

# Some Theological Perspectives on Disability

Arthur J. Freeman

**Author:** Arthur Freeman from 1961-1996 was Professor of Biblical Theology, New Testament, at Moravian Theological Seminary, Bethlehem, PA. For twenty of those years was responsible for its continuing education programming. Since the 1960s he has been involved in the spiritual formation movement and has taught a course on Spiritual Formation for more than twenty years. He received his B.A. (1949) in classics from Lawrence College, Appleton, WI, B.D. (1952) from Moravian Theological Seminary, Bethlehem, PA, and Ph. D. (1962) from Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ. He is a bishop of the Moravian Church and from 1982 to 1996 was member of the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches.

**Abstract:** Originally presented to an Interfaith Conference on Disabilities, the article seeks to advocate helpful and creative perspectives on disability and persons with disabilities. It begins with the recognition that to be human is to experience disability and limitation and that the human developmental process is a movement from not-yet-abled potentials to possibilities which stretch our limits. Life is a process which takes courage and calls upon one to receive God's enabling affirmation of oneself and to affirm one's own dignity and value.

Called for are new views of creation, human existence, the spiritual dimensions of being human, and a comprehensive view of life which places human struggle, limits, and growth in the larger context of meaning. From the perspective of Intertestamental Judaism and the early church, life is seen as lived in the context of many forces or powers which affect human existence, some destructive and some supportive, calling us to live both with the risks of life and the resources of God. Two world view options are presented, the traditional view of creation having been made good, finished, but fallen and distorted through human sin, with "normal" models of what humans should be but are not because of sin; and the other understanding creation as an unfinished process which God initiated, into which God invites human participation, and which God impelled towards the future in the second great act of creation in Christ. In this view creation is still in process and it is very difficult to delineate normal and abnormal, abled and disabled.

The human contribution to creation is to be there in the ecosystem as the image of God, the place where God's image, God's life and activity, can be reflected. The way that the human is to be there is not primarily as one to exercise power and construct concepts and systems of knowledge, but to be there in love, with and for others, something which is possible for most persons.

The human being is foundationally spiritual and has a soul. Thus whatever happens to the body is transcended by the soul, the soul provides important resources in life's struggles, and the soul is the dimension where we most share the experience of human existence. Both because of the will of the person and the soul, disease is never the same in two persons, for its course is determined by personal and spiritual interaction with it.

God is not the imperial God who is to control and fix everything, with the consequence that we have failed or God has said "no" if we are not healed. In Jesus God renounces the use of coercive power and accepts the cross to become the human one, the one who shares life with us, the one who by crucifixion is disabled. The essence of religion is the heart relationship with God which is not dependent upon understanding or conceptualization, and so is available to all including the infant and the person with mental disability. This is the God who would draw near, who offers relationship, and would solve the existential estrangement which results from disability.

All of this is integrated into a comprehensive model of life.

Key Words: disability, creation, human, God, life, soul.

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**Introduction**

To seek to present theological perspectives on anything from religion in general or interfaith perspectives is difficult.<sup>1</sup> The best I can do is to be responsible to the Old as well as the New Testament. My interests in spirituality provide me with a view which transcends my own Christian tradition, but if I am to deal with theological reflections on disability I need to write within the specifics of my own tradition. Yet I do challenge a number of *traditional* Christian perspectives (though I believe that what I say is biblical) and I claim an experiential base in my own life experience for what I say. I have long suffered from something akin to Attention Deficit Disorder and my first wife was ill for twenty years in a way that we had to struggle with her disability and seek to preserve her personal dignity.

As I sought appropriate language by which to discuss disability, I am particularly indebted to Janet Miller Rife, author of the story of her son Brian, *Injured Mind, Shattered Dreams*. In a letter she pointed out to me that the appropriate language when speaking of those with disabilities is person-first language. We are first persons. We must not be defined by our symptoms or limits.

Much of what I wish to share expresses a desire to explain and explore life, to survive; and to share with others what comes out of my experience. Also very helpful to me in my reflection has been the work of Oliver Sacks, a New York neurologist, and Aleksandr Luria, a Russian neurologist ( both of whom will later receive mention) and Jean Vanier, founder of the l'Arche communities, together with the work of Henri Nouwen in the l'Arche community of Daybreak in Toronto.

I do feel that it is important to say that in some way we are all persons with disabilities, limits, or variously enabled. We live through the limits and possibilities of this amazing biological system we call a body. If we take seriously the great human variety in all aspects of this system, there is no normal. Whether by birth or by accident, we are all different. In dealing with students over the last 30 years I have become clearly aware of the ways in which we are neurologically wired differently. Persons learn differently, and some things certain persons find almost impossible to learn. I teach Greek as part of my responsibilities, and I have learned that some persons cannot learn a language, no matter how hard they try. I have also watched students struggle with depression or try to hold on in periods of mania. I have

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<sup>1</sup> . This was originally a lecture presented on September 19, 1994 to a Conference on Disability, sponsored by the Interfaith Disabilities Coalition and the Ecumenical Committee on Continuing Education, with the involvement of the National Organization on Disabilities, held at the Asbury U. Methodist Church, Allentown, Pa..

worked with multiples whose individual alters each have their own characteristics and, at times, disabilities. I have seen students compensate for Dyslexia and Attention Deficit Hypertensive Disorder. It is not only true that we are variously enabled, but that we are born into this world with not-yet-abled potentials we must develop, for we are not born with all systems developed and able to fulfill their intent. Thus life is a constant seeking to develop and use that for which we have potential, exploring what is possible and stretching our limits.

*It takes courage to live.* We must not forget that. It also takes an understanding of life which enables us to deal with what we experience. I will try to deal with that in this paper.

We must not minimize the developmental struggle we all face and the struggle to compensate for and live with limits which we discover or which happen to us. One of my favorite stories of courage is that of Zazetsky, who cooperated in writing the story of his disability with the Russian neurologist Alecksandr Luria.<sup>2</sup> Zazetsky was wounded in 1942 by a bullet from a German rifle that penetrated the left side of his head, costing him much of his field of vision, awareness of his right side, and the section of his left brain that combined his sensory impressions into a coherent whole and enabled his use of language. Thus whatever he saw appeared in a constant state of flux and he was left to struggle for language the rest of his life. Their book, *The Man With A Shattered World*, is an amazing collaboration between Luria and Zazetsky, the injured man whose struggle to think and write produced 3,000 pages of diary, sometimes at the pace of a few lines a day, portions of which are used in the book. In the foreword Zazetsky says:

Perhaps someone with expert knowledge of the human brain will understand my illness, discover what a brain injury does to a man's mind, memory, and body, appreciate my effort, and help me avoid some of the problems I have in life..... Why doesn't my memory function, my sight return? Why does my head continually ache and buzz? It's depressing, having to start all over and make sense out of a world you've lost because of injury and illness, to get these bits and pieces to add up to a coherent whole.

