

Forgiving Constitutes the Person

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Introduction

This paper is a meandering comment on a part of James E. Loder's *The Logic of the Spirit*, which caught my fancy.¹ I have thought much about human development, having lived through a lot of it myself, seen and messed about with it in other people, but I have no competence in the science of human development. I found a meeting point with Loder when I saw some resonance between his description of the creative work that has to be done by the infant as a growing person and ideas I have cultivated for decades about the fundamental way in which forgiving is constitutive in the being of persons and societies, if they are to have a plausible claim to be humanly good.²

Composing a World

“The child must construct, compose and construe the world in a predominantly trustworthy or untrustworthy way” (88). The child cannot avoid doing this work, for the child is within a “chaos of forces unleashed

1. Loder, *Logic* (pagination noted in the text).

2. Willmer, “Forgiveness as Permission,” 79–98; “With My Missing Hands,” 141–48; “Forgiveness and Politics,” 1–10; “Forgiveness,” 245–47.

at birth.” The child cannot read a blueprint, but he must find a way to live as a person. It is not as though the child is offered a variety of paths, all equally safe and rewarding. If that were so, it would not matter which way the child went forward. The child does not have leisure of that kind. Already the child is threatened by the negative. This is not a merely alien external negation, but takes form and comes close through the experienced unreliability and fragility of the child’s own achievement in personhood.

Loder described this achievement in terms of the Face, which is in the first place a gift from the personal and person-evoking environment, which conveys the message, “You’re wonderful.” The mother’s contribution to bringing a person out of the chaos is not merely quickly accepted by the child (who soon smiles readily) but is internalized by the child in her own work of self-creation (or is it evolution?). That reminds us of an important point: What the environment gives is not a determination; it is rather material to be worked on and with and made the child’s own. So, “the face phenomenon is not strictly something that comes only from the environment; it is also a construct created by the child and developed out of the child’s inherent resources and deep-seated longing” (91). It is also important that, in this process, the environment does not function simply as a quarry of inert material for the growing person to control and shape in sovereign freedom. That would reduce the environment to passivity as well as building *hubris* like Nebuchadnezzar’s into the person’s being.³ Rather, the environment, which is mediated and personalized by persons like the mother, gives itself to the project of the little person. While the environment taken as a whole wears many different faces, some of them dark and hostile, the welcoming, encouraging, and affirming Face which calls persons into being is sufficiently shown by the environment for the infant to see it. That is so for many, even though what the infant sees is less a clear continuous path, and more like fingerholds in a rock face. Only if the environment (in this broad unspecific sense) gives itself so that a friendly Face can be described in it will it be plausible to construe the world as trustworthy.

3. Daniel 4: 30: Nebuchadnezzar said, “Is this not great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power . . .”

Meeting Negation

The Face goes away: that is an early and inescapable discovery of the infant. As a result, the world the child was finding as a habitation that makes life in hope possible is shattered and dissolved. The Wolf huffs and puffs and blows down what the Piglet built using all he could find—straw. The Negation, this “No!,” is, says Loder, “traumatic.” Thus, the anxiety of non-being becomes integral to the child (and remains with us). He has no power to counter it, unless he learns and borrows from what he has been given: the No. So he defends himself against this world that does not keep its promise by raiding its armory, seizing its No, so that he learns to turn the No upon the negating world. To protect himself, he closes himself against what is other.⁴ “The much-lauded achievement in the first year and a half of life is ultimately ironic.” The child takes the negative into and onto herself and is shaped and burdened by it for life.

The child encounters Negation, in the form of frustration and disappointment. This encounter is not only traumatic at the time, but carries great danger for the future. To understand this danger, there is no need to put a deterministic interpretation on the early development of the child. It is enough that negation influences the formation of character or spirit and builds a habitual style of limited living.

The Way of Hope in Life

Because of the Negation, there is real struggle, uncertainty about outcome and, even, defeat. But there is also a hope which persists through life because divine Spirit does not give up. So the human spirit at each stage of life may find sufficient grace to build on its capacity and creativity (95). The person develops through negotiating a path where Negation cannot be avoided. The pilgrim way, as Bunyan narrated it, is illuminating here. Pilgrim enters the way to life, from the City of Destruction, through a narrow gate. He must get past the Lions, through the Valley of

4. How does this compare with the tragic stupidity of some war? “*It became necessary to destroy the town to save it*” is a famous disputed quote from the Vietnam War. We might also remember the fearful Cold War slogan, “Better dead than red,” which justified MAD (mutually assured destruction) defence policies. It is an ancient homely wisdom that tells us not to cut off our nose to spite our face. We should not act out of pique, or pursue revenge in a way that would damage oneself more than the object of one’s anger.

