] story."⁶ If I understand correctly, one could say that "orthodoxy" for you is the protection and passing on of this story. Ultimately, this story is the story of Jesus, and so you write that "'orthodoxy' but names the developments across time that the church has found necessary to help us keep the story of Jesus straight. Therefore, rather than being the denial of radical democracy, orthodoxy is the exemplification of the training necessary to form a people who are not only capable of working for justice, but who are just."⁷ Now—returning to the tension, the paradox—authority and hierarchy are necessary on this account precisely for "keeping the story straight." No doubt this is a crucial part of what one might call the more "teleological" aspect of Christian tradition. But it seems to me that Chris Huebner, following Yoder, gives traditioning a twist in *A Precarious Peace*—a twist that you note in a footnote, and that I want to hear you discuss further.

A certain way of intoning, "keeping the story straight," might risk reifying the communion of saints. In the name of protecting the "straight story," a focus on *telos* and on associated institutional hierarchies of those closest to it, is organized in order to "keep the story going," if you will. And this requires disciplining belonging in ways that—especially when combined with the frailties of people in positions of power—is extremely dangerous. What seems vitally important about Huebner's account of martyrdom is that it is a radically *eschatological* act more than it is a teleological act. Recalling your summary of Chris Huebner's account, "martyrdom is an eschatological act through which the world as we know it is stripped of its apparent givenness, and strange new possibilities emerge. . . . martyrs do not have a 'solid identity' but rather call into question all

6. See page 25 above, including note 11.

7. See page 248 above.

our assumptions that we can secure our identity through our actions.”⁸ Now, for Huebner, there is a story to be passed on, a story that churches must discern seriously and patiently. But it is a story that radically decenters even itself as it does so. It is a story that continually invites eschatological inbreaking and constitutes a community through this invitation. This means that there is a constitutive tension in the story between the straight and the queer. Because church happens in that tension, Yoderian Christians are called to “keep the story going” in a different way than are those Christians with more teleological intonations. Indefinite pause, patience, midcourse correction, and unexpected newness become utterly vital to the task of becoming church. This patience opens to the manifoldness of gifts within and outside the church in a way that likely suspects and resists the potential growth of reified (and hierarchical) politics that might consolidate in new (and old) forms of insistent consolations fueled by the denial of a death to which one remains radically unreconciled. Selves in Huebner’s eschatological communion have to reconcile with death more profoundly than those selves who might think that they know too well what it would mean to get the story straight. This reconciling with death is likely to make the selves in Huebner’s eschatological communion more humble in relation to others.

I see such motifs all over your writing about virtually everything—one could indeed call them quintessentially “Hauerwasian.” Yet sometimes I think that your straining against a certain kind of liberal takeover in the church leads you to accent a teleological voice at odds with this deeper current. And sometimes I wonder if there isn’t a teleological accent that ought to be reconsidered even apart from these polemical questions? For example, in *Naming the Silences*, which I read as political theory, I think, there’s a point where you draw too sharp a distinction between the kind of suffering and death that is cross-like in the more obvious, immediate sense, on the one hand, and the kind of suffering and death that is radically senseless and ungraspable, like the death of a child due to awful contingencies like a purely random genetic malfunction, on the other. You warn against the will to put the senseless kind of suffering into a narrative, while you say that the cross-like kind (like martyrdom and political sacrifice, for example) can more easily be put into a narrative. Perhaps. But I think, actually, that the virtues you discuss in relation

8. See page 25 above, note 11.

to the senseless suffering that cannot and should not be given a narrative—sitting quietly on the mourning bench, giving a gap, recognizing modes of redemption that might become possible only as we abandon any sense of redemption through narratives that we could prepare or advance or possess—I think that these virtues are crucial *political virtues too*. I think they are virtues with which we should approach even the most ostensibly cruciform suffering. I think they are one of the deepest themes in your work. Don't you think, however, that they profoundly disrupt the motif of "getting the story straight" ("disrupt" is not the same as "call us to abandon")? Don't they also profoundly disrupt tendencies toward "high church"? Don't they disrupt time-as-narrative in important ways? Don't they leaven the body of Christ with a radically democratic and plural ethos—one tending toward more radically democratic practices and institutional modes as the heart of the church? Not just what the church prepares people for?