The title I decided on for my writing was "I'll Fight On!" .... I haven't given up hope.<sup>3</sup>

How marvelous: "I'll fight on!" Really for most of us the struggle to live never really ceases, whatever it is that we struggle with. There are probably days when we long to stop the struggle and to sink back, exhausted, into the lap of existence even if it means forever. But then again we gain a glimpse of something, and the struggle renews its meaning, and we move into life to push forward into the horizons which both resist and beckon.

What I hope this paper will do is to provide perspectives on life by which the struggle to be and live may be encouraged and life itself understood. I know that some of what I say may be debatable and for some of my views, such as the reality of the human soul, I cannot offer conclusive evidence. Yet what I share is the way life best makes sense to me from my experience, from the experience of others with whom I have had contact, and from the research I have done.

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<sup>2</sup> . Luria is author of *The Man with a Shattered World* (Harvard U. Press, 1972, reprint in 1987 with Foreword by Oliver Sacks), and *The Mind of a Mnemomist* (Harvard U. Press, 1968, reprint with new Foreword by Jerome Bruner 1987). The founder of neuropsychology, Luria has written neurological studies which have become classics: *Human Brain and Psychological Processes*, *Basic Problems of Neurolinguistics*, *The Neuropsychology of Memory*, and *Higher Cortical Functions in Man*.

<sup>3</sup> . Luria, *The Man With A Shattered World*, pp. xxi-xxii.

Self affirmation is important for a person living with disability, or just facing the struggles that are part of being human. In my spiritual formation course I advocate persons daily receiving from God a sense of personal value and dignity, offering themselves to God as they are and receiving themselves back as those who are loved as they are and whose dignity God daily establishes. But it is also necessary to become responsible for the affirmation of ourselves and the way we will or must live life. Though God would do this for us, the others around us for various reasons often cannot provide this for us. And even though God would do this for us, we must assume responsibility for the internalization of our own dignity and value. If we will not do this, how can we ask the others around us to do it. Thus I offer a credo to be recited whenever life seems too much and we are in danger of losing ourselves.

### **A Credo**

*Each person is a being unique.  
No one is exactly the same as another.  
Some of our differences are by nature.  
Some are by accident.  
We experience anxiety in the presence of those too different  
and in the presence of our differences.  
We wonder how to relate and how to be related to.  
And yet spirit speaks to spirit,  
and we find in the heart, soul, and embodiment of each  
that which makes us distinctively human.  
How strange and wonderful our differences,  
and sometimes, how painful.  
But is there really any normative way to be,  
and in our being,  
is there any way without pain -- and joy?  
Whatever we can become,  
we must with all our soul and courage affirm who we are.  
Sometimes we have no others who can do this for us.  
Whatever our limits, we must affirm  
who we are and our transcendence.  
We live within this world and within the body.  
But also we transcend it.  
Like soaring eagles we engage in flights  
through our inner and spiritual reality  
and for moments soar free,  
to return again to live with new strength and vitality  
within our limits and possibilities..  
We deeply rejoice  
when we discover those who will affirm us as we are,  
who will uphold us when we cannot uphold ourselves,  
who will receive the gifts we may struggle to offer,  
who will share our joy at being alive  
and live with us our anger and tears.  
We are!  
We are children of God and God's world  
and children of this earth!*

*We have bodies,  
but also souls!  
Woe if we forget either,  
for we diminish our possibilities  
and misunderstand our existence.  
With all my courage  
and God's blessing  
I will be, and I will to be.*

## **Creation**

To push into the horizons and limits of life we need an adequate view of life and of ourselves. For me this means:

1. an adequate view of *creation* which enables us to understand the dynamics of our world and our *human role in it*;
2. an adequate view of the *spiritual dimensions of being human*,
3. an adequate view of *God* which makes God's presence and role in life meaningful,
4. an adequate view of *life* as a whole which places our struggle and life into a larger context of meaning.

## **The Complex Nature of Our World**

Science is gradually forging for us views of the world which are partially based upon observation and analysis and partially hypothesis. There is no way that we can, even with our rapidly expanding knowledge of the world, avoid needing to fill in the gaps with theory and leaps of the imagination. I would like to suggest that views of the world have always been, to some extent, based on observation even before the development of science. Persons experienced and analyzed life within the limits of their powers of observation and technology, and then they reflected on what they experienced, forming hypotheses about its nature.

The biblical materials represent reflection on world and life over slightly more than a thousand years, if one includes the oral transmission of some OT materials. This reflection also included the Jewish (and sometimes Christianized) literature of the Intertestamental Period, the best known of which are the Old Testament Apocrypha and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Over this long period of history one finds many creation stories, some of which are reinterpretations of earlier ones. One also finds statements about what they thought constituted the primary forces of the world in which they lived. Much of the Old Testament is dominated by the Deuteronomic view of the world, which was that God was in control of all of the forces of world and history and that whatever happened was what God wanted. Thus if things were good for you, God was rewarding you for the good you had done. If things went badly, God must be punishing you. However, it did seem that some righteous people suffered, but that was still explained in such a way as to keep God in control. Job suffered because God allowed Satan (in Job, God's district attorney, not yet the head of evil) to test him, and when the testing was over God gave back to Job all that he deserved.

In the Intertestamental Period (from 150 BCE to about 50 CE) *Judaism changed its understanding of the world because of its experience of history and life*. History was tragic. In spite of the promises of God, Palestine was constantly conquered by foreign armies. Moreover, life remained a struggle and what happened often seemed unjust. In their attempt to explain the world they experienced, Judaism forged a

new understanding which described life as consisting of *many forces*.<sup>4</sup> God had his world, but God no longer pulled all the strings in this world. There was also *evil*, something which Jews and Christians of the first century CE took very seriously and I really think we should take more seriously when we observe the almost intentional forces behind the tragedies of modern history. There are *neutral powers*, besides whatever influences human beings brought to bear upon things. Neutral powers were those powers which are neither inherently good or bad, but may impact one's life quite destructively at times. The powers of nature and political systems were seen as neutral powers, needed for life, but inherently neither good or bad. God can hold us safely in God's love within this complex world, but God cannot save us from the nature of the world and its complexity. (A good passage in which to explore this is Romans 8:18-39. It is also helpful to read II Cor. 11:22-12:10 where Paul speaks of all his difficulties in life along with his experiences of God.) As the bumper stickers say, "shit happens."