Humiliation, through the fight with Apollyon who “straddled quite over the whole breadth of the way, and said, ‘I am void of fear in this matter, prepare thy self to die, for I swear by my Infernal Den, that thou shalt go no further, here I will spill thy soul,’” through Vanity Fair and Doubting Castle, till he comes to the inescapable River of Death. Negation is given vivid and various dramatic expression in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Bunyan speaks to the soul, Loder speaks about the soul, and both give hope for living through Negation. Are we who have Loder now, better or worse off than the many generations who had only the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress*?⁵

It is possible to avoid being determined by the Negation, though it is not certain. Coming through positively seems to be given to people in different measures. There may be some to whom it is hardly given at all. Hope placed in mere humanity is fragile and erratic, tossed about by luck and accident. Sure or firm hope is the gift of divine Spirit engaging with the human. But the divine Spirit is not easily accessible, not on tap, it seems (does not the story of “Helen” suggest that?).⁶ Loder describes moving forward hopefully on this threatened way as:

a stage transition dynamic that begins in conflict and moves through scanning to the construction of an insight about one’s place in the world, or the construction of a new way of construing personal world order out of chaos, followed by the release of tension bound up within the original conflict. Now new energy is available to be redistributed, and thus development proves out and moves ahead, building on this newly constructed sense of order. This pattern, built into the earliest period of a child’s life, works to make the difference between life and death. Partly because of the sheer survival power of this pattern, but also *because of its uncanny capacity to construct the world, the child creates a future that is indebted to but not controlled by the past. Indeed, the past is totally reworked and reconstructed as new forms of relating self and environment emerge* [my italics]. For these and other

5. And do not let us say Loder includes children in his account of human development but Bunyan left them out—at least let us not say that till we have read the second part of *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

6. See Loder, *Logic*, chapter 3. Loder tells the story of Helen who came to him for counselling. Helen’s story serves as a case to illumine his thesis that “when ego-development is disturbed from the beginning . . . the transformational power of the human spirit must be seen as transcending the constraints of any stage-developments or any distortions that may occur therein” (55).

reasons, this pattern of transformation typifies the work of the human spirit in the creation of the human ego and all its adaptational functions . . . early development discloses the hidden potential of the lifetime that is to come (88–89).⁷

Integral Unnamed Constitutive Forgiving

Amid much that I only dimly understand, I see in this account of what goes on in the child's development something which I want to name as forgiving, a forgiving integral to the development. I only see this because of the way I have come, over many years, to understand forgiveness and its relation to being. Loder does not use the language of forgiveness here but I think he is describing something that has forgiveness family resemblance. It is that family resemblance I look for. Forgiveness occurs and works in human living, individual and social, in many different ways. If we presuppose a particular definition of forgiveness we may not see it. Sometimes people look for whatever they define as "real" or "true" forgiveness, and then they despise and miss imperfect or incipient or indirect forgiving. It could be that some forgivings we do not name are the most important in opening the way of life to us. It is possible to speak of forgiveness (and to speak and act forgivingly) without using the word or having a simple definition of it. The reality of forgiveness in practice can be described without using words such as forgive. The traces of forgiveness in living often go unnamed, and operate hiddenly. Life is humanized and divinized by sensitivity to and appreciation of the unlabelled and the uncelebrated. That is the gentleness and humility of being. That is why I do not work with an authoritative definition of forgiveness but see the word itself as representative of a big and fruitful family. One sees there is a family likeness among the members, within the repeated disconcerting surprise that all these different people are a family.

Loder's omission of the word, then, is not a ground for declining to see the real thing at work in what he is talking about. Given the dominant cultural understandings of forgiveness, it is not surprising that he did not use the word. We mostly do not have the antennae to see forgiving as essential to the construction and sustaining of being. There are many contexts in which we do not expect it, so we do not find it. If

7. Hutchinson, *Johanna*, 314. See Willmer, "Forgiveness as Permission," 79–98.

we think of forgiving at all, it is something that persons, who already have being, receive or do in response to what occurs within what already exists and can be taken as given. We thus follow the powerful pattern derived from Genesis, which dominates much of our religious and even secular culture: first creation, then Fall, then redemptive forgiveness. The goodness of creation implies that what *is* does not need forgiving, so we never think being and forgiving together. The beginning is simply good, and nature is innocent.