Hauerwas: By calling attention to martyrdom I mean to suggest two gifts God has given the church: first, the defeat of victimization; and, second, patience. Martyrdom means, "you can kill us, but you cannot determine the meaning of our death." In order to have such patient defiance as a form of resistance to state power, you've got to have a community that is an alternative—that is, a community of memory. And so Christians have to negotiate memory, because martyrs are not easily remembered. So Christians hope that they are remembering martyrs the way that God remembers them; we have exemplifications of what it means to be glorified. So I think that the defeat of victimization is at the heart of what it means for the church to be an alternative to the politics of glory, to the politics that says, "America is the greatest country in the world." Martyrdom is not heroism. Rather martyrdom names the death of those who have been witnesses to the God who makes this kind of death serve a community across time—a community that will not be subjected to the temptation that we have to make a difference. Now, patience comes exactly to the extent that you are not subjected to the temptation to believe that you have to make a difference, because you can take the time—in a world that doesn't think it has any time—to live lives in quiet humility and truthfulness. I would hope this humble and truthful patience would make a contribution not only within the Christian community, but also without the Christian community. That's the way I think about the "interruption"

(what you once called the “pause”) that the martyr represents. The martyr obviously doesn’t go to martyrdom to be martyred, because 1) they are trying to avoid having their killer be guilty of murder, and 2) they know that their business is in escaping—they want to live! God created us to live! So death is a bad thing. What I take to be the pause is that the martyr dies in confidence, but they do not die knowing what God would do with the death. Is that the pause you’re asking about? Of course, I think Huebner is right, moreover, that martyrdom is an eschatological act more than it is a teleological act, but I think he learned that way of putting the matter from me via Yoder. Eschatology names the radical possibility that it did not have to happen that way. My way of putting the matter is that the past is not the past until it has been redeemed. The martyrs make possible a world otherwise unimaginable. Ella Baker could not be imagined given the world of segregation, but, by God, she exists.

Coles: Amen, Ella Baker! Yet, still, I’m also trying to get at the question about what kind of story, tradition, and memory is being kept and formed by the community? The straight story easily becomes a pauseless narrative that engenders its own impatience within the community. What kind of narrative and nonnarrative strategies might the community try to perform in order to become this politics of patience “within” itself in relation to its “exterior” edges?

Hauerwas: I guess I just assume that there’s always going to be conflict. The story that is the gospel is one that produces different tellings because the story requires witness. And when you witness, oddly enough, strangers receive the witness, become witnesses, and then they tell the story back to you in ways that you had never anticipated. I think it makes all kinds of sense for people to say, “You know, I don’t get the doctrine of the atonement. Why do I need a doctrine of the atonement?” Indeed, I’m one of those people—I don’t think I need a doctrine of atonement. So there’s always going to be a give-and-take in that sense of the ongoingness of the tradition. It’s such a basic thing—and I think MacIntyre has named the necessity of conflict in any living tradition—and I assume that the Christian tradition is exemplary of being an argument across time. And that’s why mission is constitutive of Christianity, because when you have to go beyond where you were, then you will discover things that you hadn’t known were part of your story. Now, I don’t know if that’s sufficient

or not to respond to your worry about keeping the story straight, but it's the best I can do. You asked the question once: how do I learn from radical democrats? And you asked whether or not a kind of syncretic radical-democratic tradition exists that Christianity could learn from. I just assume that Christianity is a syncretic tradition because, as I suggested above, we can never be free (nor should we want to be free) of being challenged by God's promised people: the Jews. So that's the way I think of Christianity in terms of its being the kind of argument that is unending. And that's why it's so interesting—and why it's such a political tradition, because the gospel requires vulnerability if it is to be true to itself.

