

Meditations on Reconciliations

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The following meditations on reconciliation are based on the author's lectures given at The Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, PA, on 9/24/03 and 2/11/04 as part of that institution's *Trinity Healing Seminars*. Aspects of the spiritual psychology of reconciliation are explored through clinical vignettes, literature, film and stories. Reconciliation is explored and critiqued through the lens of *Christian Holism*, and the God of the Christian revelation is depicted as integral to the holistic healing implicit in the reconciliation process.

From the perspective of *Christian Holism*, Jesus Christ brings everything together. He ultimately unifies us and the universe into a loving, dynamic relationship with the Holy Trinity. He brings everything, including our fragmented minds and ruined friendships, into harmonious interactions. Jesus' death destroys the shattering effect of sin and wonderfully reconnects us to ourselves, creation, and God. A transpersonal insight of staggering psychospiritual implications, this truth was expressed beautifully by St. Paul in Colossians 1:19-20:

So spacious is he [Christ], so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe, people and things, animals and atoms, get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that was poured down from the cross" (Peterson, 1996, p.422).

So, you have St. Paul with his beautiful vision of Jesus, through his sacrifice, bringing all fragmentation into his fragmented body and causing fragmentation and unreconciliation to die with him on the cross. Then God as Christ surrounds and encases and saturates all things in loving, vibrant interconnectedness.

Jesus Christ is the universal reconciler. Everything comes together in right relationship through Jesus Christ. St. Paul had experiential knowledge of this. Alienated from God, alienated from church, and alienated from himself, Paul lived a destructive life. He participated in the executions of "religious extremists," and he applied himself to destroying communities and people who did not share his worldview. Eventually, however, the resurrected Christ confronted Paul and psychospiritually transformed him. Christ destroyed the sick, fragmented Paul on his cross and resurrected a healthier, whole Paul to a revolutionized, renewed experience of living. As Paul reconciled to God in Christ, he came to see his earlier destructive behavior as intrinsically crazy and outside the healthy life in God with whom he enjoyed intimacy. As he reconciled to God, Paul's subjectivity healed. He experienced himself as living and moving and having his being in God. He found himself reconciled to and saturated with divinity and went on to live among the most generative lives in Christian history.

The Importance of Reconciliation: The Need to Imitate Christ

Jesus Christ reconciled St. Paul and reconciles us to ourselves, to one another, and to God. But Jesus also wants us to participate in his ministry of reconciliation. Jesus is our role model, and he wants us to imitate him. In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus asks us to reconcile with others with whom we have had a falling out, even before we begin our prayers. Jesus tells us that if our relationships are disordered, we must fix them. Then we can pray.

Jesus taught this, because he knows how things work. He knows that unreconciliation in our relationships will hinder the effectiveness of our prayers—and he wants us to have effective prayers. He does not want our fractured relationships to hinder our deep communication with the Holy Trinity in whom we live and move and have our being.

To reconcile is to bring back into friendship, to harmonize. Reconciliation is a relational movement toward closeness to self, others, and God. An important reason to reconcile is that, if we do not, our unreconciliation will break our hearts. Unreconciliation leaves us with the bitter fruit of alienation and warps our minds. Epidemiological evidence shows that unreconciliation ruins the immune system.¹ It fuels estrangement, and it robs us out of communion with God. Jesus reconciles us to God and wants us to reconcile with one another in order to enjoy the intrinsic health of the reconciled life and have effective communication with the Trinity.

The Parable of the Lost Son

Jesus teaches about reconciliation in the parable of the lost son. (Keep in mind that mine is a psychologist's understanding of the parable, not a theologian's.) Three important players live out the parable's action:

- the father, who owns a big estate,
- a dutiful, older son, who is on task all the time, who keeps himself under parental authority and might even have a type A personality, and
- the younger brother, who wants to do his own thing and does not want to be under parental authority.

Parental authority symbolizes living and moving and having our being in the Trinity.