The alternative pattern set by God in Christ has a different order: first forgiveness, and so New Creation which defines the reality within which we are given to live. In this pattern, the Fall is not denied but is revealed as overcome and repaired in the primal creative act, by which the initial and sustained divine Yes takes the weight of the No into itself and disempowers it.⁸ The Fall so overcome by God at the beginning is not, however, a dead past but shows itself powerfully in human life every day. Within this pattern, to fall, to sin, is not to lose innocence and break from original goodness. It is rather to refuse to believe and respond to the divine forgiving in which and by which we are created, constituted in being.

There are several ways in which forgiveness appears in Christian and secular discourse. We tend to look for forgiveness when a law is broken or not fulfilled so that we fall under some kind of penalty. And we look for forgiveness in quarrels and conflicts between persons and groups. We think forgiving might be relevant in peace-making, but not in infant or adult person-making. Recently, the world has learnt that forgiving is practical and prudent in dealing with unpayable debt.⁹ It is now widely understood that forgiving is not an exclusively religious or interpersonal practice. Nor is it a Christian invention (despite Arendt's oft-quoted, complex and in some respects misleading remarks about Jesus).¹⁰ Nevertheless, specifically Christian contexts like church, and extensions of church such as Desmond Tutu's activity in the Truth and Reconciliation commission, are major carriers of the advocacy and

8. I am indebted to Karl Barth, who was forever making this point, and taking it with his own peculiar kind of seriousness as the key to evangelical faith. As he is noted to have said, "Sin scorches us when it comes under the light of forgiveness, not before."

9. See "Jubilee, 2000." Online: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jubilee_2000.

10. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 238ff.

practice of forgiveness.¹¹ Not that Christianity can be presented as a forgiving religion in contrast to all others. It is, however, a religion under continual critical pressure from the revelation by which it is called to be forgiving in response to God's Forgiving. So in the Church, at least, we think we know what we are looking for in forgiveness and when we find it we celebrate it repetitively till it is reduced to a cliché. Or we narrate special instances of it as wonders, which surpass what is expected in ordinary life with ordinary people. But looking for it in this way means we do too little to explore forgiveness as it happens through time (process) and especially we do not look to see how forgiving is integral to ordinary everyday being. Overuse and over-definition of words like forgiveness (or "God" or "ransom"¹²) wears them out and even makes them unbearable. So it is a refreshing practice to try to talk about the reality of forgiveness without using the common or obvious word.

Because it is possible to forgive, and to talk about forgiveness, without using the word, many apparently barren fields in the world hold the treasure and the seed of it. I like to read all sorts of stories and texts as a prospector who in looking at mere rocks sees gold waiting for him. Of course he may be gullible and dig where there is nothing to be found. But sometimes he strikes lucky for, in some rocks, there is gold.

Past and Future

One feature which belongs to the family of forgiveness is a distinctive range of ways of dealing with past and future. There is an example of this in the italicised words in the passage quoted above: "*Because of its uncanny capacity to construct the world, the child creates a future that is indebted to but not controlled by the past. Indeed, the past is totally reworked and reconstructed as new forms of relating self and environment emerge.*" The past is not thrown away as useless; that is, it is not condemned. The refusal of condemnation and outright discarding of what is inadequate for the future is an essential element in forgiving. The admittedly inadequate, failed past is utilized in making way for a better, richer future. Approached in a forgiving way, the past gives itself as a resource for the future, even in the moment when it is being surpassed. The past is saved, redeemed and valued (not disvalued) by being transformed. Forgiving

11. Tutu, *No Future*.

12. Lewis, *Voyage*, chapter 9.

does not see the past as simply what has failed and therefore will fail to make its way in the demanding present. Forgiving does not write off as hopeless those who are responsible for making the mess. Somehow, forgiving sees that the one who made and thus now suffers the past, who is now therefore confronted with achieved inadequacy, is rightly to be valued, loved, and so hoped for, because love hopes all things. Forgiving not only sees this person more clearly, but acts to open the door of hope even for the one who has failed. This way of relating past and the present, opening out to the future, helps us to see what forgiveness is, what it has to work at and what it may achieve. Forgiveness values and holds on faithfully to what is good from the past, even if that good is now no more than a discredited promise of potential. It rescues and builds on the little that it finds, taking it into a future where its value can be realized and recognized openly.

