

The Bi-polar Relationality of Personal and Social Transformation

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I dream of a world that is yet to come. It is a world where individual attitudes and societal norms have been transformed in accordance with God's best intention. Therefore, I maintain that if Christian Educators are serious about living and teaching others how to live as doers of justice, then we must bridge the chasm between what is good for the individual and what is right for the society.

Far too often, the transformation process in the work of Christian Education is assigned in terms of polarities, either individual or social transformation, with very little attention to the relationship between the two. This polarization empowers the separation and limits what is possible.

The disconnect between individual and communal occurs when the priorities of a particular person override what is necessary for the well-being of the collective whole. This severance is achieved by subjugating the call of community, inherent in faith, to the siren of society's message to "look out for number one." It is a siren song whose lure we succumb to because of our human propensity to choose what is easier-- concern only for self and one's own benefit, rather than that which is more faithful—living in community.¹

The human predisposition to choose one's own profit is illustrated clearly in the greed that saps the souls of many as corporate America faces CEO bonuses while foreclosing on the retirement of its trusting mid and support level employees.² This detachment between the good of the one and the whole is manifested in the debates over school reform, wherein we face a world where public education no longer means access to quality education for all, but rather, education only for those who can afford to live in neighborhoods with sufficient tax base to support curricular needs or who can afford private tuition. In turn, it creates a world where color, too often, determines the quality of education, a world where we may have to confront being a republic without public education and the sweet freedom of democracy gives way to oligarchy.³ The chasm between that which is easy for the individual and that which contributes to the well-being of the whole community can be found, also, when the bounties of the earth are not shared evenly, but are hoarded by those whose profit margins or comfortable lifestyles are built on the backs of migrant farm workers and the poor who work the minimum wage jobs that keep the costs of living low.⁴

¹ I am working from the understanding that there is a difference between personal and individual. Personal implies a connection with community while individual implies isolation. An individual can have a personal experience with and of God is possible but it is always within the context of the community of faith. An individual can have personal devotion time but by its very nature worship is corporate and communal. An individual can personally experience the sacraments but never in isolation as they are always surround by the cloud of witnesses on earth and in heaven. In these very acts, these personal connected to the communal acts, the individual becomes a communal being – no longer isolated but knit into the fabric of community. "Personal" allows for the individual to have a unique and intimate experience while never disassociating or disconnecting with the community. It follows then that, for me, transformation both personal and social.

² See accounts of Enron collapse: www.time.com/time/2002/enron; www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/business/specials/energy/enron;

³ See Jonathan Kozol's discussion in Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 1991.) ; Jonathan Kozol, *Ordinary Resurrections: Children in the Years of Hope* (New York: Perennial, 2001.) and David Hornbeck's work, [//www.nccusa.org/98ga/dhtext](http://www.nccusa.org/98ga/dhtext); [//www.aypf.org/forumbriefs/2000/db111400](http://www.aypf.org/forumbriefs/2000/db111400); www.pbs.org/merrow/tv/crusade;

⁴ See migrant farm worker's plight in Immokloee, FL. <http://www.ciw-online.org/4-herald>; <http://www.latimes.com>;

Robert Bellah and his associates described this propensity, in their 1985 *Habits of the Heart*, as religion of rugged individuality superceding religion of the God of covenant relationship for too many in our society today. Bellah writes, “Individualism lies at the very core of our American culture.”⁵ While the authors are careful to delineate between healthy individuation (e.g. the right to self-determination, thought, judgement and worship) and the rugged individualism that takes on mythic ideological proportions, Bellah worries that an all consuming individualism, “may have grown cancerous...may be threatening the survival of freedom itself.”⁶

Eight years after *Habits of the Heart's* prophetic release, Larry Rasmussen, in *Moral Fragments and Moral Community: A Proposal for Church in Society*, proposes that the effect of rampant individualism is a fragmented society that has led to a false sense of isolation among persons, and small familial units, from community and society. Disjointed community, Rasmussen believes, has fostered divisional ethics and morals. Each individual (or unit) operates under his or her own understanding of ethics so that as long as a decision or behavior does not harm, or cause a breach of conscience for that particular individual (or unit) then it is an acceptable decision, behavior or belief.⁷

Therefore, in this paper I argue that a reorientational process is necessary to overcome the disconnect between the individual and the communal. Assigning transformation to opposite poles, individual and social, falls short and limits the potential scope of radical reorientation. Bipolarity, the dependent connectedness between two extremities, provides a truer understanding of the relationality of personal and social transformation.