As we seek to sort out why things happen to us and the resources we have to cope with them, it is important to note that the forces of nature from which we benefit may also harm us. It is important to recognize that the political systems which maintain order and provide benefits, may also be unresponsive, repressive, and destructive. Our industrial, economic and technological developments may also do harm. We may pollute our environment. Mergers of corporations produce unemployment. As Walter Wink has pointed out in his work on the neutral powers described in the New Testament, at times they take up a life of their own and control the humans that are part of their system.<sup>5</sup> And then there are the human contributions to the complex scene of history. We may do great good or we may do great harm, individually and through the structures of the world of which we are a part. *Applying this to the issue of disabilities, we realize that we live within a world/creation which can both support life and be destructive to life. To live life we must be willing to live with the risks of life, but to also realize the resources God has provided with which to cope with life.*

God's involvement in our lives then is in the context of all of the other forces which affect life. When one's life is open to God, God does what God can for us, seeks to protect us from destructive forces, lovingly cares for our essential selves (our souls), and seeks to resource us as we develop and struggle with life's limits and challenges. As Paul indicates in Rom. 8:28, "*in all circumstances (even the difficulties mentioned in Rom. 8) God works for good together with those who love him.*"

Another aspect of our complex world is *the deterioration of our biological organism and ultimately death*. This process may be regarded as enemy, or as part of a process which ultimately is creative of life. The forms of aging and death are hardly pleasant, but neither was the way we were born into this world. For speaking about death I prefer to use a term used by Simone Weil, a contemporary French mystic, "decreation." She believed that as well as a creative process in life there was a decreative process. The decreative process brings us to death, but it is much more than death. It is the process by which aspects of life are gradually stripped away until, if we are wise, we recognize that we are left with the spiritual dimensions of life which are essential and eternal. It is my belief that the decreative process prepares us for birth into the next stage of our existence, into the spiritual world which is God's world. *One may*

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<sup>4</sup> . Along with interpreting the world as consisting of many forces, much of Judaism still felt that somehow humans were also responsible for the predicament of the world, and so Pharisees and Essenes argued for a stricter following of the Law and a greater maintenance of purity and separation from those impure (Gentiles). I believe that this is analogous to a person who has experienced tragedy and suffering, and so seeks to ward off future tragedy by excessively trying to do what their tradition tells them needs to be done to satisfy the powers in life.

<sup>5</sup> . Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

*describe the decreative process as one of gradually becoming disabled, but it is a process of disablement which, if we are wise, will also enable us and help us to discover who and what we really are, for what we are is that which still remains.* I discuss this in greater detail in the “Model of Life” which is appended to this paper. This decreative process also calls us to trust ourselves to a process which is in God’s hands, the goal of which we do not know until we move through the door/womb of death. To deal with disability is to deal with what it means to be human.

#### World-View Option I: Standard World, Standard Humans, Differences Largely Our Fault

The above has presented the world as a complex of forces and processes in order to explain the human experience. Now I would like to deal with two differing options, both in my understanding biblical, from which to understand the human being and his/her role in creation.

*We have often had a view of how humans came into being and how we as individuals come into being which minimizes human differences and wrongly makes us think that it is simple to determine what is normal and what is not. If you can accept what I wish to say, there will be very little that we can call abnormal or normal, as in “That’s the normal way for a person to be.”*

Our view of the way we are created determines what we think is normal for us and others. When we think of how we are created we usually think of humans coming into being at some time in history, an origin that continues to determine us all. We may also think of the creative process of individual birth and development.

There are many creation stories in the Bible. In Genesis 1-3 there are two stories, each with a different portrayal of creation, which in the creation of Genesis were joined together. Though they have been together in Genesis for a long time, in the history of Judaism and Christianity some have preferred the implications of one and some, the other. Within Christianity, until recently, creation of humankind was often described in terms of Gen. 2:4-3:24. In this story man was created and then woman from man, two ideal humans if they would only be obedient to God. They were the way humans should be. The world now has all of its problems because these original humans disobeyed God and were excluded from their ideal world (the garden). This is what is called “the fall.” Not only did humans fall, but a fall of the angels occurred.<sup>6</sup> Though there is only one way to be, the world is now disabled, affected by sin. Thus abnormality and illness are really the human fault and responsibility, either the responsibility of our forebears (or Adam and Eve) or ourselves. God desires to restore and remake the world like it was originally, following the original pattern, and that includes us.

Somehow it is comforting to think that there is only one way to be, at least for those who can regard themselves “normal”. For those who cannot so regard themselves, at least this explains why we are not like we should be. Many Christians have been uncomfortable with evolution not only because it might deny God’s role in creation, but also because it might make more uncertain the normal ways that we are supposed to be.

Sometimes we have thought about the creation of individuals in the birth process in somewhat the same way. Persons are a result of the fertilization of female ova with male sperm, with the resultant

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<sup>6</sup> . This was described in Gen. 6 (angels looked on women and could not resist). Jewish interpretation of Genesis 6 noted that the story of Noah and the flood is in the same chapter. Thus it was also the angels who made the world so bad God had to destroy much of it and start it over.

combination of genetic materials, gestation, then birth, and then development somewhat influenced by family and environment. Genetic inheritance and environment will produce some differences, but we are still expected to come out pretty much the same: normally.

*The presupposition of all of this is that somehow God made two original normal and prototypical humans, male and female, and that when we conceive and birth a child we will have created a normal and typical child who will grow up to be and do all of the normal things that we somehow think are normal.* When we ask what it is for a female or male to be normal, we begin to realize how much this is affected by traditional and stereotypical cultural norms. A woman should be thin, have sufficiently ample breasts, and be feminine (not too aggressive) in behavior and dress in normal ways (now rather hard to determine). A man should be strong, athletic, and be in control. Both males and females should have a certain normal or above IQ, the higher the better though we are suspicious of one abnormally high, should have all of the normal body parts and be able to use them, and should facially appear normal (facial abnormality is the most discomforting). Persons should be of a normal height, men not too short and women not too tall. Both males and females should be able to get a job and attain a certain measure of accomplishment to be valued. If they have children, they should be normal parents who produce normal children. Behavior should be normal and when we find human idiosyncrasies we can go to the DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) to describe how others deviate from normalcy and give such deviations the proper name which describes how they are abnormal or ill.