We picture persons as having continuity through change, including rise and fall, growth and decay. If growth is by incremental enlargement, where new goods are added to and built on an existing good, a seamless continuity of goodness is realized. And then forgiveness has no place or function. Often this is how we see traditions we favor or believe in, as for example, the apostolic succession of bishops. In reality, all continuities are broken by interruptions, contradictions and blocks, so that to perceive continuity is itself a determined act of repair. Continuity is achieved by going back to pick up the lost stitch, to find the lost sheep or the wandering son, or by building bridges over chasms. This work of knitting up the discontinuous belongs to the family of forgiveness. Growth by forgiveness is necessary because the negation means there are no steady unbroken progressions in life. We are always beginners—forever beginning again.¹³

Forgiveness is not so much a way of settling an account from the past, writing it off and getting free from it, as opening a new and different future of surprising rescue. In the Gospel of God in Christ, forgiving comes in the present anticipatory actualization of the New Future of God. Desmond Tutu entitled his book, *No Future without Forgiveness*. But the converse is equally true and important: there is no forgiveness without the future. It is the promise and venture of a specific future which gives the power and the vision to escape what the past seems to

13. Barth repeatedly made this point, see his *Christian Life*, 78–82. Willmer, “Karl Barth and Thurneysen.”

be prescribing, namely, revenge, grudge, caution, building negation on negation. “Your Kingdom *come*” is the ground that gives validity to the prayer, “Forgive us our sin . . .”

Seeing Forgiveness through Active Forgiving

Forgiveness is central, though not exclusive, to Christian faith. Christian experience and presentation of forgiveness have been shaped, predominantly, by the human need to be forgiven and by the joy of being forgiven. God forgives: human beings are forgiven. We receive forgiveness or let ourselves be forgiven. Thus, active forgiving is left to God—either because it is his sole right to judge¹⁴ or because it is his *metier*.¹⁵

We can see this passive forgiveness played out in the history of baptism. From early times, baptism was a washing for forgiveness of sin. Because baptism was seen in that way, Tertullian had argued that children should “become Christians when they have become able to know Christ. Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the remission of sins?” Little ones had done nothing wrong yet: he could not see that they had any need to be forgiven. Augustine turned the argument the other way: because infants are baptized, they must have some kind of sin to be washed away. Protestant Evangelical Christianity often makes more of conversion than of baptism. But there too, the priority of God’s grace in forgiveness is emphasized. Being forgiven is at the heart of the human experience of desiring salvation and being given the dynamic of new life. So human beings relate to forgiveness as God offers it, sheds it abroad and actualizes it in saving ways, centrally in Jesus Christ. Some liturgies, like the communion service in the Anglican 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* are shaped throughout as a plea and a search for forgiveness now and at the Last Judgment. Recent liturgical revisions have relieved congregations of a sustained level of mournful penitence that the “easy conscience of modern man” does not want to bear.¹⁶ In all these various

14. Cf. many of the contributions in Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*.

15. Attributed to Heinrich Heine and others, this saying seems to affirm forgiveness, because it is God’s doing, but then cheapens it by treating it as God’s expertise and habitual practice. In both ways, forgiving is made unimportant for the daily earthly living of human life. Neither God nor forgiving are taken seriously. He also said, “One should forgive one’s enemies, but not before they are hanged,” which is another way of quoting the Gospel and making it of no effect.

16. See Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 99–131.

ways, it is in the passive reception of being forgiven that we discover and trust the grace of God.

We do of course know that we are to forgive as we are forgiven, but in spiritual experience and in most theology, our active forgiving does not weigh as much as being forgiven. For a variety of reasons, (is it fair to say?) when Christians are actively forgiving, they do not find themselves so powerfully in and with God as when they receive forgiveness. Can we forgive without assuming superiority? If we cannot, it is spiritually and socially dangerous to forgive others. In any case, our forgiving is so feeble and spasmodic and really nothing to crow about, whereas God's forgiving is sufficient, unstinting, creative, renewing. We are bowled over by the generosity of God to "miserable sinners." So it would seem obvious that we should persist in rejoicing in the glory of God's forgiving, and being very modest about ours.