Coles: Yes, I know you think that, but I'm still trying to push you. Let me go back to *Naming the Silences*, because one of your fears there is that the will to narrate becomes this sort of oblivion to the suffering of the other. I mean, it's one thing to narrate your *own* suffering, which might be dicey in itself. But it's really dicey to narrate the death of a child, say, as being redeemed as part of the parents' learning process. And one of the things that Iris Murdoch repeatedly probes is the way that this narrative—and many other narratives that provide consolation—becomes a deceptive machine. In this way, you get wedded to “keeping the story of Jesus straight” because you need to win that game in order to get out of the game of “winning and results.” One can get addicted to and driven by consolation in the victory of the “straight story.”

Hauerwas: That's exactly right.

Coles: And then, in fighting the politics of death, one inadvertently reinscribes this politics in one's own protective relationship to the story of Jesus. So aren't decentering, pausing, and resisting certain intensities of consolation in fact paradoxically a *central* thing that must be kept, remembered, invited, and prepared for? They are not something you can assume, say, as the inexorability of conflict, because that intense and deceptive energy that Iris Murdoch talks about, and that you talk about in *Naming the Silences*, is a huge part of what we do to console suffering and thereby act foolishly with respect to death.

Hauerwas: I have thought for what seems like my whole life about Murdoch's claim that the very assumption that we can narrate our lives

cannot help but be a comfort bought at the price of illusion. Truth requires the acknowledgment of the absolute pointlessness of life, she argues. Otherwise we fail to have the capacity to acknowledge the beauty of the contingent. Beauty is crucial for me, but I believe we can learn to see the contingent only because we must learn to receive it as gift. Gift, of course, entails a narrative of creation. I think Murdoch is wrong to think that narrative is but a comforting illusion. How can she think this, given the story of the Jews?

Crucial for me is the presumption that the gospel is a story meant to train us to live without explanation. Explanation presumes that if I can just account for why what happened did happen, then I will be able to live with what has happened. In modernity, this hunger for explanation often takes the form of mechanistic cause-and-effect relations that ironically attempt to give people who have such a view of the world the presumption that they are in control. I think Christianity is the training for learning how to live without being in control: You learn to live in the silences, and you learn what the politics of living in the silences might look like. I always think of nonviolence as crucial to this. Just think about this: what does it mean to try to end a war—the war in Iraq—when people feel that if you end it, they could not explain the meaninglessness of the deaths of the people who have died so far? So you’ve got to somehow make the deaths successful. But to learn to live patiently in a world where you have no answers, it seems to me, gives you political alternatives that otherwise would not exist—through hope. And I don’t care whether the people who are able to do this are called Christians or not. I mean, I assume that God will show up in all different kinds of ways. That’s how I try to conceive of what it means to live hopefully without explanation. You don’t have to explain the death of a child. That will kill you. That will kill you.

Coles: Right. Is there any loneliness for Christians? I mean, when you talk about Murdoch, especially in *Wilderness Wanderings* (following your much earlier discussion of Murdoch in *Vision and Virtue*) you bring up this question of loneliness as a marked difference from Christian existence, noting that Murdoch’s world is too lonely for Christians.⁹ And I take it that in some ways there’s at least the insinuation that the loneliness of, say, a Murdoch has a tendency toward getting reabsorbed into, and

9 Hauerwas, “Significance of Vision,” 30–47.

maybe even fueling, the politics of glory. What's interesting in *Naming the Silences* is that it seems that you come close to acknowledging some kind of loneliness as an appropriate Christian sentiment, though not a loneliness of permanent solitude.

Hauerwas: Right. That's why friendship is so important. I would like to hear you say something about loneliness, and how radical democracy is a response to loneliness.