The younger brother gets his courage up and says to his rich father, "I don't even want to wait until you're dead, Dad; I want my inheritance now. I want to take all that would be mine when you die. I want to take it while you're still living. I want to go away from you. I want to go to a foreign country, and I'll party there." The younger brother's request disrespects the father and hurts his feelings. Because the father loves his son, he is reluctant to acquiesce, but he respects the boy's freedom, so finally he gives him his inheritance. The young man goes to a foreign country, and he lives it up. He engages in "riotous living." He probably buys prostitutes and drinks profusely. Maybe he does drugs as well. His dissolute lifestyle ruins him.

Then a famine hits the land, and a bear market sets in. All economic indicators are down and concurrently the young man runs out of cash. He cannot find a good job and he has no resources for basic necessities. In desperation, the young man gets a job on a pig farm. Down on his luck, he finds himself slopping the hogs and even envying them. He has become a hog butler who serves pigs food that he himself cannot afford. He admits, "I've blown my personal life. Even the hired guys back on Dad's estate have it better than I do here. I've completely ruined my life." So, he brainstorms a solution and concludes, "OK, I could go back to Dad's estate and say, 'Dad, I've sinned against heaven and you. I've done bad things, but I would like you to allow me to return home, no longer as your son, but as a hired hand'."

Why didn't he ask to be reinstated as a son? The younger brother was psychologically astute. He understood human nature enough to know that by rejecting his Dad, he had brought a grotesque relational scenario into force. His selfish behavior interrupted the love between his father and himself. What happens when there is an interruption in love? The rejected person experiences pain, then anger. How do rejected people deal with their anger? They typically seek to punish, humiliate or put into a low status, the people who have broken their hearts. Knowing this, the young man does not presume to come back and say, "Take me back, Dad. Let me be in relationship with you as I was before." He realizes that his father might require him to be humiliated. This is human nature. The son probably resigned himself to the idea that the grotesque relational scenario was even fair. Likely, he concluded, "I hurt Dad, so I deserve to be hurt by Dad in turn.

With this in mind, the lost son starts home, and his father sees him coming from a long way off. Why does his father see him coming from a long way off? Because the father was keeping watch, yearning for his return. He may have thought, "Because I love him, I miss him. Because I miss him, I will welcome him." Upon seeing the boy, the father actually goes out to meet him. Dad literally cannot wait for his son to come home. The son gives his words of apology and—instead of the father saying, "I will now prosecute the grotesque relational scenario and take you back but in a humiliating role,"—he says, "Certainly not! Get in the house. Here's a nice robe." He gives the son good shoes, and he puts a wonderful ring on his finger. He throws a party, and he kills the fatted calf, the best beef in the place. Instead of humiliation time, it's party time. Capable of love, the father bypasses the grotesque relational scenario that weak people perpetrate upon each other—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. You did that to me, so I'll do this to you. The father was so capable of love that he did not have to play that game. Without complication, he accepted his son back. The requirements of love made everything else superfluous. The father had a beautiful position of strength. Astounded by the loving gift of reconciliation, the son will see that by rejecting his father, he rejected love itself—a love that dwells in his Dad for him and saves him.

In this parable of reconciliation, Jesus tells a final incident: While the party is going on, the responsible older brother is working, and he hears the music. People are dancing, having fun, drinking wine and eating excellent meat. So, he draws near and stands outside the party. He would not go inside, because he begins to think that something is wrong. Asking a servant for information, he learns that his "worthless" younger brother just returned from his disastrous binge and that his Dad rewards the unemployed, destitute, fornicating, miscreant drunk with gifts and a party. The older brother is furious. The father comes out and

tries to convince him to join the party. There is plenty for everybody. If the father has enough love for the destitute younger brother, surely he has enough love for the responsible older brother. The older brother does not get the point. He lacks the psychological and spiritual maturity to appreciate how intrinsically reconciling love is—how love can overwhelm the need to hurt those who hurt us. He cannot see how love transcends fairness. The older brother just does not understand. But he is a good guy. We admire him. We appreciate his work ethic. We would probably hire him for a job before we would hire the younger brother, but he is missing something very important. He is starting to think that the father’s approach is wrong. He feels cheated because his “worthless” younger brother got a good thing. His weak, wayward younger brother, who injured a relationship, was reconciled back to that relationship by the stronger father who could love.