It can be argued, however, that while this is true as far as it goes, it is not fully faithful to the challenge and the gift of God's forgiving in Christ. We are not rising to the height of our calling to *forgive as we are forgiven*. We are not to minimize the wonder of God's gracious forgiving, in relation to which we are simply beggars. But it is a mistake to fear that our forgiving could somehow compete with and thereby lessen God's forgiving. Our forgiving is a tribute to and a fruit of God's forgiving. It is an active form of gratitude, trust and acceptance of what God offers in decisive action. The measure of our appreciation of God's forgiving us is not that we sing songs of thanks for what we have received but that we give ourselves in the practice of life in the world to sharing with God in what God does. We are invited, indeed commanded, to let ourselves be taken in to the fullness of God's forgiving grace, by giving ourselves to active forgiving. This is our due response, the living sacrifice of our whole life in the body (Romans 12:1–2). God's grace is full, not because it is what God does from his side quite without us, and in distinctly divine action, but because it is what God does with and in and through his human partner, elect in Jesus Christ, in the reality of the world as his creation, where God is imaged actively and visibly by those created after his image and likeness.¹⁷ God's forgiving is a central key to God's reconciling us to Godself and adopting us as his children. It is an inseparable aspect of the greater whole of our fellowship with the Father and the Son in the Spirit.

17. Hall, *Imaging God*, 88–112, especially 108.

This partnership of God and humanity is expressed plainly in the Gospel teaching about forgiveness. We are forgiven as we forgive. This is not to make our forgiving a condition of our being forgiven, though it can be read that way, and too often it needs to be read so.¹⁸ It is rather to invite us to be forgivers like God and with God. So we must work with conceptions of forgiveness that do not set God and human being over against each other, but rather (like Loder) find appropriate ways of relating the divine and human spirit intimately. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned. It is in trying to go God's forgiving way and to share God's forgiving work that we come to know we need to be forgiven and receive it. We are taught to pray, "Forgive us our sin." And we can be more specific, "Forgive us our unforgiving," a core sin in the light of the Gospel. But we also thank God that we are able to forgive within his forgiving, thus sharing what we are given. We know our forgiving often falls short, and we are not very good at it. So within the active life-creating fellowship with God, we take our prayer further: "Forgive us our forgivings. Come and perfect what we do." When we pray this way, we confess that God's forgiving is the beginning and the end, and thus our hope. But we do not make that confession as supine recipients, mere dependents rather than partners.

What Has All This to Do with Loder . . . ?

As I understand it—and I understand very little in this area—the person forms the ego through dealing with an immediate practical make-or-break issue. The child encounters the No when the Face which sparks its world into being disappears, thus destroying nascent trust. Working amid this traumatic threat to being, the child makes a covenant with death (to borrow from Isaiah 28:14–22) or, in Loder's account, co-opts the No in order to hold on to and define itself against the No (94). This tactic gains success in ego-building, but "under the surface, existentially speaking, negation has triumphed." "The human spirit has been forced by the sense of dread, 'the anxiety of non-being,' to contradict itself

18. It is needed because we are prone to take advantage of forgiving grace, Rom 6:1, 15; 3:8; Matt 18:23–35. The leverage of fairness is a useful instrument to form and stir the careless conscience. Why expect anyone to be generous to you, if you are not generous to them? (2 Sam 12:1–15). But we lose the generosity of God if this lever ceases to be like a schoolmaster leading us to Christ, and becomes the law of forgiving as a mere *quid pro quo*.

and lose touch with its original creation, the face phenomenon, and its power to shape human destiny in the direction of the divine.” The “powerful hidden longing” for the remembered and lost Face “continues to influence the ego from under the surface as the human spirit continues to scan for ways to overcome this deep fault in the bedrock of human development” (94). This scanning is the will to forgive, exploring how to make something of a compromised position by forgiving. Loder says the achievement of the child in this early period is “ironic.” The child has achieved no more than “a defensive functional solution to an existential and theological crisis” (95). It is not difficult to hear some resonance with traditional notions of Original Sin. That would be a measure of the grievousness of the situation. But it would leave the child with a one-sided need to be forgiven. Loder does not refer us to anything like original sin here. If this ironic solution is a step in a life of hope, then hope has its source elsewhere, transcendentally, beyond the holding position achieved by the child.