All of us experience anxiety in the face of difference. I do think that this is partially due to the struggle or our neurological system to come to terms with that for which it has no established patterns, for we can almost watch our mind trying to come to terms with what is unfamiliar for it does not know where to fit the unfamiliar. But we also are anxious about difference because we know first hand the price that is to be paid by those who are different. Most of us have in some way paid this price as children through the ridicule of others. And we sense how the ego of one is dignified at the expense of the diminishment of others.

World-View Option II: Creation a Process Still Unfinished, Giving Birth to Variety, With Humans at the Center of the Process

But there is another biblical perspective on creation which will help us transcend rigid and restricted views of what a human should be.

Genesis 1:1-2:3 is different. It says that the *human being was created in the image of God*. I would like to suggest that what one finds here is an ancient metaphor often used in mysticism, that the *life and reality of God are to be seen reflected and present in the human mirror* and this is a primary way that God is present in the world. To be in the image of God had the *possibility of variety* for God said, "let us make man in our image, after our likeness," seemingly referring to the heavenly council though Christians have also interpreted this to mean the Trinity.

Thus the human is the place where God is present in the world. Paul, for example, picks up on this metaphor in I Cor. 13:12 where he speaks of seeing God in human love "as in a mirror darkly". This means that the divine life takes place within the human in the world. If one were to view this ecologically, *the role of the human in the ecosystem is to be the place in which the life and mind of God can be present for the good of the system.* [I would like to understand ecosystem as having both to do with the natural world and the social-political-economic world: that is, the whole system of the human environment.] This

is very much like *Luke's understanding of the Kingdom of God* which he says is not the re-establishment of the kingdom of David as a geographical and political reality, but *the presence of God in the Spirit in persons who then transform the society and world with which they have contact*. This is the way Jesus defines his own mission in Luke 4:18-19. One could make a very good case from the biblical materials that the presence of both God and evil within the world occurs in the way humans embody and reflect both.

This makes sense when one considers the role of human consciousness in the ecosystem. Consciousness is the place where creation comes to awareness and there is the possibility of responsibility, decision, action, and love. This is not to deny the significance of other conscious life, such as animals, but merely to recognize that the human has a special role in terms of neurological complexity, spirituality, and ability to act upon the environment. *Thus the human plays a crucial role for the whole system of creation and does not just exist just for him or herself*. Rather *the human represents the mind of creation* (note how I Cor. 2:11-16 speaks of the Spirit in terms of the mind of God and the mind of Christ -- and therefore one might say the mind of the creator and creation).

One must be careful about just interpreting consciousness and its possibilities merely in terms of ability to be rational or conceptualize, for among the variously enabled not all are capable of concept and system formation. I would like to suggest that *the essence of this consciousness is the spirit, soul, or heart of the person (not just intellectual mind) which allows the Spirit of God to be present to the world*. Thus through us all, through our spiritual reality, through our soul, God may be present to the world. In Jesus' day there was in Judaism and early Christianity a movement towards emphasis on the spiritual dimensions of human life as having to do with ultimate human destiny, even to the extent of seeing the resurrection body as spiritual (not fleshly) so that after death one moved beyond the biological medium of human existence (see I Cor. 15).

*This presence of God to the world through the human is to be understood dynamically, as providing creation with the dynamics for its ongoing process*. Thus the human struggle with development and the human struggle within and against limits, and the human impact on creation itself, is the struggle to bring into being, the ongoing process of God's creative action.

Note how different this is from the creation story in Gen. 2-3. In Genesis 1 the human is given a crucial role in the world system. In Gen. 3 the human is driven out of the system (the garden) and no longer fulfills this role and the system; the world and its possibilities are spoiled. In the perspective of Gen. 1 the background is laid for a view of creation as an ongoing process. One finds various biblical passages which treat this.

There is in the Old Testament the expectation that God will create new human possibilities. In Jeremiah 31:31 ff God says that he will make a new covenant and put the Law within, on the heart. In Intertestamental Judaism Wisdom, God's agent in the creation of the world, is seen as active in all of history, still creating. The heavenly Son of Man in Jewish Apocalyptic is seen as coming to recreate the world, producing a new heavens and a new earth.

The New Testament brings a very special perspective to the view of creation. If one takes seriously the New Testament creation stories of John 1:1-18, Colossians 1:15-20, Hebrews 1-2, and Romans 8:18-30 (really a story of the recreation of creation), then one must ask for the particular perspective of the New Testament stories on the nature of world and human existence.

The New Testament affirms that *Christ enters into the creative process* to move creation on towards what was intended for it. *Creation, and humanity, then cannot be understood without this second significant act of creation.*

This second act of creation may be understood in several ways, both of which are in the New Testament. *The traditional way* (related to Option I above) that Christians have viewed this is to see creation as originally made good and complete but now fallen and failed. Christ is the beginning of a restoration which will ultimately return the world to its intended and original state.

*An alternative way* to see this is based upon Genesis 1 and its interpretation in John 1:1-18. In Genesis 1 humanity is created in the image of God, to represent God within the world, to be an image and reflection of God. The world was created good, but was just in its beginnings. Humans were given special responsibility to continue the development of the world just made:

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.<sup>7</sup>

Following this God saw that everything was good, that the creative task, at least in its initial stage, was finished, and then God rested from the work of creation. The rest of God is the end of the creation narrative in Genesis 1:1-2:2. The command given to humanity and God's rest seem to imply that humanity is now to enter into the formative process of creating. As the image of God, humans are to re-present God within the world. There is no talk of a Fall, but of the unfinished nature of creation.

In John 1:1-18, which is an interpretation of Genesis 1, the Word that God spoke to create is seen as the person of Wisdom which in Judaism was God's agent in creation. The Word/Wisdom who was in the beginning, through whom the world was created, who was involved creatively in history bringing life and light, making persons aware they are children of God, ultimately becomes flesh and life becomes available in him. The difficulty with the world is not fall, but darkness which can not comprehend the light, but also can never overcome it.<sup>8</sup> It is as if the primal chaos out of which the world was created, the darkness into which light shined, still exists. Thus the Word becomes flesh in an unfinished world to bring it to its intention, fulfilling and implementing the role of the human made in the image of God. From this perspective, the problem with the world is that it is unfinished, not yet mature, the creative process not yet finished.

The realization of this new creation in Christ will only be complete in the end of time. Romans 8:18ff approaches creation in terms of its eschatological destiny. The present is a time of suffering, for creation was subjected to futility in hope, with a view to its ultimate freedom from bondage and restoration of its glory. The whole creation, nature and persons, groan in travail longing for the birth of a world for which we wait with patience and hope.