As individuals, we are shaped and formed within a social context. Development does not occur in a vacuum. Likewise, there is no social realm without individuals who comprise it. The dynamic that keeps the two polarities connected is relationality. It is my contention that personal and social transformation are connected through bipolar relationality. That is to say, that while social and personal transformations are different in nature and represent two extremes, these poles are connected by a dynamic energy and are dependent upon one another. *Personal* cannot exist in its fullest possibility without being connected to *social*, nor can *social* manifests its fullness without the *personal*. It is the dynamic exchange and interplay between personal and social that sets the stage for transformation to occur.

So, what is education for transformation? How do we eradicate the disconnect between the individual and the communal, so that we bridge the bi-polar relationality of social and personal transformation, in order to grow into the fullness of life for which we are created? Do we begin with the individual and then move to societal transformation? Or, do we begin by changing the systemic structures and allow those structural changes to transform each individual? Or, does transformative education involve and affect both the individual and the society simultaneously?

To find the answers let us examine each end of the spectrum, individual/personal and social/communal, in order to construct an educational model of bi-polar relationality. While the choices of where to turn are many, this exploration will engage the thoughts of two individuals representing two theological perspectives. Individual transformation will be examined by

⁵ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Sidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 142.

⁶ *Ibid.*, vii.

⁷ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments and Moral Community: A Proposal for Church in Society*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

looking closely at James Loder's theory of transformation in his 1998 book, *Logic of the Spirit*. Social transformation will be examined through the lens of the social gospel movement and Walter Rauschenbusch's writings, in particular, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. I ask both of them the same guiding questions with the explicit assumption that theological perspective informs transformational theory: *What are Loder and Rauschenbusch's understandings of transformation? And, what are their theological assumptions that influence their views of transformation?*

Individual Transformation

James Edwin Loder was born in 1931 in Lincoln, Nebraska and died in Trenton, New Jersey in November 2001. He was Professor of the Philosophy of Christian Education at Princeton Theological Seminary for nearly forty years. He earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and spent a career writing, teaching and counseling. As a Presbyterian minister and scholar, Loder had an affinity for the intersection of theology and science especially as it relates to transformation of the individual through the Christian faith.⁸

Loder's own transformational moment occurred when he stopped to help a motorist along a highway and another car crashed into them pinning Loder beneath the disabled vehicle. His wife, a petite woman, came to the front of the car where Loder was caught and invoking the name of Jesus lifted the car so Loder could roll out from under it. This experience changed everything for him – reorienting his life, his work, his faith and his perspective.⁹

James Loder locates himself within Neo-orthodoxy theology. In *Logic of the Spirit* his primary theological sources are Karl Barth, T.F. Torrance and Wolfhart Pannenberg, drawing heavily on Barth's Christological formulation.¹⁰ Neo-orthodox theology emphasizes the self-revelation of God through the Word of God. Jesus Christ, the Holy Scriptures and preaching are "witnesses" to the majestic power of God. Jesus Christ is understood to be God revealed, the Bible is God written and the preaching is God proclaimed. The three represent a unified and connected whole in which Jesus Christ is at the center.¹¹

Loder argues that God, at God's own initiation, crossed the "abyss between human and divine" becoming fully human while remaining fully divine in Jesus the Christ. The two natures are in dynamic relationship, with and to one another, and neither exists without the other. This Loder calls "bipolar relational unity" – a term he will also use to also describe the relationship between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit.¹²

"Jesus Christ is the reorienting event of the Christian life," says Loder, "and the living Word in whom all creatures find their center." Salvation occurs in the redemptive act of Christ and each of us is called to reflect the divine reconciling presence. Sanctification, for Loder, is embodied in the "God with Us," and Jesus Christ is mediated through the Holy Spirit.¹³

Thus, transformation for Loder is defined as the following:

When within any given frame of reference hidden

⁸ *News and Information*, Princeton Theological Seminary [website], (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary November 2001, accessed 9 May 2003); available from <http://www.ptsem.edu/know/loder.htm>; Internet.