Human existence throughout the rest of the life span, especially through the great eruptions of adolescence, the middle years, and later life, urges persons toward a more adequate solution that will nullify the existentially formative power of negation, transform the ego and its defences, and put the totality of human existence into a relationship with the One who is the cosmic ordering, self-confirming Presence—the Face of God who does not go away (95). This indicates the positive, hopeful way Loder leads us through the whole book. Because he does not name the initial stage as a forgiving, the later stages are not presented as ventures in forgiving either. Yet I think the family likeness can be seen in all these stages of life. It is wise to face the existential challenges flung at us in a lifetime with a spirit ready to forgive and to read the challenges as invitations to forgive. Even when the challenges arise within ourselves because we make covenants with death and because our achievements are merely ironic solutions, forgiving shows us how to go forward. Forgiving symbolizes a style of practical living, in which the persistent pilgrim-experimenter in forgiving looks for and enters God’s coming new creation where forgiveness is beyond irony, generous and effective.

... and with Child Theology?

Jesus placed a child in the midst of the disciples who were so anxious about greatness in the Kingdom of God that they put their bare entry into it in doubt (Matthew 18:1ff.). Jesus gave them the child, signaling humility as the way into the Kingdom of God. When they received the child, they received Jesus—and the One who sent him—and thus were already brought to the heart of the Kingdom—the King. The child placed by Jesus is thus full of profound, demanding and saving meaning, but is also, significantly, without any trace of parental, or modern, or psychological interpretation.

Loder puts the child before us, with meanings that are modern products. True or not so true, these meanings suggest some of the ways in which we might see child so that the child illumines what it is to be human. Theory of this kind is not only useful for looking after children in appropriate ways, but it helps us to understand what kind of beings we are in the whole of a lifetime. Yet we should not glibly assume that we can put Loder's child, or any other modernly-perceived child (certainly not the fancifully idolized or the affluent child) into the center of the argument about the Kingdom of God. We have to be clear that Jesus served the Kingdom of the Father by centering a child who was not any one of our modern preferred much loved, abused or studied children. We are not called to receive an idealized child, who exists in our dreams and not in her own bodily presence. And to ignore children, as they are now, in order to work in theological purity with the child as formed in a first-century Palestinian culture, would be an idealization. So, while we must be humbly cautious, we should not be frightened off by the dangers of putting ourselves in the story where the disciples were and where the child from next door was being placed by Jesus. It is not consistent with faith and obedience to God in Christ to refuse to work with this story because we fear to contaminate it by putting a modern child there. That kind of refusal is the exegetical sin of hiding one's talent in the ground. Rather, we must have courage to follow the story along all the tracks it opens up, including recognizing that the child here is real, not a product of idealization, and that the real child placed by Jesus bears saving meaning for those who would like to enter the Kingdom of God.

There is encouragement for us to take this risk with the story and even, if it comes to it, to "sin boldly" as Luther said. If we see forgiving

is naturally necessary to the child's inescapable person-making process, we can build a bridge between the child as we know her today and the child who was placed by Jesus. Loder's child, if I may use that shorthand, is not totally alien to the child by whom Jesus signed the Kingdom of God. Forgiveness, passive and active in unity, is the typical core of the Kingdom of God, as Jesus presented it (i.e., as he made it present in his action and words). Matthew 18 begins with the child in the midst and leads into a major discourse on forgiving. The child is placed in the midst to be received. Shockingly, the child is often not received but is despised and rejected (Matthew 18:10). This rejection is actively resisted and overcome by God who typically goes in search of the lost straying sheep (18:12–14). Bringing back the lost is a concrete image of forgiving. It highlights the costly venture that forgiving involves. Forgiving is not a mere "letting it pass" with a casual "no problem." Remember the pathos of the hymn, "The Ninety and Nine"? Having prepared the way, Matthew 18 then speaks about dealing with faults in the church and forgiving brothers up to seventy times seven. Its climax is the story of the unforgiving servant. He missed entry into the Kingdom of God altogether, because, though he was blessed by the king's merciful forgiveness of his debts, he did not forgive a fellow servant whose debt was small by comparison.

