

Healing by Paradox in the Christian Tradition

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The aim of this paper is to re-look at Christianity, not as a religion, which it is of course, but to restate it as a working dynamic. In a sense, it is to make the familiar strange, for a purpose. There are many psychological maps: Freud, Jung, Klein, to name but a few; they are all useful maps in their own way, exploring the human condition and explaining how healing might take place. No one map handles all conditions. Yet, each dynamic is useful in its own way. This is not to reduce Christianity to something less than it is, but to study the dynamic of how it heals, which might be replicated by those in the healing professions.

Paradoxically, it can also be said that science (particularly medical science) is a religion. Like the priesthood, in becoming a Doctor (meaning one who knows the doctrine, or teacher) by taking an oath (Hippocratic), medical confidentiality is equivalent to the seal of the confessional. Latin and Greek names bewilder outsiders and both can excommunicate (Doctors excommunicate by placing people under Section of the Mental Health Act). Christianity believes in life after death; in science, people suffering with diseases have their belief statement, which is: 'I **believe** that medical science will be able someday to cure what is killing me'. As people with every disease say this, the underlying belief is that science should be able therefore to 'cure death' and we will therefore all have immortality in this life! Both have scriptures. For the Christians, it is the Bible (you do not have to believe in anything not in the Bible), with Medicine, the medical scripture is statistics (you don't have to believe anything not proven by statistics). While scripture is ambiguous, so are statistics as evidenced by the following story:

Once upon a time a scientist trained a flea to jump when he shouted jump. The flea duly learned this test. The scientist then pulled one of the legs off and yelled 'jump' again. The flea jumped a bit sideways, but still managed to elevate itself. The scientist then continued until he had pulled all the legs off the flea. He yelled, but the flea did nothing. Amazed he repeated this 50 times before writing an article for a learned journal. He claimed to have discovered something astounding, which was: 'if you pull all the legs off a trained flea, it goes DEAF!'

How does Christianity work as a healing dynamic?

Stated simply, the dynamic of Christianity seems to me to work by taking the contradictions of life engendered by tragedy, trauma, and even taboo and transforming them into paradox where opposites are simultaneously true. It

does this by elevating them into the spiritual dimension through metaphor, symbol, and story, **where the worst in life becomes in fact the 'best/worst' thing which could happen.** 'Best/worst' is to be taken as one word.

This happens because using metaphor, symbol, and story can be entry points into different dimensions of reality. We are already familiar with different dimensions of reality, even though we may not think very much about them. Let me give you an example.

Suppose you were working as an air traffic controller. You receive a message from a pilot, who says, 'my aircraft is going at 1,250 miles per hour, it is going end over end, and I would like permission to let myself out through the door to check and see if everything is alright.'

Understandably you might be concerned. You say, 'please state your position, I do not have you on my radar.' 'The reply comes: 'I'm in outer space.'

You might breathe a sigh of relief. 'Thank goodness for that; I thought you were in atmospheric flight. You've come through to the New York area air traffic control; you want the frequency of the Houston Space Centre.' Of course, it doesn't mean that you can do whatever you like in outer space, but you can go out for a spacewalk while your craft is travelling at excessive speeds. Space flight works on a different dynamic than atmospheric flight, and it is possible to go from one dimension to the other.

The spiritual dimension works on a different level of reality than other levels of reality, and it has its own dynamics. Essentially, it works by paradox, where opposites are seen as simultaneously true; and this can lead to healing. Metaphorically, it might be seen as the process which happens after a transplant, where the new organ which is designed to be healing, is first rejected by the body until it is finally seen as ultimately friendly.

As an example, I want you to imagine talking to someone who is in a wheelchair, who has just won a para-Olympic gold medal. He or she is wrapped in their country's flag, and their national anthem has just been played. He or she is crying tears of joy. You might say, 'You are paralysed from the waist down because of a car crash, and will never walk again. That same car crash, which has put you in a wheel chair, has also resulted in you being honoured internationally on this podium today. **Was that car crash quite possibly the 'best/worst' thing which ever happened to you?**

Likewise the loss of the Titanic was a great sea tragedy. However, because it happened, it galvanized the countries of the world, which find it hard to agree together on anything, to put sea safety regulations in place, which have literally saved thousands of lives. Was the Titanic's sinking one of the 'best/worst' things which ever happened at sea?

