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Baptizing John Dewey

James Loder's Pedagogy of Presence in Theory and Practice

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. . . transformational logic may be called the grammar of the knowing event, and the knowing event may occur in contexts as seemingly alien as puzzle solving, scientific discovery, poetry writing, and religious conversion

—James E. Loder, *Transforming Moment*

Loder's Debt to, and Transformation of, Dewey

After teaching a seminary course for many years in the philosophy of education that included an intensive segment on John Dewey, it dawned on me one day that the transformational epistemology of James Loder is a philosophically-nuanced Reformed theological expansion of Dewey's scientific method. One of Loder's lifelong conversation partners, Dewey saw the scientific method as the best way to equip an educated citizenry to become competent to make the kinds of rational judgments that contribute to a robust democratic society. That Loder's theory takes

a page directly from Dewey's book is obvious when you place the steps of the scientific method next to the steps of transformational logic:[1]

Dewey: Scientific Method	Loder: Transformational Logic
1. Problem	1. Conflict
2. Rational Formulation	2. Interlude for Scanning
3. Exploration/Hypothesis	3. Constructive act/Imagination
4. Best Hypothesis Selected	4. Release and Opening
5. Hypothesis Tested	5. Interpretation

Loder's educational philosophy, which I want to call a "pedagogy of presence," focuses on our participation in the life of God as both the source of the human spirit and the goal of "its genuine but blind longing" across a lifetime.[2] While Loder was highly appreciative of Dewey's experience-centered pedagogy that sought to nurture well-informed Americans for participation in democratic social institutions, he was equally critical of his instrumentalist ideology that repudiated the humanistic educational tradition and left no time or space in the curriculum for metaphysics or the life of the spirit. If Dewey's pedagogy of experience has a proximate or pragmatic end, Loder's pedagogy of presence has a theological or transformational end. Yet it would be a serious error to conclude from this that Loder was a teary-eyed, other-worldly mystic when compared with Dewey, the hard-nosed, this-worldly pragmatist.

As just one example of how Loder defies such a caricature, he offers in chapter 4 of *The Transforming Moment* a Christian alternative, on the one hand, to Eastern spiritual transformations that appear to take people "out of historical reality,"[3] and on the other hand, to "an erroneous Western Christian view of transformation" that accentuates "the historical, almost to the exclusion of the spiritual." He calls instead for "authentic Christian conviction" that retains both "continuity and the power of transformation." While he was not yet using the formulation of Chalcedon to depict asymmetrical bi-polar relational unities, the

1. This presentation of Dewey's scientific method is taken from Loder's own presentation of Dewey's *How We Think*. See Loder, *Transforming*, 44.

2. Loder, *Logic*, 12.

3. It must be said that Loder's understanding of Eastern thought was very limited, and the fact that he mentions Japanese Zen Buddhism probably should be read more as an apologetic gesture at a contemporary Western trend rather than a result of a serious study of Zen in its Japanese context.

Christocentric logic is already present here in tacit form.[4] "Christianity, true to the complete logic of transformation, returns every insight, vision, or image to its historical context as the locus of God's redemptive action."[5] Because Jesus Christ is in Kierkegaard's Chalcedonian shorthand the God-man, his followers resist spiritualties that either denigrate or idolize history. It is Loder's willingness to hold on to this core paradox that gives his theory its dynamic biblical, theological, and scientific character.

To return to Dewey, in chapter 2 of *The Transforming Moment* Loder is critical of Dewey's paradigm, and by extension Piaget, for two faults: (1) Failing to take the imaginative and intuitive dimensions of the knowing event seriously; and (2) For being overly concerned with "consistency in performance and conformity to known frames of reference." Loder had a conviction of a deep or hidden order toward which transformational epistemic events move and was therefore sensitive to the need for the broadest possible range of perceptual modalities to disclose this order. For knowing to more faithfully plumb and reveal the inexhaustible richness and depth of this four-dimensional order,[6] he thought it must embrace imaginative and intuitive forms of knowing, as well as more rationalistic formulations. Hence, it would be a huge misunderstanding to conclude that Loder rejects rationalist formulations *per se*. Rather he insists on the need for reason to be complemented by other registers of knowing.

4. Of Chalcedon, George Hunsinger writes, "The minimalism of Chalcedon, in other words, is not only constitutive but also regulative. It is constitutive with respect to salvation, and regulative with respect to interpretation. More precisely, it is constitutive regarding Christ's person in the work of salvation, and regulative for the church in its interpretation of Scripture. As a hermeneutical construct in particular, Chalcedon offers no more and no less than a set of spectacles for bringing the central witness of the New Testament into focus. It suggests that just because Jesus was fully God, that does not mean he was not also fully human; and that just because he was fully human, that does not mean he was not also fully God. When the New Testament depicts Jesus in his divine power, status, and authority, it presupposes his humanity; and when it depicts him in his human finitude, weakness and mortality, it presupposes his deity. No interpretation will be adequate which asserts the one at the expense of the other" (Hunsinger, "Karl Barth's Christology," 128).