To summarize, *creation may be seen as consisting of an initial start, some problems encountered (it is unfinished, has not yet attained God's intent and its possibilities), humans are placed in the world in the image of God, there are additional acts of creation as part of creation's process, the second great act of*

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<sup>7</sup>. Genesis 1:28.

<sup>8</sup>. The verb used in John 1:5 has both these meanings.

*creation occurs in Christ where Christ enters life also as the image of God, and creation continues to move towards the future where God's intent will be realized in some way. Creation is not yet finished. This is of course what all of us experience in our individual existence.*

There are several consequences of this:

1) *There is no clear way that humans are to be since they, and the world, are still in the process of a creation not yet finished.* Thus one cannot define the essence of being human as having certain capabilities or biological characteristics, being a certain way. The creation of humans is also not just a biological and genetic process, but it is God's process through beings who are foundationally spiritual.

2) What seems to be clear in the Genesis 1 creation story and the further process of God's ongoing creative efforts is that *humans are being evolved or developed towards a realization of their full role within the system of creation, as the place where the life of God is reflected and the mind of God is made manifest, and they are being drawn by God in spiritual directions. The process itself, the human role in creation, and the spiritual dimensions of human existence continually give us hints as to what a human is and should be.*

*Central to the human role in creation is the presence of the person who bears in his/her life the spiritual reality and the engagement in the struggle to live which is the struggle of creation coming into being and contributes to the direction in which creation is moving..* **Thus to be here for God, to engage in the process of life for God, means everything.** Whatever our ability or disability, in this we have a dignified place, and we are called towards the spiritual dimensions of life where we will not be identified by what we call our disabilities..

#### The Human Contribution to Creation

The human role in this can be *over intellectualized*, so that only the great intellects would have some role in the human contribution to the ecosystem. The significance of *power can be over emphasized*, so that only those with political, institutional, and social power to change the world's systems would be regarded as being significant.

If one would seek to find the significance of the human in terms of what we all can bring to life, whatever our abilities and powers, there are three contributions brought by the existence of every human:

1) For Jesus, *just being there for God and being present to the world mattered.* Jesus' promise of the Kingdom of God to the poor, hungry, weeping, and hated in the Beatitudes (Lk. 6:20-26) and distancing himself from the political and revolutionary movements of his time would seem to indicate that there is a *power of the powerless* for somehow God is there where they are even if they are without power. Thus it is not only engagement in the process of life for God which makes a difference, but it is being there, living, and *by our living being a sign*, reflecting and pointing to the life of God. One way to see this, and some have viewed it this way, is that God's reality is a different reality than the structuring of the world according to power and influence. This it is in the powerless that the nature of God's power is most apparent.

2) *Being there is being there with others.* All are part of the community of human life where all contribute to being there and each contributes to the impact of the totality of living beings upon the ecosystem. If this is taken seriously, then some attention needs to be given to the impact upon the ecosystem of the divided and hostile character of much of the human community.

3) In the New Testament there is *a primary emphasis on love as a sign of the presence of God*, though not all Christians seem to have understood this, even in the New Testament. In I Cor. 13

Paul presents love as the “still more excellent way.” God is a God who reconciles (II Cor. 5:18), and calls upon humans for reconciliation. God is a Father who loves his children whatever (Luke 15). One might then say that *the essence of the human presence within the world is to relate, love, touch upon the lives of those around one, and to relate lovingly to and be present lovingly to the ecosystem.* The advantage of seeing the essence of the human contribution as love is that, by and large, this then becomes possible for all and the contribution is not just viewed in terms of intellectual competence or power.

### **Human Nature and the Soul**

The author of Psalm 8, reflecting upon the creation story of Genesis 1, stands in awe of the role of humans within creation: “you have made them (humans) a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.”

In much of the Old Testament the human was defined in terms of his/her role in history and world, membership in a community or people, but as an individual the person survived only in family and progeny. It is only in the later OT literature (Ps. 49, 139, Dan. 12:2)) and the Jewish literature of the Intertestamental period that the possibility of survival of death is considered. In the Apocalypse of II Esdras, God describes to Esdras the journey of the soul after death (7:76ff). Much of the New Testament presupposes, as did Judaism of its time, that persons have souls and survive death, most of them to await the resurrection in the underground “holding tank” of Sheol/Hades, though some especially righteous were understood to go directly to heaven.

Though the church long spoke of the souls of persons, with the development of the modern scientific perspective many stopped doing this, and by stopping *lost awareness of one of the most significant human resources.* If I am only a biological system, even with a mind and psychological aspects biologically based, I am only this biological mechanism. When something goes wrong with my biological system, then I am essentially changed, for this biological machine is all that I am. When I die, I am no more.

If I also have a soul, then whatever happens to this body, I in some ways transcend it. The body is me, but that is not all that there is to me. The soul is somehow bound to the body and affected by it and its processes, but is also in some way free from it. The near-death experience is very helpful here.<sup>9</sup> Those who have had a near death experience often describe a separation from the body while retaining memory and powers of observation, sometimes a journey into a spiritual realm, loss of body sensations and pain, return to the body and awareness again of the body’s condition and pain. If one were to use this experience to draw conclusions, the soul while related to the body shares the experiences of the body, but when separated retains identity and powers of observation. When it is reunited with the body it is again conditioned by the body. Carl Jung spoke of the relationship of soul and body as non-causal but synchronous, meaning that body and soul were not linked causally, but what happened in the one at the same time also occurred in the other. Thus soul and body influence each other, but the soul is not dependent on the body for its existence.

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<sup>9</sup>. See, for example, Kenneth Ring, *Heading Towards Omega: In Search of the Meaning of the Near-Death Experience*, (NY: William Morrow and Co., 1984) Ian Wilson, *The After Death Experience: The Physics of the Non-Physical*, (NY: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1987). Carl Jung describes a near-death experience in his autobiography. C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, recorded and edited by Aniela Jaffé, transl. by Richard and Clara Winston, (NY: Vintage Books, Random House, 1965), p. 289.

The soul then, whenever it comes into the biological organism, is our link with the spiritual world of God. It is not only something that may survive death, but is our resource in life. *When we face great difficulty, our soul may be our greatest resource and it also may help us to retain our identity when biological limitations bring our identity into question.* Although all of us experience how, when we do not feel well, our sense of identity is changed, it is important to note that this is because of the interplay (synchronicity) of body and soul, each affecting the other. In this interplay of the spiritual and the physical, the soul may affect the body as well as the body the soul.