⁹ James E. Loder, *Transforming Moment* [video recording], (Richmond, VA: PSCE, 1982).

¹⁰ James E. Loder, *Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in the Theological Perspective*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc. 1998), 30

¹¹ Donald K. McKim, *What Christians Believe about the Bible*, (New York: Thomas Nelson Publications, 1985), 76.

¹² Loder, 13.

¹³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1985) 18 ff.

orders of meaning and coherence arise to call the axioms of that frame into question and reorder its elements accordingly, transformation has occurred.”¹⁴

The nature of re-ordering, for Loder, is a series of defining moments in which the chaos of life is altered in a sufficient manner to change one’s outlook and provides new ways of understanding and interpreting life in all its parts as well as the whole. The intention of this radical shift is unity with God in a way that re-grounds the human spirit in the Creator Holy Spirit with whom it was once connected.¹⁵

Loder maintains that transformation occurs through the asymmetrical bipolar relationality of the human spirit and the Holy Spirit, “The human spirit is to humanity what the Holy Spirit is to God, so these two are interrelated according to the bipolar relationality.”¹⁶ It is the human spirit that provides persons with the ability to self-transcend and that, according to Loder, “drives toward the transformation of every obstacle in its path, making the obstacle into a vehicle for attaining a wider and higher horizon.”¹⁷

The human spirit and the Holy Spirit are related in a way that mirrors the Chalcedonian formula of the natures of Christ. It is the anthropological spirit that propels the creature’s life towards a gradually higher plan of existence within the realm men, women and children. It is the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit, to whom the human spirit calls out to and in whom the human spirit seeks its grounding if it is to sustain viability, that creates moments in which the fullness of time, kairos, renovates chronos everyday existence. [See Figure 1.]

Loder focuses on the individual and any connection of the one to society is done within the context of the community of faith. Little attention is given to societal ties. His understanding of the church is that it is a socially constructed reality based on roles and role systems, which are the outgrowth of, not the condition for koinonia. To be sure, these two, the koinonia and the institutional church, will always be found together and dialectally related in a bi-polar relationship. In essence, Loder’s Chalcedonian understanding of the Resurrected Jesus dictates that the spiritual presence of the Messiah exercises marginal control over the church and other social institutions that are created to express it.¹⁸

All in all, Loder states, “The logic of the human spirit is the heart and center of every lifetime where in duration and synchronicities combine in moments of kairos, where the fullness of time reshapes chronos, as the human spirit seeks ultimate agreement with its eternal ground in the unity of the inner life of God.”¹⁹

Social Transformation

Walter Rauschenbusch, (1861-1918) raised in a pietistic German-American home, came to be the most prominent theologian of the Social Gospel movement. As a Baptist minister he served a pastorate in New York’s Hell’s Kitchen where he saw the abuses of the poor and middle class every day. He later went on to become a professor of Church History at Rochester

¹⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵ Ibid., 339.

¹⁶ Ibid., 35.

¹⁷ Ibid., 33.

¹⁸ Loder, 194.

¹⁹ Ibid., 339.

Theological Seminary and published the seminal work for the Movement *A Theology for the Social Gospel*.