At a time of tragedy or illness, how then do we access the best/worst mode when our inclination is to see it only as the 'worst' thing that has ever happened?

Before giving some practical examples, I would like to quote from Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun's book *Trauma and Transformation, Growing in the Aftermath of Suffering* (London, Sage, 1995)

They say that each person has a schema with which they look at life. Schemas are models of reality and are used to explain and predict events in life as continuous. Growth occurs when these schemas are changed by a traumatic event. In other words, the schema can no longer accommodate the experience which is characterised by suffering.

As one experiences a trauma, one's schema has to be reconstructed. These new schemas are made up of parts, which may exist in fragmentary form in one's past life. The fragments come together and become part of a new and dominant schema. When the trauma occupies a central place in the person's life story, the growth occurs more readily (page 85).

For me, the penny dropped about the dynamics of the way it happens in the most unlikely of places. It literally was an 'eureka' moment. Professor Brett Kahr spoke at the Oxford Psychotherapy Society on *the Masturbatory Fantasy and the Coital Fantasy: A study of Nineteen Thousand British Sexual Fantasies* (28 September 2006). Having received a research grant from one of the major TV networks he had interviewed several thousand people by written interviews and some 300 people by a one-off 4 hour interview as to what their sexual fantasies were during intercourse or masturbation. The one-off interview was because you probably wouldn't tell anyone about your real sexual fantasies unless you had got to know them very well, and secondly that you would hope never to meet them again. He discovered something extraordinary - that the sexual fantasy was essentially a re-framing of **the worst abuse** that had happened into a **desirable fantasy**. This was a way in which people who had suffered horrible abuse were actually healing themselves without prompting from therapists. They elevated aspects of their abuse to a metaphorical level of desire which mitigated the effect of the abuse. It made sense in that several women had told me about their own sexual abuse and how, years later, they could only truly enjoy sexual intercourse and have orgasm with their husbands, whom they loved very much, by putting both wrists together above their heads, which was the way they were held down during their abuse. Symbolically, they had to bring elements of their abuse in a transformed way into their later lives.

Anyway, I literally shouted out 'eureka' during the lecture. Some of my friends and colleagues turned around and stared at me with puzzled expression. The inevitable question was 'what was the 'eureka 'about?'

My reply was that the lecture was demonstrating exactly the process by which Christianity works.

The point is not that Christianity is a fantasy, but that if we elevate our brokenness or tragedy into the dimension of the metaphoric by symbol or story, it leads to healing. Jung said that 'people are healed symbolically.' Symbol in Greek means to bring unlike things together. The opposite of symbol is diabol (from which we get our word 'diabolical' or of the devil). Diabolic means to separate-- to distract or pull things apart into good and bad.

Paradox unites opposites into a whole and therefore does it through symbol or metaphor. The diabolical splits things into good and bad, which separates out the very grit around which a pearl might be formed; no grit, no pearl.

Take the **wooden cross** as a Roman gallows and an excruciating and painful way to die; Christianity has re-cast the gallows into a **gold cross**, sometimes adored with jewels and says this form of abuse is now an expression of our triumph and hope - which it is. The worst thing that any tyrant can do is to threaten us and those we love with death. If the resurrection showed that death is not the end, then it literally trumps death's Ace of Spades. To the tyrant death is a threat; to a Christian it is also the entrance into a fuller and more fulfilling eternal existence in a higher dimension - both are true. This second view alters seeing death primarily as a threat.

Viktor Frankl schematically draws out these dimensions in a helpful way in his work on Logotherapy. He literally describes them as dimensions. Hold up a glass; showing a light over it casts a shadow. If we hold up three different 3-D objects with the same circumference and shine a light over them, the reduced two dimensional shadow shows all three objects as the same. If you elevate something by a dimension, more things become possible. In fact you can reverse what happens in the lower dimension by elevating it to a higher one.