Jesus ends the parable with a warning to us. We see this older brother really, really upset. He says, “Dad, you’re throwing my little brother a party, and you’re giving him all kinds of good things. I’ve been working really, really hard. You won’t even kill a goat for me to eat with my friends.” The father essentially tells him, “Everything that I have is yours. What’s the big deal? Come and enjoy all this good will and harmonious merrymaking.” The older brother struggles to decide whether or not he is going to do it.

If the older brother is not careful, he’s going to end up with medical problems. He may brood about how his younger brother should have been punished, and he will get angry and upset. His sympathetic nervous response will activate and will pump out too much adrenaline and cortisol. The older brother will lose neuronal tissue. Anxiety and depression will plague him. His immune system will degrade. He will fail to relate harmoniously to his father and younger brother. His unreconciled, contemptuous stance will generalize into other relationships. He could alienate himself from a lot of blessings. This is a warning to us.

The Alienation of the Unreconciled Mind: The Case of the Angry Young Man

God wants to reconcile with us, and Jesus Christ teaches us to reconcile with one another. Something about reconciliation heals our fragmented psyches. Yet, our free will plays a huge role in whether or not we enjoy the healing benefits of reconciliation. We can refuse to reconcile—but at a cost.

Here is an example of the alienation of the unreconciled mind: When I started my career in mental health, I worked in an inpatient facility for young adults. A young man in my therapy group was angry at everyone. He seemed to have a special relationship to his anger. His anger came from being rejected and treated cruelly by his parents. He generalized his anger to everyone and lashed out to keep all away. He forgave no one, and he never gave anyone the benefit of the doubt. He was terribly unhappy. He could not be friends with anyone. He could not be vulnerable. He could not experience pleasure, because his body was strangled by the tense muscles of a person ready to fight. He even had a certain aura around his body—as if his anger impregnated the space around him. Sometimes I had the feeling—when he was especially angry—that you could just cook an egg on his head. He was so angry. That is the cost of the unreconciled mind.

To be fair, at the time of his treatment, his parents were probably too dangerous to reconcile with in any practical sense. If the young man, however, could have entered a forgiveness process toward them, he stood a real chance to heal in terms of his anger and underlying rejection wounds. Because healing grace comes to those who forgive, he could have healed internally and reconciled with himself. Also, if he could have accepted the unconditional positive regard of the therapy group—the therapeutic equivalent of love—he might have entered into simultaneously harmonious relations with himself and the group. Reconciliation could have been realized. His defensiveness was understandable, though, because being hurt by others does cause us to distance ourselves from possible future hurt. Wherever he is now, I hope he is well.

The Story of the Actor: A Calamitous Example of Choosing Self-Contempt over Reconciling Love

We do have a choice about reconciling. We can move toward the people who have hurt us, or we can move toward the people whom we have hurt—and seek to restore the relationship. Both take humility. For some of us, reconciliation with ourselves or others or God is impossible until we experience love. God loves us directly and God loans us love for one another. In many ways, God is always offering us the opportunity to be loved, to be healed, and to be reconciled. We have a choice as to whether we want to accept that love and heal our inner fragments and fractured relationships.

Here is a story of a lost opportunity to accept love, to heal, and to reconcile. An actor who had prided himself on his good looks and ability to sing and dance was down on his luck. Out of work, he sat around his girlfriend's apartment and ate junk food. He got fatter and fatter, and his "six pack" turned to a paunch. Then a director friend called. He said, "Fred, I have a role for you. I want you to perform in my musical." Needing a job, Fred accepted immediately and went back to work—but things were not right. Rehearsing for a dance scene, Fred found he could no longer dance as he once had. He had become uncoordinated. His big stomach made him wobble. He felt ridiculous. He ran from the rehearsal in humiliation and fled to his girlfriend's apartment. Taking off his shirt, he sat on the bed and looked glumly at his big stomach in the mirror. Humiliated, he moaned and groaned so loudly that his girlfriend overheard and rushed into the room. "Fred, what's the matter? You seem really upset."