Coles: OK. Well, let's see, I don't know if you know Primo Levi's book that just came out called *A Tranquil Star*? It's a posthumous collection of short stories. Late last night I was reading the last story in the volume, "A Tranquil Star." It begins with him imagining a far off tranquil star in a manner that can only be described as apophatic. It is a star of such immensity in every way that our grandest adjectives can only dull rather than vivify our sense of it. It turns out that the "tranquil star" is actually a "capricious star," somehow occupied by "an imbalance or infection as happens to some of us." The star undergoes an unfathomable explosion that moves outward in an inferno "spreading in all directions." Imagining a planet in its solar system, Levi writes:

After ten hours, the entire planet was reduced to vapor, along with all the delicate and subtle works that the combined labor of chance and necessity, through innumerable trials and errors, had perhaps created there, and along with all the poets and wise men who had perhaps examined that sky, and wondered what was the value of so many little lights, and had found no answer. That was the answer.¹⁰

If you want to talk about radical contingency and cosmic loneliness this is a pretty good image! And Levi poignantly conveys this contingency and loneliness at a micro level too, as when he is talking about a deformed molecule in a story titled "The Molecule's Defiance" as: "a symbol of other ugly things without reversal or remedy that obscure our future, of the prevalence of confusion over order, and of unseemly death over life."¹¹ Levi, of course, knows what he's talking about, and he also makes clear that even his breathtaking stories are themselves insufficient evocations

10. Levi, *A Tranquil Star*, 167.

11. *Ibid.*, 155.

of the immensity of the inferno named “holocaust” that he somehow endured and lived to express.

So there is this colossal annihilation of space, time, and meaning as endurance—and yet. *And yet* Levi’s story is populated with philosophers, poets, astronomers—people looking up at the stars in wonder; an Arab astronomer who, centuries ago, “equipped only with good eyes, patience, humility and the love of knowing the works of his God, had realized that this star, to which he was very attached, was not immutable”; a contemporary Peruvian astronomer who mysteriously lives for the stars (in a way that impinges on his family). These people are not extinguished by the explosion. They remain in Levi’s story with their wonder, their simple love, their complex love. They populate the universe with sensuous gratitude and the stories of lives thus lived.

There may at any moment be an explosion that will extinguish all wondrous gazes and all stories of such gazes. What then? Levi’s story raises a question, for me anyhow, about our normal measures—our territorial measures, thinking back to Rowan Williams’s discussion. It raises the question of whether extensive magnitudes of spatial and temporal duration—however much we do and in some good ways *ought* to seek such continuities—are the final measure of meaning and value. In the sheer intensity of wonder, gratitude, and care for being (always so indebted to past experiences and practices and cultivated memories of these)—what Iris Murdoch calls ‘love’, which is the most complicated, difficult, and messy thing there is—there emerges a contending unfathomable measure. Even as love seeks to endure, perhaps its significance lies more in the intensity of witness and care. Love’s intensity births and raises the question—in the face of catastrophes that are immense beyond measure, of whether *this* immensity is the last word. Wonder and love refuse to grant such immensity and its loneliness the last word. They proclaim: “we happened,” “we are happening,” and thus, crying out into the night sky, they call (and denounce) the territorial imagination that is brought to *despairing* silence in the explosion of stars, to another kind of silence: silence in the face of an utterly different and greater significance—a different measure. A different way to live. The fact of Levi, the event of his apophatic stories, his atheistic love, his story of his friend Sandro who embodied exuberant wonder until he was the first person in the resistance shot dead by the

Italian fascists—Levi’s storied love for Sandro refuses Auschwitz the last word.¹²

Hauerwas: So the beauty overcomes the loneliness?

Coles: Does it overcome it? It at least puts loneliness radically into question and orients us toward witnessing and seeking to embody another kind of nonterritorial light. There is a certain warmth in this, though to say so directly like this definitely takes us to the edge of blasphemy in the midst of catastrophe piling up relentlessly over time. (“Certain truths, when said, become untrue,” as we heard from Rowan Williams.) And the warmth of wonder and love are never untroubled by territorial catastrophes, because even as they are born in an intensity that has no extension, they immanently yearn to radiate outward and extend in time and space. So the beauty and love exceed the loneliness of catastrophe but nevertheless engender and maintain a distinct and radical vulnerability to it.