*Our soul is also the dimension at which we most share the experience of human existence.* Though we are all different biologically and have individual characteristics spiritually, that we all have a soul binds us together on a spiritual level and on the level in which we participate in the human role in the ecosystem, being the presence and the mind of God within the system. It is interesting to speculate as to what happens when the souls within the ecosystem of our world are bound together in love and allow themselves to be used by God. Does then something happen to the world that would not happen otherwise? And *what does the world lose because so few souls are able to bond with one another?*

*The soul and spiritual dimensions of human existence, as well as the flexibility of our biological organism, mean that disease and disability can be engaged in such a way that their course and consequences are shaped by this engagement.*

Oliver Sacks' *Awakenings* is the story of the use of L-Dopa with those affected by the Encephalitis epidemic of the 1916-27 (an epidemic which affected nearly five million people world-wide). A number of patients with long-lasting effects of the illness were still alive and residents in the Mt. Carmel Hospital in New York when he came as a neurologist in 1966. The use of L-Dopa was begun in 1969 at Mt. Carmel. Many of the patients for the first time in almost 50 years emerged from lethargy or various neurological limitations into active awareness, but also into the aberrations produced by L-Dopa. This book contains the case stories of these persons, with his reflections on their experiences. It was also made into a film. In his section on "Perspectives" he gives his reflections, including, among others:

- That disease is not only a perversion of our physical condition, but a perversion of our being and our person, and that we interact with our disease: Our diseases "can only be understood with reference to us, as expressions of our nature, our living, our being-here (da-sein) in the world."<sup>10</sup>
- That one's condition is an interplay of the dynamics of health and illness.

Health and disease are alive and dynamic, with powers and propensities and "wills" of their own. Their modes of being are inherently antithetical: they confront one another in perpetual hostility - our 'Internal Militia', in Sir Thomas Browne's words. Yet the outcome of their struggle cannot be predetermined or prejudged, any more than the outcome of a chess game or tournament. The rules are fixed but the strategy is not, and one can learn to outplan one's antagonist, sickness. In default of health, we manage, by *care*, and control, and cunning, and skill and luck..<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> . Oliver Sacks, *Awakenings*, (NY: E.P. Dutton, 1983), p. 205

<sup>11</sup> . Oliver Sacks, *Awakenings*, p. 210.. Sacks also is author of many others books dealing with disability: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, (NY: Summit Books, Simon and Schuster, 1985, *Migraine*, Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1985 , *A Leg To Stand On* , NY: Harper and Row, 1984), and *Seeing Voices: A Journey Into the World of the Deaf*, (Berkeley, U. of California, 1989).

## God

God is often described in religious literature as a great king in splendor. This God is also the God of perfection and of purity, whose holiness separates God from world and humanity. This God is all that we are not, described in moving terms in Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4-5. In the face of this God we become aware of all our disabilities and imperfections. I like to call this God *the imperial God*, imaged after the analogy of great kings. This is the God whom some feel nothing can resist, a God of great power and wisdom, able to do and fix anything. *But then why is the world the way it is and why are we the way we are?* Sometimes it is said that God in his wisdom decides not to save us from our predicaments, for some good reason that we don't know. I would have difficulty believing in that sort of God, for he may be less moral than I. Or sometimes it is said that the problem is that we do not have enough faith for God to do something for us or that something is not right in our lives and this keeps God from healing us. *I also have difficulty with a God who would make our suffering our fault.*

But could there be other explanations? Two things in the life of Jesus presented the early church with great problems. One was *Jesus' seeming renunciation of power* in such passages as Mark 10 where James and John request positions of power when Jesus comes into his kingdom. Jesus said:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (42-45)

The second was *the cross*. Jesus' disciples struggled over whether the cross was just a historical accident or whether it said anything about the permanent way that God is God. They often said that if the cross said something about the way God is God, it spoke of how Jesus was a sacrifice for our sins. When Jesus was finished with that he then ascended into heaven to a position of power, escaping his suffering. *But John 20 says that Jesus carried his wounds to heaven with him.* Luke, in his earlier work in Acts portrays God as a God of power, but in his latest revision of the Gospel he says that the primary sign of God's presence is the birth of a child in a manger.<sup>12</sup> Both the cross and Jesus' sayings about God's inversion of power and propensity for service seem to echo strains from II Isaiah in the Old Testament. *If somehow God enters life, assumes the way of the servant, and is crucified by the forces or history, what does that say about God's way of being God?* Paul in I Cor. 1:18-25 says that the message about God which includes the cross runs contrary to all human expectation. One type of expectation was "wisdom," while the other was power.

If taken seriously, this means that *God renounces the role of the imperial God to become the human one, the one who shares life with us, the one who washes his disciples feet, the crucified and wounded one, the one who is disabled.* Thus the poor, the hungry, and those who weep, those who are hated and reviled are blessed, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

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<sup>12</sup> . Luke originally wrote this Gospel and Acts in about 62 CE, which is where Acts ends. There are indications that he later revised it twice. In Acts, which was not much revised) Luke was much impressed with the power of God's Spirit. He thought God could overcome all. However, by the writing of the present version of Luke he changed his mind, for he had encountered many harsh realities in his life. Paul and Peter were now both dead at the hands of the Roman government and the city of Jerusalem lay destroyed by Roman armies.

*The God who accepts the limits and disabilities of human existence, is also the God who is near.* It is the Judaeo-Christian understanding of God that God enters into relationship with humanity. For many during the time of Jesus God had become distant. How could God be present in life with the world the way it was. Thus they spoke of his powerful presence in history in the past. They believed that he would be powerfully present at some time in the future and set everything right. But now, God was mostly present in heaven and perhaps in the Temple and when the Bible was read. God could not generally be present in life now because the harsh realities of life showed little sign of God's power. Jesus' teaching about God as intimate father who was there for his children beyond their deserts (Parable of the Prodigal in Luke 15) and the experience of the Spirit among Jesus disciples all affirmed a nearness which had to be reinterpreted in terms of love rather than power.