"I'm just so fat and overweight. I've lost my ability perform. I'm a disgraced whale!" He grabbed his big stomach and squeezed it in anguish. Then his girlfriend reached to him. She tenderly touched his fat shoulder and whispered, "I love you." In that one moment, in her simple gesture, dynamics of reconciliation could have merged with elegance. Fred was fragmented and unreconciled with himself. Fred stood beside himself and could not value himself. But his girlfriend offered him her love and, in so doing, demonstrated to Fred his lovability. By accepting her love, Fred could have healed internally, connected harmoniously to his girlfriend, and experienced God—because to be in love is to be in God. (St. John the Evangelist would say as much.) All Fred had to do was accept her love to begin to heal psychologically, relationally, and spiritually.

What did Fred do? He said, "No!" A perverse sense of pride made him refuse her love. He dashed away—his big fat stomach jiggling. He stormed into the kitchen, grabbed a donut covered in icing, and feasted on his self-loathing and spite. In this deed, Fred made a choice. He chose fragmentation and estrangement to wholeness and reconciliation. He chose the prideful, isolated prison of self-hatred to the humble freedom of love offered by his girlfriend and God (the wellspring of all love).

The Reconciliation of Jean Valjean: Acceptance of a Bishop's Love Heals Jean Valjean Internally, Relationally, and Spiritually

Reconciliation is offered to us by God in love, and by people, who often act unconsciously as God's ambassadors. Sometimes, for reasons of false pride or defensiveness, we reject it and fail to heal. At other times, in the mystery of grace, we apprehend the divine father offering relationship (often through others or circumstances), and in the blinking of an eye, we experience the transformative nature of reconciliation with self, others, and the Trinity.

Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* illustrates this transpersonal phenomenon. There's one scene that's absolutely astounding. It holds true both psychologically and spiritually. Jean Valjean is on the run. Convicted of a crime, he has just exited a physical prison, but he can neither escape nor gain parole from his metaphysical prison. More animal than man, he has suffered inhuman treatment by the prison authorities. Injured from cruelties, he has no reason to love himself or anyone, let alone to seek God or to entertain ideas of reconciliation. This man is purely in survival mode, trudging from village to village, trying to avoid the authorities, and impossibly trying to put prison behind him, even as he carries it in his heart. Jean Valjean finally ends up in the house of a bishop. Desperate for food and shelter, Valjean begs the bishop's hospitality, and—offending Jean's cynicism—the bishop graciously invites Valjean to enjoy his hospitality. Graciousness is foreign to the convict, and he cannot trust it. But, in his neediness, he eats the food and drinks the wine the bishop offers him, and he accepts the holy man's offer for shelter from the night.

Then, while the bishop is sleeping, Jean Valjean rises from his bed, steals most of the bishop's silver—including cutlery and religious items—throws them into a sack, dashes from the house, and flees into the night. In the morning, the bishop awakens to find his silver, save for two priceless candlesticks, has been stolen. The bishop is deeply hurt and disappointed. Jean Valjean, meanwhile is on the run; he looks extraordinarily fugitive, and the gendarmes easily spot him. When the gendarmes grab him, they recognize the engravings on the silver, and they bring Jean Valjean and the silver back to the house of the bishop. The gendarmes present the stolen silver and Jean Valjean to the bishop. They say, "We have found this criminal, this rogue with your silver. We want to return it, and then we are going to throw this wretch back into prison." But the bishop is like the father in Jesus' parable of the lost son. Valjean expects punishment. He is ignorant to the fact that love enables the bishop to transcend justice. To the gendarmes' remarks, the bishop replies "Oh, no, gentleman. You are mistaken. This man has been my guest, and he is a friend of mine. He has not stolen my silver. It is a gift I have given to him. But you have brought him back, and I am

pleased. Now I can give him these candlesticks as well.” Satisfied, the gendarmes leave, and the bishop gifts Jean Valjean with the very candlesticks the criminal forgot to steal. Instantaneously, Jean Valjean experiences the healing agony of accepted love. He realizes that despite his criminal behavior towards this holy man, this man can love him. Experiencing his lovability through the bishop, he accepts that love into his fragmented soul. The love he accepts is a medicine that reconciles him to himself in terms of psychological healing, to the bishop in terms of relational healing, and to God in terms of spiritual healing. Overwhelmed, he weeps in the relief that comes from the healing remedy of the love that reconciles.