Yet I do think this: to recall Ella Baker, Bob Moses, Septima Clarke, and Myles Horton—their event, their memory, the passing on of their memory, and the effort to form selves in communities of their memory—is, I think, to be witness to an event of human relationship, care, and intense struggle so miraculous (with all its imperfections) that it is not clear to me that any extinction of space and time could possibly diminish it (even one that annihilates their memory and all future possibility). Even as they call us more profoundly than most to extend and deepen the legacy they leave us—and this is the work we *must* do, I remain tempted to say: these events of the “radical ordinary” are so incredible as to call into question the possibility that they could be diminished. Of course, Benjamin is right, even the dead are not safe from dying again at the hands of the “victors,” so the work of memory and extension is imperative and urgent. And yet this work, for me, is sustained by a contingent intensity that exceeds duration and extension even as it requires such duration and extension—yearns for them, and is radically vulnerable in so doing. This opens radical democracy to myriad complexities torn between an ethos of radical receptive generosity and wanting a legacy to survive and flourish. Yet such democracy negotiates these complexities with its weight (and lightness) in the radical ordinary.

12. See Levi, “Iron,” in *The Periodic Table*.

Hauerwas: This is an antagonistic question: Why choose Ella Baker and Myles Horton and not America as a kind of project to also engage in a new politics that the world has never seen etc. etc.? Why isn't that also a sign of intervention?

Coles: It is not impossible that "America" can sometimes embody the intensity and traditions of relationship, care, and struggle that I am talking about. Howard Zinn's histories are replete with examples of struggles that have sometimes linked up with a subversive image and memory of America. MLK Jr. at his best employs this in profoundly radical ways. Yet the more dominant "America" is by its own definition a jealous and proprietary secular god that wants to exclude and/or subordinate all other attachments. It has so often been a project that subverts democracy and proliferates imaginary communities that are more the stuff of capital, mega-state, and empire.

The miraculous aspect of radical-democratic wonder, tending, and struggle is—like Iris Murdoch's love—*profoundly difficult*. To experience the intensities of these is to become deeply aware of insufficiencies at the heart of the very moments that are miraculous. This awareness, in turn, immanently calls for a deepening sense of the very specific histories of those who are engaged in the ethical and political work of co-existence. This is about memory and the effort to cultivate ongoing relationships. It is especially hard to do this at the level of the nation-state—partly because of scale, and largely because of the dense operations of power that are constitutive of its dominant institutions and practices. It is not that there is no point in trying—it is that in terms of cultivating a democratic care for the radical ordinary you and I find much more hope in specific relationships: It is infinitely more probable in Bob Moses telling people to go and sit at the feet of the sharecroppers. It's going to play basketball with the kids of parents who won't talk to you yet. It is specific bodies marching together and enduring blows as they advance nonviolently through public space for basic justice and more. It is the incredible work of people weaving their lives and struggles together—with all the difficult differences in Durham—to engage in creating and caring for goods of the city. The elements of specificity and relationships of tending are more possible here, these have far greater potential to resist the dominant obfuscations and, behold!, find us "doing a new thing." So this is where I

would cultivate a radical hope. “America” has too often been used to deny precisely these qualities domestically and abroad. “Baghdad” might be the short answer to “why not America?”

Hauerwas: It seems to me that you and I presuppose a lot about, for example, the liberal subversion of democracy. And when I ask you, why America? you’re presupposing something like Wolin’s understanding of the liberal subversion of democracy. Now, what may not be all that clear is how the liberal subversion of democracy relates, then, as a narrative—how it relates to issues of death. I think liberalism is a grand narrative that promises worldly salvation in a way that has terrible results for people who are subjected to the ethos of freedom. And I think we share this in common.

Coles: We do, but I wouldn’t limit my critique here to liberalism. I mean that the ugly faces of America have all sorts of liberal, illiberal, conservative, fundamentalist, and radical forms, and I want to keep that complexity in our memory—as well as an eye for certain gifts that, remarkably, we inherit from some of the most questionable places, ideologies, and developments.