It has long been pointed out that Jesus had a unique sense of God as his Father, which he taught to his disciples. The word of his native Aramaic tongue that he used for this was "Abba", which was a familiar form of address, presuming intimacy of relationship. In Luke 11 Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray by telling them to address God as "Father" and then in a parable reminds them their heavenly Father does more than an earthly father who knows how to give good things to his children. Their heavenly Father gives the Spirit, which in the language of Jesus' contemporaries meant that God gave God's self into relationship; he did not just give things. Paul in Gal. 3-4 speaks of the gift of the Spirit (God's self) as the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham to bless all nations, and this finds its fulfillment in the Spirit of God's Son (the resurrected Jesus) helping us to give utterance to this by saying, "Abba, Father," as he did with his disciples during his historical ministry (Gal. 4:6). *This made the essence of religion relational and gracious. As relational it meant that having religion did not depend upon intellectual understanding. As gracious it means that it did not depend upon one's ability to deserve it or produce it. As in the case of most relationships, relationship is ultimately a gift.*

For the Moravian theologian Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf in the 18th century, founder of Bethlehem, this meant that all could have religion, for it was essentially a matter of the heart, not the head. In his *Socrates* Zinzendorf comments:

- 1) Religion can be grasped without conclusions drawn by reason, otherwise no one could have a religion except the one who has an enlightened mind, and they would be the best students of God who had the greatest rational capacity; however, that is not believable and wars against our experience.
- 2) Religion must be something which is obtained without any concepts, through mere experience; otherwise no one deaf, or still less someone born blind, or even less an insane person, or a child, could have the religion which is necessary for salvation. The first could not hear the truth, the second lacks the sensual perception which would awake his mind and incite his thoughts, and the third type lacks the ability to understand concepts, relate and test them.
- 3) Truth in concepts is less important than truth in experience, errors in teaching are not as bad as in essence, an ignorant person is not as badly off as one impervious (to God).
- 4) The conceptual meanings vary with age, education and other conditions. The experienced meanings are not so much subject to these variations; they remain firmly established in the face of time and circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>. Nicholas von Zinzendorf, *Der teutsche Sokrates*, "Gedancken vor gelehrte und doch gutwillige Schüler der Wahrheit" (The German Socrates, "Thoughts for Educated and yet Well-intentioned Students of the Truth" -- this was a periodical published for a while when he was in court service in Dresden) , (Samuel B. Walter, 1732), pp. 35f. I am writing a theology of

*The religion of the heart has tremendous potential for understanding and nourishing the spiritual life of those whose ability to use concepts and patterns of thought is limited.* In fact, mysticism has often taught us that whatever we do in the naming of religious reality, concepts and descriptions are not the ultimate concern of our religious life. Ultimately we must unname and return to the foundational spiritual reality we sought to describe.

One of the great difficulties of all persons who suffer from physical or mental disability is what one might call *existential estrangement*. What this means is estrangement from everything, even human existence, even God. One cannot help but ask, “Why me?” And in pain and anger, with a feeling that one belongs nowhere and with no one, with a growing panic about one’s differences, withdraw into inner isolation. And if disability involves perceptual distortion, the isolation is worse. God will seek to reach such persons in God’s own ways, but we are the ways of God if we take seriously the human role in creation. *When we touch another and so establish human contact, we also do this as a sign and presence of the God who would draw near.* When with those who cannot communicate we allow our souls to touch *in the silence of being with*, or enter into another spiritually, with intent, then both we and God are near and the person is rooted in God’s creative and loving process. *When communication is not possible, perhaps some direct form of communication is possible, from mind to mind or heart to heart.* We have all had this happen at some time. Communication is not only words.

### **Community**

As humans we were never made for isolated existence, though life often drives persons in that direction. *We were created for community.* For persons living with disability and for the families of such persons community becomes very important. The biblical materials view persons as interdependent. The gifts of each enable others. Religious communities should be the ideal place where a measure of support should be possible and manageable commitments might be made to those whose commitments are overwhelming. Janet Rife in her book *Injured Mind, Shattered Dreams*, speaks of “Circles of Support,” persons who “agree to meet on a regular basis to help the person with a disability accomplish certain personal visions or goals.”<sup>14</sup>

*Community is also important because each person has to have a place to bring his/her gifts.* The gifts of some living with disabilities are considerable and enrich the life of the religious community, the family, and society in general. However, each person needs to be able to give something of self, whatever its utilitarian value, because *the dignity and value of the person is tied into being able to give one’s gifts.* If there is no one who will receive one’s gifts, then there is no one who will receive one’s self.

### **Some Not-So-Simple Suggestions for Those Who Work with the Severely Disabled**

Many who live with disabilities and are able to maintain themselves and live “normally,” needing no special consideration. In fact, this article presupposes that most of us have some sort of disability along with our abilities and that normal is very hard to define. Yet there are those whose disability makes them

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Zinzendorf called “Theology of the Heart,” which I have shared with Henri Nouwen because of the significance of his theology for understanding the spirituality of the handicapped.

<sup>14</sup> . Janet Miller Rife, *Injured Mind, Shattered Dreams*, (Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books, 1994), p. 166. This is an extremely helpful book which describes the long journey of Brian and his family after severe head injury in a car accident. Written by his mother, with portions contributed by Brian, it introduces us to their feelings, experiences, faith, and struggles with recovery itself and community agencies. The book concludes with a valuable list of publications and organizational resources.

dependent on the care of others in varying degrees, temporarily or long term. Those who care for persons with more disabling disabilities might consider the following:

1. *It is important that the one who is to work with persons with disabilities not only care, but bring to their care a philosophy of life which enables them to understand and to help others understand. A philosophy of life is not merely a way of helping persons and their families to understand their experience, for it becomes embodied in the person of the care-giver and thus is experienced.*

2. *It is important for those who work with persons living with disabilities to bring to the persons for whom they care the lived reality of their own spirituality, not just as a faith to be expressed but a presence to be felt. If spirituality is not a conscious part of their life, they can bring to the person living with disabilities the dynamic and energy of their own living, which is a type of spirituality. Both items 1 and 2 assume that those struggling with their own reality can often find significant help in the reality which another brings to them.*

3. *It is important that the person who would help another be exploring, accepting, and challenging the dimensions of what it means to be human. It is also important that the person deal with feelings and life experience related to their own limits which could affect their relationship with the disabled person. It is important that the person who would help another be able to accept and live with pain and suffering without being overwhelmed.*

4. *The person who would help another must be willing to enter another's world and yet preserve one's own integrity so that one brings the resources of one's own world to the other. To enter the world of someone else and its limits, one must both have accepted the limits and humanness of oneself (one cannot accept in another what cannot be accepted in oneself) and be willing to enter aspects of the human predicament which may be foreign to one. By entering the human condition of another one begins to experience what the other experiences. By preserving one's own integrity, one's own gifts are brought and the integration and perspectives of one's own life are preserved. Nothing is accomplished when one is swallowed up by the needs of another or dis-integrated in the disorder of their world. One must also protect the integrity of the other, seeking the invitation to enter their space, sensitive to their anxiety about the approach of the other, preserving the identity and autonomy which enable their life. And yet ultimately, one must enter, if only for a time. Carl Jung made a significant comment about the relationship of doctor to patient which is applicable. "...attentive entering into the personality of the patient" is important. "The doctor is effective only when he himself is affected. 'Only the wounded physician heals.' But when the doctor wears his personality like a coat of armor, he has no effect."<sup>15</sup>*