Rauschenbusch, and the social gospel movement, has its roots in Liberal Theology. If Neo-orthodox theology was shaped in reaction to the Liberal theology then Liberal theology can be understood and in reaction to the protestant orthodoxy of Jonathan Edwards and his contemporaries. How to live in the modern world, and the experience of that living, was central to the Liberal Theology. Creeds were seen as outmoded and static in a world teeming with change. Reason, the mind and forwardness of thought were the partners of experience. Scientific approach to interpretation, historical criticism and cultural perspectives were tools for this new era.²⁰

Rauschenbusch saw the need for a coherent theology for the social gospel movement. He believed theology would, “release energy for heroic opposition against organized evil and for the building of a righteous social life.”²¹

While its roots are in the pre-Civil war evangelical awakening era the Social Gospel Movement came to fullness in the post-Civil War industrialization expansion (1870-1920.) As the cities of the North grew in prosperity and population and the “Gilded Age” saw unprecedented prosperity for some the rich became wealthier on the backs of the poor and middle class. Child labor, high risk of industrial accidents, unemployment, hazardous working conditions, exploitation of women, substandard health care and excessively long work hours were the every day reality of many trying to make a living in the cities.²²

Rauschenbusch’s definition of transformation is characterized as the communal reorientation of the society towards a social righteousness that embodies the Kingdom of God. The nature of this reorientation is the work of justice on behalf of the neighbor, particularly the vulnerable, weak and voiceless, while its goal is to align society in a manner that is consistent with the Kingdom of God taught by Jesus.

Transformation occurs by addressing systems that govern our common life together and bringing them into line with the Kingdom. Human communal action and experience moves society towards the common good. The teachings of Jesus break into life and move it away from selfishness and toward concern for community and commitment to neighbor. [Figure 2.]

Conservative pietism and rampant individualism of the Gilded Age were the message of the day until the Social Gospel emerged. The Social Gospel movement propounded that humanity was a community knit together by God and that as the collective we had a responsibility for our neighbor – both personally and corporately. Proponents of the Social Gospel believed that by looking to the teachings of Jesus and the Kingdom of God a blue print for life together as a society could be seen and achieved.²³

The Kingdom of God is central. Rauschenbusch believed that it was a doctrine that had long been ignored by theologies which led to an over emphasis on individualism. The Kingdom of God, Rauschenbusch believed– is the realm of love and the commonwealth of labor.”²⁴

²⁰ McKim, *What Christians Believe about the Bible*, 38-48.

²¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1917), 42.

²² Douglass Ottati, “The Social Gospel Movement,” *The New Handbook of Christian Theology*, Donald Musser and Joseph Price, ed., A New Handbook of Christian Theology, (Nashville, TN: Abingdom Press, 1992).

²³ Christopher H. Evans, ed., *Perspectives on the Social Gospel*, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 1999); Max Stackhouse, introduction and ed. to *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* by Walter Rauschenbusch, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd.); J. Phillip Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox/Westminster, 1993) 194-208

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 and 54.

*Jesus Christ superimposed his own personality on the previous conception of God and made love the distinctive characteristic of God and the supreme law of human conduct. Consequently the reign of God would be the reign of love. It is not enough to think of the kingdom as a prevalence of good will. The institutions of life must be fundamentally fraternal and co-operative if they are to train men to love their fellowmen as co-workers.*²⁵

If the Realm of God is the “commonwealth of labor” then the field in which it labors is that of sanctification. Rauschenbusch understands “sanctification as the continuation of the process of spiritual education and transformation, by which human personality becomes a willing organ of the spirit of Christ...through increased fellowship with God and man.”²⁶

The church is the “social factor” in a salvation that turns humanity from selfishness and self-centeredness toward an outward journey that looks to serve neighbor and God.²⁷ “The church is the social factor in salvation. It brings social forces to bear on evil. It offers Christ not only many human bodies and minds to serve as ministers of his salvation but its own composite personality...the saving power of the church does not rest on its institutional character, on its continuity, its ordination, its ministry or its doctrine. It rests on the presence of the Kingdom of God within her.”²⁸

Quality of Life

Education for Transformation, either individual or social, has within it an underlying concern for the quality of life. The reorientation from a former way of being to a new way is a motivating factor within any discussion. There is an expectation that transformation, unlike change, implies a positive alteration of the situation.