The lowest dimension is the physical; the next highest is the psychological, the highest Frankl calls the no-ogenic or what I would call the spiritual.

Take Romeo and Juliet; a story we all know.

On the physical level, the story of Romeo and Juliet can be explained simply as a matter of hormones. On the psychological level, it is a matter of teen-age identity formation by rebelling against parents' wishes; on the spiritual level, it is the story of how two innocent deaths reconcile two warring families. Which

level is true? They all are. Access to the level is by language. We use scientific language for the physical; humanistic or the language of human development for the psychological and symbol, story and myth to enter the spiritual level. If you use the wrong form of language, you get stuck. For example:

Imagine sitting across the table from the person you love the most. The table is laid out for a beautiful meal, soft music and candles. You take your beloved's hand; look deep into his or her eyes and say passionately: 'Although you are composed of 95% water, plus a few trace elements, nevertheless the arrangement of your molecules is not in an altogether unpleasing fashion. Furthermore I notice that my hormonal response increases when in proximity to you, and I was wondering if we might get together and mix genes for subsequent progeny. Perhaps you could let me know your response in 30 days or a month, whichever is soonest.'

Heart-warming? Perhaps not; if I continue to use scientific language, my cause is lost. If, however, I say I love you as the mountains love the sea; we are one soul in two bodies, it doesn't make scientific sense but I am on the right level. Scientific language is useful for what it does, but it has its limitations for pitching woo or exploring meaning.

Frankl tells the story of how he shifted the level in a patient he had seen. She was a woman who was in a hospital bed. When he visited her she said that she was useless. He asked why, and she said that she had been a cleaning lady and now was too old to work and therefore was useless.

He asked her to tell him her story. (Telling stories as well as the use of symbol and metaphor automatically make the spiritual dimension more accessible).

She said that she cleaned floors and her husband was a builder. Together they had raised four children, one a doctor, one a teacher, the other two went into business. During the war they were all killed. Frankl sympathised with her and then asked her just to focus on one of her sons, the doctor. 'How many people would he have seen in one single afternoon?' he asked.

'Perhaps ten' she replied.

'And what would have happened if on that particular afternoon, he had correctly diagnosed and saved two people's lives; where would the result of that be today?'

'They would have survived to have more children, to do good to others in life, perhaps, and help others,' she replied.

Frankl continued: 'So that is just taking the results of one afternoon in one of your children's lives; multiply that by all of your children and your own life.

That good was in part made possible because you cleaned floors. Are you useless now because you can no longer continue to clean floors?’

The woman replied that she was not useless, that she had changed many people’s lives throughout the world, people who didn’t even know of her existence. Before she died, she recognised that she was a valuable person who had had an influence on many peoples’ lives in the world.

We could say that a different truth exists on several levels. We can say that Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of penicillin is dead. We could also say that through his discovery of penicillin, he shows up to work in hundreds of thousands of hospitals this very day all across the world. That is not a bad practical service record for a man who has been dead for many years, is it? The fact that he is now dead, and yet is still healing people, are two parts of a paradoxical truth, depending on which level it is viewed.

Now we have a central problem here. Most of us look at things as either/or: this is good; but that is bad. This is called dualism, or splitting in psychological terms. This splitting can cause us to be blind to the good, which is hidden in tragedy and trauma. How does Jesus handle this? He usually puts opposites side by side, so that you see the two together.

It works on the same principle by which aircraft land safely at airports. Pilots land safely through VASI lights (or a slightly different version called PAPI lights) to bring about a safe landing. VASI lights are a good working model of how Christianity works with paradox. How does it work?

How does a pilot land his or her plane safely just at the end of the runway, rather than to over-fly or to land short of the runway? First of all, the pilot lands at 3 degrees. On each side of the end of the runway there are lights with shutters calibrated for the plane landing at that angle. If the pilot sees two WHITE lights, one on top of the other, the plane is coming in too high and will either overshoot the runway or will land too far down to stop safely at the end. If the pilot sees two RED lights one on top of the other, the plane will land short of the runway, at Heathrow perhaps on the M25, which is not considered a good thing. If both WHITE over RED are seen together, the landing will be safe by seeing the two extremes simultaneously.