### **Appendix: A Comprehensive Model of Life**

We need a model for understanding life which clarifies the nature and purpose of human existence, takes us from birth to death, and makes meaningful the process and brief span of our existence within the world. This model needs to take the difficult realities of life seriously while identifying for us the spiritual dimensions of life and the role of God in life. We can live most anything if we can begin to understand it. *There is a world where God is and a world where we are, which worlds in mysterious ways intersect. God's world is the spiritual world that transcends space and time. God is present in our world, but ours is not a world under God's control. It is a world that functions by its own powers and dynamics. Sometimes the natural world supports life and meets our needs. At other times it hurts and destroys, but without*

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<sup>15</sup> C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, op. cit., pp. 128,134.

malice and intent. There are also the realities of *Intentional Evil* (which opposes God and would use life for its own destructive purposes) and the destructiveness and helpfulness of *persons* to each other. Yet God is present with us in the world, doing what God can for us, even having experienced its destructive powers in the crucifixion of Jesus. According to the Gospel of John (chapter 20), the resurrected Jesus Christ continues to bear his wounded humanity. This means that the Incarnation, God's becoming flesh and historical in Jesus, was not momentary, limited to the life-time of Jesus, but was taken up into God and continues in the inner life of God. Moreover, the continuing presence of God within the world after the time of Jesus is affirmed in what the New Testament calls "the Spirit of God." The presence of God in Jesus and in the Spirit symbolize the *personal presence* of God within our world. God is present not as some mysterious substance, but as *Person*, and this personal presence causes us to recognize the existence of an *interpersonal relationship with God* by calling God, "Father" (Gal. 4:6).

*We come into this world by a birth process.* Our soul comes from God's world and our physical body is produced within this world. We are given momentary security in the womb of our mothers, and then by a process that involves pain we are brought into the world and gradually *move developmentally towards individual existence, self awareness, and maturity.* This process of biological, psychological, and spiritual development forms and shapes us into a person who is able to assume some responsibility in life. It even affects the life of our soul and engages it in a process of growth. However, though we are conditioned by life in this world, we are never completely limited by it. *We have a soul which precedes birth, survives death, and is a significant resource in the midst of life's conditions.*

We might call what has been described, "*the process of our creation as a person.*" However, there is also a *process of decreation* which will ultimately strip us of our physical body and bring us to another birth moment where, not without pain, leaving the womb of the body in which we have been formed, we now *move back to God's world.* The process of life that forms us enables us to bring back to God a person of some wisdom and gifts whom God can use. However, God receives us back not according to our growth and accomplishments, but as persons of ultimate value whatever our accomplishments. Not all will have the physical ability and fortunate circumstances to realize the soul's possibility of formation. God loves all God's children.

There are *several tasks that are part of our life in this world*, besides the usual developmental tasks:

One is *the moral aspect* of the person's formation, engaging us in becoming a person with values and commitments, though not without mistakes and failures. Those who seriously reject the moral nature of this process and reject its ultimate goal may ultimately be rejected by God, though not without sorrow and pain in God. God does not easily let go those whom God sends into the world.

Another is *the spiritual aspect* of formation. It involves the process of discovering our own spirituality and the reality of God and God's world, concerns which are easily neglected as one engages in the tasks of life in this world. It is as if, when we are born and move into the experiences of this life, we begin forgetting from whence we came and to Whom we go.

Discovering our spirituality and God is part of our developmental process.

Then there is *the interpersonal aspect* of formation. In the New Testament this is characterized as *love.* Our ability to love affects the possibility of interpersonal relationship, for love has to do with relating to others beyond our own needs, the ability to care for others and to be patient and persistent in relationship.

With our learning to care for others we *need to learn how to care for creation*, a proper love of the world. To develop love for others and creation is necessary if we are to function in meaningful

ways in God's world. An interesting aspect of living in this world is that we have learned about creation from within creation, not as something apart from us.

All of this is part of *being for God in the world*. There was a time before modern science when it was felt that the forces of nature and history were the primary ways of God's being in the world. Within the last three centuries we have been developing an understanding of both nature and history which sees them as operating largely by their own dynamics. Thus we have come to realize that the primary way of God's being present is where the world comes to consciousness and can be influenced: in humanity. We need to learn to be willing and open to God, allowing our lives to be formed by God. Therefore we become those who can be used in God's purposes and who can represent God. Thus the Kingdom of God is within and among us (Lk. 17:21).

*That which decreates us* is partially the life process. Our physical system will only last so long, gradually aging in a process that cannot be avoided. Nature, history, and disease may decreate before the process inherent in the body runs its course. *Death is built into life as is birth. Death is really birth to a new stage of life.* Death is not always fortunate, but that to which it gives birth is. Unfortunately, our modern technological advances have enabled us to prolong death, thus prolonging its pain and suffering. *The system of life is a good system* and much within it sustains life and makes life possible. It is to be enjoyed and celebrated. It has an inherent beauty. There is much built into it which tends towards our well-being, including various systems within our bodies besides the systems within nature. Thus *one must never approach life negatively and dualistically*. And yet its dynamics ultimately return one to whence one came by the process of decreation. *Thus one must always live life as a bridge from our origin to our destiny.* Both our origin and destiny are God and God's world.<sup>16</sup> We cannot forget from Whom we came and to Whom we are going. *The problems of life become most difficult to understand when we make it the final answer to the meaning of our existence.* It is not only the good of life, but the *pain of life* which contributes to the person we are becoming. The pain of life comes from our ability to feel and be aware of life. To lose the ability to be aware would mean to lose the ability to be formed and shaped by the experience of life.

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<sup>16</sup>. That we proceed from God and return to God one finds in Platonism and Neoplatonism and thus in Christian mysticism. There was speculation about the soul coming from God and returning to God in Judaism at the time of the New Testament. In the New Testament this is the model for Christology in Phil 2:5ff and the Gospel of John, and seems to be implied as a model for the children of light in John. The New Testament belief in the resurrection of the body, does not at all deny that the soul survives death, something implied in a number of New Testament passages. In Thomas Aquinas' great *Summa Theologiae* procession and return is its organizing structure, which applies both to God and the soul.