And I want to say this: I am sympathetic with your general idea that there are central strands of the formation and legacy of the United States of America that are fundamentally oriented toward worldly salvation. You can see in the writing of Hamilton, for example, ways in which this salvation is understood as extension in space (via empire) and duration in time (via a stable republic, in contrast to the tempestuous ancients). A dominant imaginary of the U.S. nation-state tends toward global dominance and immortality—it was born in that dream. There are other American dreams (which were generally also *dreams that also had other sources*) that have far more of a call to me: those of Abolitionists, many of the women in Seneca Falls in 1847, those of many of the radical-democratic populists in the nineteenth century, Debs, labor organizing, MLK Jr., and so forth; but all these greatly risk succumbing to the salvific dream of America, and many have, in ways that have gotten very ugly. At the most profound level, perhaps, what the liturgies of the radical-democratic ordinary and of the radical ecclesia cultivate, is a nonterritorial, nonimmortal relation to death. That is, sitting on front porches, leaning into the stillness of the present, and listening in order to cultivate different

voices and visions: what I was calling wonder, love, struggle, care; what is going on here is the genesis of imaginaries that provide striking alternatives to the political imaginary of the U.S. nation-state. In terms of the question of death, if you read Ella Baker and early SNCC through Iris Murdoch, you could think of SNCC liturgies as daily training in a politics of “right dying.” What I mean is a politics that moves into relationships with others without an instrumental agenda based on a preestablished imperative frame in light of which you seek to manipulate whomever you need to, in order to get what you want. Right dying is sitting at the feet of the sharecropper and listening. I mean, learning redemption little by little in letting die your will to impose monologically, and instead seeking life in radically receptive relationships. This isn’t something that you ever possess. It is difficult, and we’re always falling away from it. It has to be reborn in each relationship at every minute. You could say, then, that what we’re up to in this book is the work of recollecting, reflecting upon, and summons-ing liturgical practices that might engender a postsecular politics. I’m thinking of this also in terms of Talal Asad’s claims about the way the secular nation-state strives to monopolize the spatial and temporal framework for significant political contestation. We’re probing possibilities of a politics through which, in manifold ways, peoples might reconstitute a more labyrinthine politics (in Wolin’s sense) as an alternative to such secularization.

Hauerwas: I think about your first response to my “Haunting Possibility” as you were sitting in California thinking about the dead that are not remembered. My view is that liberalism is exactly the project that compels us to forget the dead—particularly the ones that have been killed in the name of “civilization.” How do you remember what was done that is so wrong that there is nothing to be done to make it right? Maybe one of the ways is, as you suggest, to take the time to listen to the wisdom of those who have been about the everyday work of living. I think we have that in common, and that’s why we both look for smaller politics. And I hope that’s not an attempt to escape confronting what is at the heart of the challenge before us today. I would like to think that what one might learn from radical democrats is an exemplification for how one reclaims the time it takes to listen.

Coles: Yes, I agree. Wolin's critique of Rawls and social-contract theory seems much to the point in this regard. In terms of framing the politics in our book as "smaller politics"—this makes me somewhat uneasy. Because, say, in terms of remembering the dead, I'd say we are suggesting a much more *expansive* politics of time. And in terms of space, I think Mennonite missionary work, the kinds of transnational initiatives discussed by Gibson-Graham in *Postcapitalist Politics*, transnational networks of indigenous peoples who live locally *and* organize and cultivate relations with other traditions and localities—I think all these are examples of ways in which our politics is spatially more *expansive* than that of the nation-state. What we are saying, it seems to me, is that specificity and enduring relationships of tending, and a sense for the complexities and nuances of distinct places and histories, are elemental aspects of the kind of politics we endorse. These are most often less difficult in localities. But they can be cultivated in painstaking ways on other scales too. And they should not be conceived as a barrier against larger scales but rather as the sites and practices without which people will likely lack the experiences, relationships, and knowledge necessary to inhabit larger scales without succumbing to "seeing like a state," or like a Walmart, or like an NGO that has lost receptive contact with people beyond its staff. I am putting a lot of eggs in the basket of specific practices of tending democratically to the radical ordinary. We need to formulate and to form many of our struggles in this way. I think we need to collect a growing manifold of such stories and to draw them toward one another in tensional relationships from which we might learn. Yet I don't want them to congeal in a way that Murdoch warns against: consoling metanarratives that become an escape from seeing the specificity before us; metanarratives that impose their orders to secure their threatened consolation. That scares me a great deal. And it scares me when I see it in most Christian formations—not all; and when radical democrats do it, it scares me too.