Jesus generally gives both the white and the red together as an expression of paradox: I believe they are meant to be seen simultaneously, rather than split into good and bad.

My peace I give you, not as the world gives you (white light)

If you follow me; be prepared to be crucified daily (red light). (Peace and suffering are bedfellows).

Do you wish to save your life? (white light)

Then be prepared to lose it (red light)

Families are the best of things: (white light)

'I come not to bring peace, but a sword, a father against his son, a mother against her daughter, a daughter in law against her mother in law; a person's enemies will be those of his own family.' (red light)

This is true; some research has shown that most murderers are not in prison for multiple murders, but for killing one person, generally someone in their immediate family. Families are the worst and the best of places simultaneously.

The Beatitudes are the best example where opposites are put together to form a paradox.

Happy are you who mourn, for you will find comfort (literally finding new strength)

For example, she doesn't know she can fix a car or do the income tax until husband dies, and he doesn't know that he can do the Christmas cards and become a gourmet chef until his wife dies.

Blessed (happy) are you when you are persecuted, they did the same to the prophets (*In short, you must be saying something right for people to take offence. If no one ever disagrees with you in politics, you obviously aren't saying anything right!*)

Robin Skynner, the founder of the Institute of Family Therapy, always used to say that people get divorced for exactly the same reason they get married. If she marries him because he is stable, she will want to divorce the boring old fart because he always has to have his breakfast at 8.17 with the same menu. If he marries her because she is intelligent, he will want to divorce her because she is 'too smart by half' and shows him up at gatherings. Skynner asks couples to see that what they most appreciate about the other will be the very thing they will most RESENT through familiarity. Stability means seeing both together from the very start like VASI lights, therefore being able eventually to **tolerate in your partners** that which you have formerly **admired and appreciated**. I use this in the preparation of couples for marriage in order to 'vaccinate' them against divorce, by anticipating the reasons they are quite likely to hate on another.

More dramatically perhaps is that most everything in Christianity which is beautiful and uplifting is, in fact, the reversal of a taboo.

According to Jung, Christianity works by a process called enantiodromia meaning literally 'over and against the natural order of things.' He says 'this conversion into the opposite... makes possible the re-union of the warring halves of the personality and thereby brings the civil war to an end' (Jung 1977 p.342).

Like trauma, a taboo, which is elevated to a spiritual level by metaphor, is reversed, and so allows us to practice it symbolically.

Christianity does exactly what Jesus says it does on the tin: He said: 'The stone, which the builders have rejected, has become the cornerstone.'(Matthew 21:42 - quoting Psalm 118:22).

Consuming blood for Jews is taboo, therefore there are kosher laws.

The central act of worship in Christianity is eating Christ's body and drinking his blood: literally the taboo of cannibalism transformed by elevating it to a spiritual level.

All over the United States there are billboards quoting John 3:16: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to die for us.' This is encouraging people to become Christian. (Please don't try this at home. We do not admire the parents of Baby P, who allowed their son to die).

The Church is split today over homosexuality, with some quoting texts about its taboo.

If you define a civil partnership as making the person you love of the same gender a chosen member of your family and your next of kin, then that was literally Jesus' last act before he died. Jesus last act on the cross was to enter into a one-to-one civil partnership with John, the man he loved. He does this by saying to his mother and to John, 'Mother here is your son; son here is your Mother.' This makes the man he loves literally a member of the Royal House of David. This act fulfilled the debt of honour, which his ancestor David had with Jonathan, crown prince of Israel. They loved each other with a 'love, which exceeded that of women.' Out of this love, Prince Jonathan made David a chosen member of the Royal House of Israel through a sacred covenant and vow before God, that David, rather than himself would become the next king instead of himself. The Gospel says with some surprise that Mary went to live with John from that very hour, which she should not have done, since Jesus' legal next of kin, who should have been responsible for giving Mary a home, would be his second oldest brother, James, who led the Church with Peter after Jesus' crucifixion.(John 19:25-27)

Monks and nuns make a family of choice by entering into a legal polygamous civil partnership by choosing a group of same gender people to be their new families. They wear wedding rings, get income tax perks, and their new family

become their legal next of kin. The Church considers this polygamous civil partnership higher than marriage because only a Bishop, rather than a priest, can hear and bless these same gender marriage vows.