Loder is explicit with these concerns and frames them at the intersection of human development and theological discourse. While the science of human development can describe life, Loder believes that it is theology which gives meaning to existence.²⁹ He begins *Logic of the Spirit* with two guiding questions “What is a life?” and “Why do we live it?” and concludes by answering, a life is “an unfinished act of God’s love; it is intended that we complete that act by returning ourselves to God.”³⁰ The reason why we live life, for Loder, is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ and “because we have been created for nothing less than the pure love of God, whose universe is our home.” To be faithful, then for Loder, is to be open to the transforming moments as they seek to reconnect us in the likeness of Christ and the love of God.

While Loder’s work is framed within human development the social gospel movement is clearly concerned with public progress. What is a life for the Social Gospel movement? Every life is a treasure of God to be honored, treated justly and to enjoy the benefits of communal belonging. To be faithful then is to follow the teachings of Jesus and to work for the Kingdom of God in transforming society.

Both Loder’s individualism and Rauschenbusch’s social gospel share some commonalities and yet differ, radically. [Chart 1.] They both share a strong belief in the redemptive act of Jesus Christ, both value human life and agency and both understand

²⁵ Ibid., 54.

²⁶ Ibid., 102.

²⁷ Ibid., 99.

²⁸ Ibid., 119-129.

²⁹ Ibid., 27.

³⁰ Ibid., 341-342.

transformation as something more than simple change. However, their differences all but obscure their commonalities. Loder is oriented towards the individual beginning and ending with God's initiation. Rauschenbusch, while beginning with God's initiation moves quickly to human agency and responsibility aiming towards society. Loder deals very little with community and not at all in *Logic of the Spirit* with the questions "What happens once transformation of the individual has occurred and how does individual transformation affect society?" It is as if transformation of the individual is solely for the individual's sake. The social gospel movement deals very little with individualism and begs the question, "What is the relationship between the social and the individual?" These inquiries lead justice-making Christian Educators to ask, "Is there another possibility?" – a third alternative for bridging the bi-polar relationality of personal and social transformation?

As Educators, we serve as significant agents of transformation. The Church is both a human institution and a divine manifestation. It is prophetic witness to what is possible when justice reigns, mercy is dispensed and God's people are working for that end. The Church is God's provisional demonstration of this continuing presence in the world until Christ comes again, in that "already but not yet" time.

The faithful, who live in the bipolar relationality of the in-between time of the "already-but-not-yet," are called to be agents of transformation, God's partners in working towards the divine commonwealth, using the Biblical witness of justice, righteousness and the Peaceable Kingdom as our road map.

This relationality process can be understood as sanctification. This communicative connectedness is marked by a forward march, but the every day occasion of its progress is an up-and-down rhythm that reflects humanity's nature and participation. The relationality process of transformation and sanctification is fueled by the co-catalytic interaction of the human and Holy Spirit throughout the whole journey. The Holy Spirit does not "break into" rather it is an integral, always present, part of the drive towards the fullness of the Kingdom of God empowering any and all human action for the common good. [Figure 3.]

When transformative education occurs in this bipolar relationality model, both personal and social understanding is reordered so that justice is the foundation of all new meaning and means of relating. Justice becomes the standard by which each person in society interacts. Decisions are made with righteousness in mind corporately and personally. Providing the opportunity and the environment where each person created in the image of God can grow into all that God created them to be is a radical shift away from individualism and towardS the fullness of the Kingdom of God, a shift that has direct impact on the quality of life.

Responding to Loder's foundational question, "What is a life and why do we live it?" our answer as Educators committed to the bipolar relationality of personal and social transformation: Life, personally and collectively, is a gift from God, a gift not to be wasted or neglected or abused by our own selfish inclination nor by abusive inflictions on others. We live in grateful response to life's precious gift, doing God's will here on earth, as partners in God's commonwealth, until Jesus Christ comes again. This, then, is our marching order for today.