5. Loder, *Transforming*, 96.

6. Loder described four dimensions of human existence, as they are related to the logic of transformation, in terms of knowing events within "the lived world," "the self, " the void," and "the Holy." See Loder, *Transforming*, 67–91.

Charging that the imaginative theoretical breakthroughs of both Dewey and Piaget actually subvert their epistemically restrictive paradigms, Loder writes, "Had Dewey followed this procedure (= the scientific method), he would have remained a philosophical idealist; Piaget would have stayed with Simon in Paris constructing standardized tests, and neither would have made the contributions for which they are so widely noted." Loder claims Dewey and Piaget fall prey to the eikonic eclipse, "a theory of error in which rationalistic assumptions about truth cut off reason from its generative sources in personal knowledge and the imagination."[7] Loder is challenging what he sees as an excessive rationalism and reductionism in the scientific method and, while highly valuing its contribution as far as it goes, seeks to open it up to the personal and imaginative dimensions of knowing. Into this critical discussion of Dewey and Piaget, Loder introduces Einstein as a scientist who positively exemplifies the transformational pattern and whose "intuition and insight bypassed experimental findings to generate new facts."[8]

To reiterate, in terms of pedagogical theory, while Dewey believed the scientific method is the most practical way for building a healthy democratic society, Loder believed that the living God is bringing about the reordering of persons, history, and the cosmos through divinely-initiated transformations that conform to the cruciform pattern of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ. Hence, the relation of Loder to Dewey is not as an other-worldly mystic to a this-worldly pragmatist. Rather, it is as a nuanced confessional Reformed theologian who maintained strong doctrines of incarnation (as source) and redemption (as destiny) to a pragmatic philosopher or ethicist who had abandoned metaphysics in the interest of building a good modern society. Loder never lost his sense of deep respect for Dewey. He acknowledges his debt to the final step of his scientific method, saying, ". . . once the results of transformational thinking are given and one enters the last step of 'correspondence,' Dewey's paradigm becomes useful."[9] In this way, the structural overlay of Dewey's scientific method and Loder's transformational logic remain, even as they are clearly distinct on presuppositions, ultimate ends, and epistemic boundary conditions.

7. Loder, *Transforming*, 223 (text slightly altered).
8. Ibid., 47.
9. Ibid., 48.

Having briefly touched on how transformational logic both builds on and breaks open the framework of the scientific method to imaginative and intuitive forms of perception, I will now switch to an autobiographical narrative style in order to unpack how I personally experienced Loder's pedagogical practice at a key turning point in my life and vocation. The point here is not to draw attention to my own story *per se*, but to offer a personal example of what I call a "pedagogy of presence." Taking his cue from Kierkegaard and Polanyi, Loder saw subjectivity or personal knowledge as integral to genuinely scientific work. Thank you for bearing with me as I briefly recount my personal story in the interest of demonstrating Loder's theory in practice.

Embodying the Theory in Practice[10]

Briefly, transformational logic includes the five moments: (1) *Conflict*, when we sense and become concerned that our current understanding no longer provides an adequate account for new experience; (2) *Interlude for Scanning*, when we actively seek out possible approaches and solutions to the conflict; (3) *Constructive Act of the Imagination*, when a convincing solution suddenly appears; (4) *Release and Opening*, when energy is released and we are opened up in a new way to our original context; and (5) *Interpretation*, when we make sense of how the solution relates back to the original conflict (congruence) and what it may offer to a broader public (correspondence).[11]

I had already spent six and one-half years teaching in Japan when I arrived at Princeton Theological Seminary as a special student in fall of 1991. I came there to study with the person who wrote *The Transforming Moment*, a book that had given me an adequate if not exhaustive language for understanding my own adult conversion experience or reaffirmation of faith. Dr. Loder was assigned to be my advisor, and on that first day we met in the seminary cafeteria, I shared with him some version of the following story.

Born into a somewhat devout pre-Vatican II, working-class Irish Roman Catholic family in Massachusetts, my mother had hoped I would someday take up a vocation in the priesthood. Up until my early

10. In his recently published dissertation, Kenneth Kovacs comments on Loder's educational and counseling methodologies. See Kovacs, *Relational*.

11. Loder, *Transforming*, 35–44.

teens, I attended confession every Saturday, mass every Sunday, and Confraternity of Christian Doctrine classes every week. Mom prayed for us every morning before we set off for school. I regularly prayed the rosary before sleeping, attended daily mass and Stations of the Cross during Lent, and sometimes, special late night Easter vigils with my dad in the darkened sanctuary of Saint Joseph's, our parish church. I always looked forward to the visits from my mother's first cousins, Father Hugh, a Franciscan priest who lived in a monastery in the Midwest, and Brother Bill, a Xavierian Brother who taught at an all boys' high school in Brooklyn. As a child, I knew myself as one called to a life of worship, wonder, and witness, and my yet-to-be-realized vocation was nurtured within a supportive religious community.