This gives the Church an uncomfortable choice of either choosing to see civil partnership as an overlooked sacrament, different to marriage, because Jesus himself instituted it on the cross, thereby fulfilling the David and Jonathan covenant of Hebrew scriptures, or passing a vote of censure against Jesus for doing something immoral by entering into a same gender covenant as literally his last act before he died. This has split the Church because some see it as taboo, while others see in it the sacramental aspect. This fits into the overall pattern of Christianity, which is the transformation of taboo by elevating it to a spiritual level.

So how might this all work and apply to therapeutic practice in a practical way? I would like to describe a particular turning point which we can look for when assisting this transformation towards healing in those we are seeking to help. I call it **the point of paradox**. The point of paradox is that opportunity, which presents itself where change and healing can take place by elevating the illness, conflict, or distress into another dimension. I use it in training theological students and clergy

I ask them to role-play a situation of conflict or talking with people where trauma has occurred. By using metaphor or symbol at just the right point, it can have a transformative or healing consequence of bringing unity by elevating what has happened to a higher level.

This point of paradox has several characteristics:

1. It happens most often when something is very highly charged in some way.
2. A certain amount of surprise or the unexpected is desirable.
3. It employs using something very symbolic or metaphorical, which has the effect of marrying together opposites, so that best/worst is seen operating simultaneously in the spiritual dimension.
4. The result is often a change of attitude or transformation in those who witness or perform it.
5. Perhaps, most importantly is to find the point of paradox within ourselves. If many of us are seeking God somewhere it may mean that he is probably hidden behind something which is troubling us, rather than within the feel-good factor. This does seem to be the divine M.O. – or method of operation.

Examples of this are when St. Francis kissed a leper, in the Christian tradition. Also when Princess Diana as a member of the Royal Family, picked up and hugged a child with AIDS. Both of these are examples of points of paradox, which are immortal because they are universally collectively remembered as changing or reversing attitudes.

Another example might be in talking to the two sides of the Irish conflict and saying 'You would not be fighting each other unless you both loved Ireland so much. What is it exactly that each of you loves about Ireland and wish to preserve?'

Several years ago there was a massive mud slide, which occurred in Central America. It came unexpectedly and many people in the town were swept away or buried. The Church was not damaged, so everyone packed into the Church on the following Sunday to hear what the priest would say. The priest mounted the pulpit. He waited. Then he reached down and picked up a large nail and a hammer. With loud blows he drove the large nail into the pulpit. Then without a word, he left the pulpit and went to kneel in front of the crucified Jesus. The congregation did not need to have the explanation made in words that they too had been crucified as a village, but they too would rise again. A sermon entirely made by the use of a symbol without words.

With the theological students in Cambridge, we often design a role play together about a conflict. At its most intense point, we stop the action and I ask the participants to turn around in their chairs to the people on the outside. They then explore together possible **points of paradox**, which each of them might try experimentally; then they turn around and continue the role play. On one occasion the loudest and most vocal antagonist said 'I would like to apologise to the group for not listening. I am aware that I have been shouting and pushing forward my point. I am going to be quiet now and listen so I can fully understand what the rest of you are feeling and saying. Immediately there was a sea change in the atmosphere; some of the participants even became tearful.

It can also happen in what the psychotherapist Murray Cox called a **third level disclosure**. A third level disclosure, according to Murray Cox, is a statement which is so profound and true that it takes the entire group with it to a new deeper level of understanding. It is so profound that it needs no interpretation by a therapist. An example of a third level disclosure might be 'When my mother died, it felt as if someone had reached up and turned out the sun.' It brings the whole group, to a shared level of deep understanding and does not require a therapist to 'explain what it all means.' It makes the

need for interpretation redundant because all can see the universal in the profoundly human through the very powerful metaphor.