Hauerwas: I'm uncomfortable—and I hate that phrase—but I don't like calling the gospel a metanarrative. To say the gospel is metanarrative can suggest that the gospel occupies an epistemological space that assumes superiority over all other narratives. Such a presumption betrays the content of the gospel, that is, that the gospel just is this particular story of Jesus, the Son of God, known through cross and resurrection. Learning that story is every bit as difficult to learn as sitting at the feet

of the sharecropper. So it's not like the gospel is some grand story that helps me get the world straight. It is a story that helps me discover who I should worship. And worshipping God turns out to be a very demanding business indeed—which is like the death that comes through listening to the sharecropper's story, because it teaches me: God is God, and I ain't.

Which brings us back to Levi's astronomer. You know, Christians believe that God is going to kill us all in the end. The human species is not the apple of God's eye. All of creation is the apple of God's eye. So the survival of the human species is not what is at stake for us. It is rather that, in the time that God has given us, we are to enjoy God and God's salvation. What do we need more than that? Any idea that Christianity is about ensuring the significance of the human as crucial to God's life makes no sense to me at all.

Coles: Could you say something about that in relation to Yoder, in relation to the places where he claims that the “fifth act” and God's victory are already assured, and that's what makes possible peacemaking?

Hauerwas: I think it is very simple. Because we believe that the end has come, through the death and resurrection of Jesus we see what God would have us be; it means that as Christians, we can live eschatologically. To so live means that we don't have to live in a way to make sure that God's purpose comes out all right. We can rest easy in God's creation—to take time to listen to the sharecropper—and that this is the kind of training that comes from learning the story of Jesus and of the people of Israel. John (rightly, I think) saw how nonviolence is the prismatic form taken by God's care of all of that is; and that nonviolence requires such a patient and conflictual politics exactly because we have the time to have the conflicts we need, in order to learn to live in peace with each other.

Coles: Yes. But isn't that a little at odds with what you were saying before? I mean, I read Yoder as saying that the church is somehow written into a major story; humans have a major part in this story.

Hauerwas: True, but if Sam Wells is right in what he is saying in *Improvisation* about how we live in between the times, then we live in the fourth act. So we don't get to speculate about how the fifth act is going to work out. That is God's problem. To be sure, we live in the tension

between the third and fifth acts, but that is a wonderful place to be. We do not have to triumph over others, because God has triumphed. Only in the light of that triumph do we believe it possible to live with the patience that makes nonviolence not only possible but necessary.

Coles: That's wonderful.

Hauerwas: But then I take it that I won't be surprised to see this elsewhere in people who do not know the name of Christ, because we have all been created by God to live that way. I love how, in *For the Nations*, John says,

Yet when "the nature of things" is properly defined, the organic relationship to grace is restored. The cross is not a scandal to those who know the world as God sees it, but only to the pagans who look for what they call wisdom, or the Judeans, who look for what they call power. This is what I meant before, when I stated that the choice of Jesus was ontological: it risks an option in favor of a restored vision of how things really are. It has always been true that suffering creates shalom. Motherhood has always meant that. Servanthood has always meant that. Healing has always meant that. Tilling the soil has always meant that. Priesthood has always meant that. Prophecy has always meant that. What Jesus did—and we might say it with reminiscence of Scholastic Christological categories—was that he renewed the definition of kingship to fit with the priesthood and prophecy. He saw that the suffering servant is king as much as priest and prophet. The cross is neither foolish nor weak, but natural.¹³

That's natural theology. I believe that, so I expect to see it in people tilling the soil. Now the question then becomes: how does being articulate help you? The gospel helps you become articulate about what it is you're doing in a way that otherwise you are constantly tempted toward misdescription.

Coles: Which gets to the question I was raising about the narrative becoming its own end.