The inner life and being of the person grows and is sustained by a process which is set out in these stories about interpersonal forgiving, coupled with directions for social living which befits the Kingdom of God. Person-constituting forgiving, which we see in Loder's child, harmonizes with God's forgiving in Christ, which constitutes New Creation. Matthew 18 is a discourse about forgiving in which the child has a crucial function, not as a teacher or a priestly minister of forgiveness, but as an eye-opening sign in the argument Jesus is having with his disciples. The disciples are missing the way into the Kingdom of God and they need help. They are not primarily called to get into the Kingdom of God for themselves, but to open it for others. They are partners with Jesus in his mission, called to be servants rather than mere beneficiaries. They need to be forgiven by being released from the sin that is driving them into darkness.

Jesus does not give up on the disciples. Nor does he uncritically stand by them, because they are his own people, right or wrong. Instead of covering up for them, he sharpens the issue. He makes clear how they

are going seriously wrong. And then he acts to give them a vision of the way, and to open it up for them. That is the fundamental content of any forgiveness, opening up a new and better possibility. It is quite new for the disciples because it was never going to come out of what they were or were making of themselves. What is, and what has been done, blocks this new better possibility. Forgiving engages with persons who are locked into the habits of the past, and finds ways—which may be costly and inventive—to liberate them for the new and better. Hence forgiving takes the form of holistic persuasion to conversion. It aims at more than a change of a particular behavior. It seeks a transformation of the whole person, so that that person may live fully and freely in the identity that belongs in the new and better possibility (the Kingdom of God).

This transformation is not and cannot be achieved in a moment or by magic. It is concerned with the whole person, who has a lifetime to live, and indeed a calling to the Kingdom of God which transcends what can be seen in a lifetime. The concept of a person with a life to live goes beyond our capacity to grasp. We do not understand ourselves in our own self-awareness, whether we approach it with ordinary amateur autobiographical narrating, or with the help of a theory of human development like Loder's. Whatever way we take, we are brought to Bonhoeffer's end, which is also the beginning, as it is expressed in his poem, *Who Am I?:*

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine—
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine.¹⁹

Not merely, then, is this transformation not to be achieved in a moment. Transformation is not in our hands or in our time. We can see hints of what it might be like, but we cannot comprehend it fully. We are waiting till we know as we are known. We may know that we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.²⁰ But it does not yet appear what we shall be—and what does not yet appear cannot be put into our account or our planning. And yet, this should not push us back into passive reception of forgiveness. It rather clarifies what it is to live a life as an active forgiving partner and follower of God in Christ, forever seeking to open the way where it is blocked.

19. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 347.

20. 1 John 3:1–3.

Social Forgiving

This leads me to a final comment on Loder. I get the impression from his account that lifetimes are lived by individuals. He does not deny that we are social beings, but our relations with other human beings seem to be underplayed or allowed to stand at the margins, as unproblematic reality. The Face is structurally vital for the infant. But, after that, the structure of the adult seems to be that of a self-possessing individual. There is no exploration of the ways in which, at every step of life, *I am because we are*. Paul asked, “What have you that you have not received?” (1 Cor 4:7). What am I if all the persons who have somehow given themselves to me and entered into my being, are ignored? What the Face tells us about being a person reveals a pattern of being which is not left behind by the adult, but becomes more complex, enriching or bedeviling as life goes on. The middle years, for example, bring to many of us all the blessings Job enjoyed—wife, children, property, social responsibility and respect—so that if they all are taken away, unnaturally and against the promise of the gracious creator, we are plunged into Job’s unbearable questions about our meaning and hope. Reduced to bare existence, an individual depressed by the loss of sociality, Job demanded to see the Face (Job 13:3; 23:1–7).

It might be argued that in Loder’s account, individuality is opened up to sociality because of the relationality of divine and human spirit which runs through the whole book. Certainly a fully social account of living should be the result of thinking about humanity in relation to divine Spirit. In Christian sources, it would seem that Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, is sociable and socially creative (e.g., Acts 2). But does this social Spirit shape Loder’s overall picture? Or does the divine Spirit tend to be individualized through being related mostly to the human person who has an individual lifetime to live? Is this individualization of Spirit a consequence of Loder’s working with modern Western people and with modern Western concepts, culture and religion?