The actor in the previous story rejected love and lost the opportunity to heal and reconcile. In Victor Hugo’s story, Jean Valjean’s acceptance of love is the act of will that unleashes psychological connectedness and spiritual transformation. Willing acceptance of offered love (human or divine) is a key component to *Christian Holism’s* appreciation of reconciliation.

Going Straight to Reconciliation:

Exploring the Christian Unconscious of a David Lynch Film

Film director David Lynch shot a film entitled *The Straight Story*. It’s based on a true story about a man named Alvin Straight, who lived in Middle America. Poor and elderly, Alvin Straight suffered bad health. He walked with two canes, and, after an eye exam revealed Alvin’s deteriorated eyesight, his doctor revoked his driver’s license. Crippled and forbidden to drive, Alvin felt terrible. Then, he received more bad news. Alvin’s brother, Lyle, who lived three hundred miles away, had just had a stroke and was expected to die soon. Alvin Straight became very concerned. Many years ago, Alvin and Lyle were drinking heavily, and they started to argue. They said drunken words that were infuriating and caused disharmony between them. Since that night of intoxication and acrimonious exchange, the two brothers had become estranged. But when poor health confronted Alvin with his and Lyle’s mortality, he realized that time was running out. He remembered how much he loved Lyle, and he was humbled to admit that he could not recall the specifics of the point of disagreement between them. Realizing the pointlessness of their estrangement, he felt tremendous pressure to go straight to Lyle to restore the harmony of the relationship. But he could no longer drive a car, and public transportation came nowhere near Lyle’s cabin. So, single-minded and resolved, Alvin bought a broken-down, second-hand *John Deer* lawn mower tractor. The crippled, half blind man forced his broken body behind the wheel and started the three hundred mile trek, riding on the shoulder of the road, to reconcile with Lyle before he died.

Clinical experience has demonstrated to me that the Holy Spirit affiliates with and works through people who follow the teachings of Jesus Christ—even if that following is informal or unconscious. From the perspective of *Christian Holism*, this spiritual dynamic is especially important to understanding some of the ministerial adventures that confronted Alvin as he pilgrimaged toward Lyle. Alvin responded affirmatively to the pressure of his conscience and the gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit to reconcile with Lyle. Then, opportunities synchronously opened for Alvin Straight to become a minister of reconciliation. The Holy Spirit recognized in Alvin a kindred spirit and affiliated with him—making him capable of advancing the interests of God.

Here is one example. Early in Alvin’s pilgrimage of reconciliation, he sat by his campfire one evening, when a pregnant teenage girl walked into his campsite. Angry and scared, she had run away from her family. She confided in Alvin, “I’m running away from home. My parents hate me. I hate them. They don’t understand me. If they find out about the pregnancy, they’ll kill me, etc.”

Alvin Straight listened to her talk; then he said, “I want to tell you something. I’m old now, and you probably can’t imagine me as a Dad, but when I was a young man, I had lots of kids, and I used to play a game with them. I’d grab a stick and give it to my kids and have them try to break it. They would break the stick over their knees and, of course, the stick would just snap in two. To break one stick is easy. Then I’d have the kids gather a bunch of sticks and wrap them in a bundle with a rope. I’d have them try to break the bundled sticks. But bundled sticks are strong, and they couldn’t break the bundle. I’d tell the kids that alone we’re like the single stick, alone we break pretty easy. But all the sticks together, that’s our family. Together we’re not likely to break, because we make each other strong.” Finished with his story, Alvin fell asleep. The next morning, the girl was gone. By the campfire, she had left a bundle of sticks tied together with a rope. In this way, she communicated that she had understood Alvin’s (and ultimately God’s) point. She was going home to try to work things out with her family. In reconciliation was her strength.