Hauerwas: Right. You're collecting the stories. . . . I suppose I just want to say, "Well, I'm ready to see the results—and see if I can be of any help."

13. Yoder, *For the Nations*, 212.

What I refuse to do is to think that I must show you that somehow you need me—a Christian. I want you to enjoy what I enjoy, but I don't want you to do it out of need.

Coles: It's interesting. We actually enjoy a lot of the same things, but I actually think the joy is intensified by immanence, which is not so different from how you think of it. But it's not clear to me what's gained by God-talk in the passage you just mentioned from Yoder. I'm closer to Wendell Berry when he says (somewhere in *The Art of the Commonplace*) that he is not that enamored with talk of "virtue." Rather, he says, talk about how you put a bridle on a horse, talk about how the plough should run along the contours of this place on earth—those are the virtues: right there in the specific contingency of people, places, relationships, and practices.¹⁴

Hauerwas: What I want to know is, where does Wendell Berry get the skills to articulate that, and how do you pass that on to another generation?

Coles: I think there are many answers to that—like Highlander. It's poets like Adrienne Rich; it's stories like those of Primo Levi; it is the memory of SNCC; it's the work of Durham CAN. We need a thick, rich, dense pedagogy of stories and practices that help bring forth the next generations. The thing that I'm stepping back from (but it sounds like you are, too, in resisting metanarrative) is the idea that radical democrats are going to accumulate something that puts them at the cutting edge and thus engenders the temptation to stay there by any means necessary.

Hauerwas: When you say that Berry doesn't want the virtues—he wants to know how to put on the bridle—surely it's the case that the teacher who will teach you how to put on the bridle has somewhere become articulate about the virtues (in particular patience) that are constitutive of the skills it takes to learn how to put on the bridle. And good communities require those kinds of theory—or philosophical articulation—that help us notice what we otherwise might miss as constitutive of our ability to put on bridles.

14. Berry, *Art of the Common Place*, 233–35.

Coles: Right. But isn't a central part of that articulation a recognition of our inarticulateness? Not just for scholars; but somehow we need to find languages in which people every day are called to a modesty about how inarticulate we humans ought to recognize that we are.

Hauerwas: Absolutely. But that comes not just from the languages but from a community calling you into account. That means you've really got to have a concrete community across time that has developed those skills. What bothers me a bit about the Wolinian fugitive character of democracy is that I don't know who is going to carry that story across time.

Coles: Right. As you know my Wolin is not quite as fugitive.

Hauerwas: I think radical democracy has a problem with the concrete community, and it may be a problem it wants to have.

Coles: It may be; and it may be that some kinds of Christianity have this same problem. Yoder talks about Anabaptism as this incredibly discontinuous community in time and space.

Hauerwas: I don't think that's a right reading of John. I think that John sees God as never abandoning the world of faithful witness—even in the midst of the most Constantinian church. The very fact that priests were not allowed to kill at least suggests that Christians have a problem with killing. The tension is still there (the discontinuity is there), but he didn't want to say that in the sixteenth century the church started again.

Coles: That's true, but that move makes me nervous. It sounds a little like democrats who say, "Well we've always valued an idea of equality, so we've always had a nervousness about the slaves . . ." At that point, we stop talking about the movement of daily care that we're summons-ing.

Hauerwas: I used to say that I represent a minority position within Christianity, but then Cathy Rudy once said to me, "No, that's not true because most women throughout the history of Christianity were not permitted to kill. So why aren't they the majority?" But how you narrate the history therefore shows how you narrate continuity and discontinuity.

ity. Why let the mainstream tell you that Christianity is primarily carried by bishops and popes and not women?

Coles: And that strikes me as a move similar to what Wolin is doing with naming a different America. It's not a linear time so much as it is strange connections that disrupt "reality," which is what I'm talking about. And, perhaps, by remembering histories of struggle to enact co-existence as tending, and by extending ourselves thus to the smallest places and times we might cultivate the greatest potential for provoking larger disruptions and grander alternatives.

Hauerwas: Right. Jesus was a very small thing; Israel a small nation.

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