Murray Cox also found that bringing the Royal Shakespeare Company to Broadmoor Hospital did the same. While people tended not to speak much in the therapy groups, seeing the plays made them talk excitedly to the actors with such statements as: 'You have just told MY story!' Seeing themselves writ large in the play revealed the universal inherent in their own lives.

Peter Reason, from the University of Bath, also uses the same principle, which I have found when deepening the depth of communication within a group or organisation. He calls it Inquiry Through Storytelling. It consists in someone in the group telling a happening. The group is instructed not to interpret or to analyse, but to respond either with telling another story, drawing a picture or a symbol or composing a poem. It has the effect of deepening the meaning of whatever story has been told.

I will give an example of a personal story I told, so you can see what happened to a quite ordinary story by revealing what transcendent qualities lay within the story without our realising it:

When I was around 13 my father asked my older brother and I if we would like to go deep water fishing in the Great Lakes in Michigan. We excitedly said we would, and he said it would involve getting up at 4 am (without complaining!) and doing some really challenging things. We said we were ready to be grown up in just that way.

The day came and we got up and got on a fishing boat equipped with deep sea fishing poles. We went out far from the shore into the rough waves. We fished late into the morning with the sun beating down on us without success. We were disappointed because we had heard that there were huge sturgeon and pike in the lake. Suddenly my line bent double. Everyone gathered round, and my brother looked especially jealous, which was no bad thing, as he excelled in most things. Both my father and the skipper agreed that I probably had hooked one of the big ones - quite possibly a sturgeon.

'It's too big for me to hold' I shouted and asked my father to take the fishing pole.

My father replied that it was either mine to bring in or to lose, but that he would hold me as I held the pole. After much struggle the skipper noticed that something was not quite right. Eventually it transpired that I had in fact, wrapped the fishing line around the propeller. In a stony, embarrassed silence we returned back to base. Myself, I felt not too bad as I really deep down didn't want to kill a fish and be responsible for its death.

Anyway, that was my story.

After a silence, this was the story which another member of the group responded to mine, re-telling it as a saga:

Once upon a time, a boy was taken out by the elders of his tribe to perform a task, which would mean that he was truly a man. They went out on a lake in which huge monsters dwelt in the deep and anyone who caught them not only would be a great warrior but well honoured by the tribe. All day they fished for this elusive prize. Then there was a bite and a mighty wrestling with the catch. Then it transpired that the boy had in fact caught the boat.

Going back from the journey everyone was disappointed except the boy. You see, the boy had caught something very important, he had discovered what he was to do for the rest of his life. That was to be a guide for people to cast into the deep to catch the biggest prize of all - which was to manage to catch their own true Self.

A final story of healing of a family by paradox: a man approached his Rabbi saying 'Rabbi, you must do something. The members of my family are fighting each other all the time; it is one argument after another; no one can do anything right. Please, you must help.' Thoughtfully, the Rabbi stroked his beard. Then he said: 'Get a goat.' The man asked him if he really said to get a goat, and when the Rabbi said that he did, he left.

Two weeks later, the man was back: 'Rabbi, it is horrible in our household right now. The goat has eaten my wife's prize flowers, the washing on the clothesline and the stuffing out of the sofa. It's a mess. What should we do?' Thoughtfully the Rabbi scratched his beard again and then said: 'Get rid of the goat.' The man left to do just that.

Not three days past before the man was back. 'Rabbi, your a genius! It is so peaceful now in our family without the goat, we have never known such harmony. Thank you, thank you!'

This very element of finding the point of paradox, is for me the very essence of the way Christianity, as well as other religions, works as a healing dynamic, where the worst thing which has happened can be seen transformed into the 'best/worst'. In it can be discovered an entry point into the eternal and transcendent. It also means that profoundly meaningful events can be discovered within the very ordinary happenings of life.

Essentially it uses story, myth, symbol and metaphor as the means of transformation into a broader and more encompassing way of viewing the eternal at work within the ordinary struggle of existence or suffering with which we as humans struggle daily. It also holds tremendous possibility, not only for personal healing but also for discovering points of paradox in resolving global conflict.

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