The Spirit can be individualized because, to some extent, we live life individualistically. Each stage of life presents the individual with the challenge to make some sense of this individual life and to “be the best that I can be.” This individuality has power and significance. Many people (how can we know whether it is every body?) have an incessant inner life, a dialogue with and in the self, and they are happy if this dia-

logue gives them a sense of control and hope and self-esteem. But few manage a lifetime as nothing more than an interior process. Even if we seek seclusion, the world of others interrupts us in happy and unhappy ways. For example, we become parents and a once individual life is siphoned off into the children—unless of course we choose to walk away from them. We become citizens, and may complain about the intrusion of government. But most of us, the canny rich even more than the poor, expect the state to be there to help us. We may want individuality without encumbrance. But when we discover, through hard experience, Aristotle's insight that to live outside the *polis*, we must be either god or beast, most people turn back to have another go at being human even if it means living with other human beings. A human life is a mix of private and social. So the divine Spirit is to be understood and sought not only in relation to the private life, but also the social.

What is the place of other people (either as individuals or in various sorts of groups) along the individual's way to the transformation the Spirit brings? Are persons transformed solely by a direct solitary engagement with Spirit? Forgiveness, as we see it for example in Matthew 18, is essentially social. I have already quoted part of Loder's account of the infant's development: "There is real struggle, defeat, uncertainty about outcome. But there is hope which persists through life because divine Spirit does not give up and the human spirit at each stage of life may find sufficient grace, capacity and creativity" (95). I recall this quote now to make the point that, often—indeed mostly—hope persists throughout a lifetime because the divine Spirit works through other people around the individual. The Spirit hopes in those who hope for those who do not hope for themselves. We need brother or sister to be "as Christ" to us, holding "the Christ-light for us in the night-time of our fear." Some people do not have faith for themselves. Some people need others with a faith that carries the weight of a stretcher and even breaks through the sanctity of property to bring a friend to Jesus.

For those who have no prayers to say,
Who in despair are dumb,
Teach us to live as well as pray
"O Lord, your kingdom come!"²¹

21. Cf. Mark 2:1–12; Smith, "Remember," 274.

The infant does not manufacture the Face out of nothing. Nor does the Face come directly from the divine Spirit in her solitary invisibility. The infant needs the earthly, personal mother, to show and give something that is at least a plausible sign that living is viable, because there can be a world as a habitat for life. God comes and works through mediation. That is one implication of the doctrines of the trinity and Christology. In Loder's case study of "Helen," she would not have prayed without Loder praying with her. The divine Spirit did not transform her without the "father confessor" sharing in the process. In the Christian understanding of God, there is a complex of reciprocating and mutually helpful mediations and representations. So God in Christ holds the place open for human beings, and human being in Christ holds the place open for God.²²

Of course there is the danger that, in the intricate, sometimes dense webs of mediation, the divine Spirit is denied because lost to sight. Created actors, human and other, fill the stage, presenting their story so convincingly that there seems to be nothing outside what we see in their action. Again and again, in Christian history, the living God, the divine Spirit, has been lost. The Church can be overwhelmed by the busyness that quenches the Spirit. Often the loss comes about not with an atheist intention—i.e., by denying that there is any Other Agent apart from human beings and all the other evolved and visible creatures in the universe. It comes because those who trust and honor the divine Spirit live with joy in the plenitude of God's created gifts. They live to the full the life given them now on earth, giving and taking, losing and finding, sharing and growing. All this humanism, they say, is the life they have from and in God—and so it is. But God gets hidden in the plenitude of the humanity that flourishes by the divine generosity, where the Spirit, with self-endangering humility, gives the stage to creatures.

Some carelessly, some cautiously, some with finesse accept that the dissolving of God in the human world and in religion is unavoidable. We have to work with it and can be hopeful within it. Theologians like Schleiermacher lead us here. But being Christian with God in human solution is not restricted to followers of particular theologians. Loder's Barthianism, if that is what it is, has a point. Without it the relationality of divine and human spirit, which is essential to his whole enterprise, melts down into an undifferentiated religiosity, where there is no persuasive or

22. Soelle, *Christ*, 104, 116, 130.

transforming transcendence. The integrity of God and creatures, each truly themselves, is essential to this relationality. To lose the difference of divine and human identity in the blending intimacy of oneness would be fundamentally inconsistent with Loder's theology, anthropology and soteriology.

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