Guiding Questions Comparative Chart [Chart 1]

<i>Guiding Question</i>	<i>Loder</i>	<i>Social Gospel</i>
<i>Jesus Christ</i>	Word of God revealed; fully human and fully divine	Initiator of the Kingdom of God through his life and teachings
<i>Salvation</i>	Through the redemptive act of Jesus Christ	Through Jesus Christ both historical and communal
<i>Sanctification</i>	God with Us as mediated through the Holy Spirit	The continuation of process of transformation
<i>Kingdom of God</i>	Sharp distinction between God and the world	Embodiment of social righteousness
<i>Ecclesiology</i>	Socially constructed reality that grows out of koinonia	Social factor in salvation
<i>Transformation (definition)</i>	New order and meaning brought to an individual's life	Communal reorientation and action
<i>Nature of transformation</i>	Change in understanding	Change in societal structures
<i>Purpose of transformation</i>	Unity with God that grounds the human spirit in the Holy	To mold society into harmony with the Kingdom of God
<i>Catalyst for transformation</i>	Spirit-to-spirit interaction	Teachings of Jesus
<i>Content of transformation</i>	The individual life	Society
<i>Process of transformation</i>	The Holy Spirit breaks into life reshaping and reorienting it in new ways.	The teachings of Jesus intersect with human experience and action
<i>What is a life?</i>	An unfinished act of God's love intending to be completed by returning ourselves to God	A gift from God to be valued, honored, treated justly and lived out in community
<i>Why do we live it?</i>	Because we have been created fro the love of God	To be agents of social transformation
<i>What does it mean to be faithful?</i>	To be open to the transforming moments in which we are reconnected to the love of God	To follow the teachings of Jesus and to work for social righteousness as embodied in the Kingdom of God

Guiding Questions Comparative Chart [Chart 2]

<i>Guiding Question</i>	<i>Loder</i>	<i>Social Gospel</i>	<i>Bi-Polar Relationality</i>
<i>Jesus Christ</i>	Word of God revealed; fully human and fully divine	Initiator of the Kingdom of God through his life and teachings	Inaugurated the Kingdom of God “already but not yet”
<i>Salvation</i>	Through the redemptive act of Jesus Christ	Through Jesus Christ both historical and communal	Through Jesus Christ both historical and communal
<i>Sanctification</i>	God with Us as mediated through the Holy Spirit	The continuation of process of transformation	The process of growing in faith and practice towards full Kingdom of God
<i>Kingdom of God</i>	Sharp distinction between God and the world	Embodiment of social righteousness	The embodiment of justice and righteousness/personal & social
<i>Ecclesiology</i>	Socially constructed reality that grows out of koinonia	Social factor in salvation	Provisional demonstration of God’s presence in the world
<i>Transformation (definition)</i>	New order and meaning brought to an individual’s life	Communal reorientation and action	New order and meaning brought to persons and society
<i>Nature of transformation</i>	Change in understanding	Change in societal structures	Reordering of meaning towards justice for personal and social
<i>Purpose of transformation</i>	Unity with God that grounds the human spirit in the Holy	To mold society into harmony with the Kingdom of God	Justice and righteousness in personal and social relationships
<i>Catalyst for transformation</i>	Spirit-to-spirit interaction	Teachings of Jesus	Human need and the Holy Spirit
<i>Content of transformation</i>	The individual life	Society	Persons and Society
<i>Process of transformation</i>	The Holy Spirit breaks into life reshaping and reorienting it in new ways.	The teachings of Jesus intersect with human experience and action	The intersection of spiritual practices, covenant community, study and intentional engagement in society
<i>What is a life?</i>	An unfinished act of God’s love intending to be completed by returning ourselves to God	A gift from God to be valued, honored, treated justly and lived out in community	An entrustment from God pregnant with possibility of being all God created it to be
<i>Why do we live it?</i>	Because we have been created fro the love of God	To be agents of social transformation	To become all that we were created to be
<i>What does it mean to be faithful?</i>	To be open to the transforming moments in which we are reconnected to the love of God	To follow the teachings of Jesus and to work for social righteousness as embodied in the Kingdom of God	To grow in faith and to be agents of social transformation