I attended local public schools in Massachusetts, which were then under the strong influence of Dewey's educational theory and a Puritan or post-Puritan ethos that was not overly hospitable to newly arrived Catholic immigrant families like mine. Entering adolescence in the middle of the turbulent 1960s, I began to mourn not only the loss of my own childhood, but also my belief in the inherent goodness and trustworthiness of human beings, most especially, of course, adults over the age of thirty. The churches I knew seemed hopelessly out of synch with the turbulent times. (Let's call this my "conflict in context" that launched an "interlude for scanning" lasting several years). Feasting on dangerous books such as *On Walden Pond*, *The Naked Ape*, and *Soul on Ice*, I started skipping Sunday Mass at 13 and came out publicly as an agnostic at age 16. At Boston College, I studied literature and philosophy, critically absorbing the Christian humanism if not the piety of the Jesuit tradition. After graduation, I took a job teaching at a private, residential school for serious juvenile offenders. But it soon dawned on me that I was unable to help those deeply troubled young people with literature and philosophy alone.

Just then I met Carol, the daughter of Revs. Bill and Marilyn Jo Tolley, the first Presbyterian clergy couple in the history of New York Presbytery. On the surface, our backgrounds could not have been more different—she purportedly a descendant of William Bradford, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony—and me a third generation Irish American. But with our lives in close conjunction, we gratefully acknowledged that we both had been nurtured by caring Protestant and Catholic families and faith communities. We were married in August,

1977 in Carol's parents' church in Brooklyn. Yet at this point neither of us expressed any interest in returning to church.

In November that year we were sent to Western Samoa by the Peace Corps to teach in a government high school. Christianity had been seamlessly woven into the fabric of traditional Samoan culture, and because of the efforts of a vibrant Youth for Christ movement, the faith of many of our students had been strangely rekindled. Carol and I were both puzzled and moved by our students' exuberant and sincere expressions of love for Jesus Christ. However, I still insisted on calling myself an agnostic. I was still scanning for possible solutions to my original conflict. In Samoa, we also made friends with Japanese volunteers and decided that Japan would be the next stop on our journey. We both got jobs teaching English in Japan where we met a bright, evangelical missionary who knew I was seriously engaged in the practice of Zen Buddhist meditation. He prodded me to read the Gospels with him. I took up his challenge with the secret intention of hoping to undermine what I then viewed as his hopelessly naïve and narrow faith. However, the more I read and reflected on what we were reading, the more I felt drawn to Jesus as he comes to us in the narratives and sayings of the Gospels, and the more I felt a rekindling of the earlier sense of God's calling on my life. One night soon after Rose, our first child, was born, I suddenly felt a strong impulse to pray in the name of Jesus Christ (This was my "constructive act of the imagination" that burst upon me unexpectedly). It was the first time I had prayed in many years. As I prayed, I felt a sensation of being bathed in a warm embrace.

Carol and I started attending a local Japanese Protestant church. We spent much time praying, studying the Bible, discussing theology, and trying to discern the will of God for our lives, which had now taken a very unanticipated turn (My "release and opening" and "interpretation"). We publicly reaffirmed our faith in Jesus Christ and began to discern a call to serve in Japan. When we returned to the States, I taught in a private, interdenominational Christian school. Our second and third children, Paul and Sarah, were born. After receiving a full scholarship to attend Wheaton College Graduate School, we headed to the Midwest. There we spent two very happy years studying and living in student housing with Christians of all backgrounds from Argentina, China, Germany, Ghana, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Nigeria, and the U.S. After graduating from Wheaton, we returned to Japan and in 1988 we were officially appointed

as Presbyterian mission co-workers with our first assignment at a junior college for women. After completing a four and a half year term, we were given a home assignment and I enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary as a special student taking doctoral seminars and courses for ordination.

This finally brings me back to my first personal encounter with Dr. Loder and what I want to call his "pedagogy of presence." Frankly, as a cradle Irish Catholic and graduate of Boston College, as one who had studied Zen and experienced a reawakening to Christian faith in Japan, as a Wheaton grad and now as a foreign missionary, I felt like something of an outsider at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1991. Some faculty and students seemed to have some need to communicate to me that they thought PTS was intellectually, theologically, and indeed culturally superior to my cradle Irish Roman Catholicism and adopted liberal evangelicalism. However, Dr. Loder embraced my Irish Catholic upbringing, my Jesuit and evangelical education, and the many twists and turns in my journey that had led to my adult reaffirmation of faith and my missionary calling to Japan. Most of all, he affirmed and celebrated my sincere hunger for a more adequate language to comprehend what had happened to me and what happens to others who perceived themselves as having been touched by grace. While he had what is considered to be an elite education in this country, at Carlton, PTS, and Harvard, he was not an elitist. In short, he did not judge me according to his own native sociocultural or economic background. Nor did he try to reduce me or my story to some pre-determined framework. He warmly accepted and welcomed me in my full subjectivity and limitations. It was soon obvious that he had a radically egalitarian view of the human person, not because of a political ideology but because of his conviction of the Spirit's free and sovereign operation. Indeed, since his real interest was in how the Holy Spirit opens up the human spirit to hitherto hidden ranges of complexity and possibility, he was not in the least bit uncomfortable with, or threatened, by my background. I think he took great joy in witnessing the countless, unique ways that his students experienced the logic of transformation. Like a midwife assisting in the delivery of a child, he always seemed to be expecting the approaching arrival of new insight or discovery. From the time we prayed at that first meeting in the seminary cafeteria and subsequently up to the time of his death in 2001, when I was finally able to return from Japan to PTS to complete

my doctoral work, I always felt the sensation of God's embrace through him. This is perhaps the greatest gift a teacher can give.

Conclusion

I know that many graduates of PTS could similarly testify to the embrace of the Spirit through the ministry of this unusually gifted and passionate mentor. In conclusion, I would like to suggest some tentative characteristics of Loder's "pedagogy of presence" (transformational logic in action) that might help inform our own interactions with learners of all ages.

Attention to Presence

Paying attention to the presence of God and to the presence of the other person in the presence of God. Jim made time for me and always listened very carefully before responding to me. This attentiveness was more than a counseling technique he had picked up at the Menninger Clinic. It was a spiritual or prayerful attentiveness that shaped his own spirit over a lifetime of discipleship, a discipleship characterized by much personal suffering or passion. Both in one-on-one situations and in the classroom, he always embodied this prayerful and passionate disposition. Whether I unexpectedly ran into him on campus or had a scheduled meeting, he acted as if our encounters were sacred, and I felt like I was participating with him in an unfolding sacred story. I never once got the sense I was keeping him from more important things. He never looked at his watch. He listened carefully to try to discern the Spirit's work in me.

Active Faith in the Holy Spirit's Transforming Work

Trusting the Spirit will eventually give language that adequately expresses insights into the hidden order that arise from our perceptual and cognitive experience. Neuroscientists also say that perception, in conjunction with cognition, drives the motors of our language and decisions. Through the window of this evolutionary pattern of perception-cognition-language-action, Jim was moved with wonder and seemed to glimpse the agency of the Holy Spirit. He was very widely read and densely articulate. Able to converse intelligently on a broad range of subjects, some say he was the smartest member of the PTS faculty. However,

I should also mention that some of his colleagues have reported that he had a competitive or argumentative streak. Thankfully, it seems he was more merciful with his students than with some of his colleagues. Unlike some pedagogical relationships where there is always a tacit or even explicit power dynamic at work, I never felt oppressed by Jim even though he had the highest academic standards. There was a sense that there was much more at stake in this pedagogical relation that transcended the institutional restrictions and requirements of PTS. I felt inspired by him and worked very hard. He communicated his personal support in the unflinching conviction that God was always at work, even in the mundane environs of the classroom or library. While I often felt tongue-tied when speaking with him, he never put me down for my inadequate knowledge. He never overtly or even subtly compared my ability with that of other brighter or more articulate students. He actively encouraged me to keep thinking and keeping seeking adequate words even when I felt like I was stammering. He loved to quote Polanyi who said "we know much more than we can tell." His confidence in the Spirit's work in me gave me the confidence that my perception and cognition had intrinsic value and that they would eventually find adequate expression in language and action. This was a huge gift and one I have sought to emulate in my own life and work.

Imminent Expectation

Expecting new light to burst upon every pedagogical encounter, Dr. Loder seemed to expect that God the Holy Spirit, the Real Teacher, would show up at any minute. While he was brilliant, he was open to the Spirit and teachable. He loved, for example, to hear me share my experiences and insights into Japanese Christianity or theology and would say, "I did not know that." Just before he died, we met to discuss my work in progress. He said, "Tom, I have so much more to learn, I feel like I am just beginning to understand, so I think the Lord really wants me to keep teaching." I hear in Jim's eschatological urgency an echo of the conclusion of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

> With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.[12]

Jim Loder never stopped his explorations, but he was grateful for, and contented with, the proleptic glimpses of the hidden order that points toward the ultimate transformation of all things when we will know fully even as we have been fully known. May we also convey a robust attention, faith, and expectation in our own pedagogical theory and practice.

12. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 145.

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