Alvin had other chances to be a minister of reconciliation. At one point in his journey, his lawnmower broke down. He found two brothers who were mechanics to repair his lawnmower. These brothers were the best lawnmower repairmen in the town, but they bickered incessantly. Alvin Straight observed these

brothers humiliate one another. He watched them butcher each other's self-esteem, and publicly rob each other of dignity. He witnessed the kind of behavior that destroys love. Then, in a kind way, he said, "Boys, I appreciate the fact that you have repaired my lawnmower, because I need it to get to my brother Lyle. The whole reason that a broken down old man like me is riding a broken down old lawnmower like that is because I didn't realize that the most important thing in the world is the love of a brother. Boys, when I was your age, I wish I would have known how important my brother Lyle was. I wish I would have treated him with the utmost respect, rather than the meanness with which I did. Now I have to repair me and Lyle, just like you boys repaired my tractor. I just thought you boys ought to know that." Dumbstruck the brothers gaped at each other. Their relationally ruinous behavior had been exposed. They realized that they needed to repent of their pointless fighting in order to reconcile and preserve their intrinsically valuable relationship. Alvin Straight had set them straight. The brothers got the point.

The experience of Alvin Straight illustrates a truth about the Christian psychospirituality of reconciliation. God not only reconciles with us through Christ, but God also privileges us to represent the Kingdom of Heaven to offer reconciliation to the world. When we respond to God or godly conciliatory impulses, we become entrained by God to participate in the Holy Trinity's ministry of reconciliation. St. Paul writes that "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal [for reconciliation] through us" (2 Cor. 5:20, NIV, 1985, p. 1769). When Alvin Straight decided that he was going to reconcile with Lyle, he became God's ambassador of reconciliation. The divine principle poured out of him into the lives of the pregnant girl and the brothers, as though God were making his appeal to them through Alvin Straight. Because Alvin responded to the godly impulse to reconcile, the psyches and relationships of others were blessed and healed.

At the end of his journey, Alvin found Lyle. He parked his old lawn mower in front of Lyle's cabin. He yelled for Lyle, and from inside the cabin Lyle yelled for him. They shuffled toward each other and sat upon chairs on Lyle's dilapidated porch. The two brothers engaged in no relational processing—no working through or negotiations. They simply sat together as the invisible God undid their estrangement and reconciled them.

The Old Lady and the Girl: A Pilgrimage from Teasing to Togetherness

Here is another story of reconciliation about an old lady who lived in a southern town. Her family had moved away or died, and she had no friends. She was quite lonely. For some reason, nobody reached out to her, and, like a lot of society's throw-aways, she became demoralized, took less care of herself, and developed a reputation for being a bit odd. One day, tired of just cats for company, she went for a walk and came across a gaggle of seven seventh grade girls. The thirteen-year-olds knew that the woman had a reputation for being a little peculiar, and, due to their parents' role-modeling of ostracizing the old lady, they felt comfortable teasing her. The leader of the gaggle of girls engaged the old lady in conversation. In a mocking way that amused her friends but was lost on the contact starved old lady, the girl chatted her up with cruel affability and politeness. Her friends tittered, but the old lady did not notice. So happy to have contact with someone other than her cats, she responded to the disingenuous overtures of the lead girl, and tried to engage all the girls, asking them their names and interests, etc. The girls were having a great time at the old lady's expense. Making sport of the old lady with false deference and exaggerated good manners, they tittered to themselves and gave each other knowing glances. But the poor woman became excited and happy. She mistook the girls' interest as genuine and invited them to her home. "Why don't you come to my house today after school? I'll buy treats. I have this wonderful collection of dolls. We can have a tea party together. I can show you the dolls, and if you want to, you can play with them." Teasing the old lady, the girls replied, "Certainly, we'll be there. We'll be happy to come to your party and play with your dolls." Then, they ran off to school. They laughed among themselves and continued to make sport of the old woman, and to congratulate one another at tricking her. None of the girls intended to really honor the old lady's invitation, but the old lady did not know this. Enthusiastically, she went out and bought all sorts of wonderful things for the tea party. Years had gone by since she had entertained. She felt so happy that she was almost confused. She set up her table. She put a white cloth on it and took her precious silver and china from the storage boxes. She set seven places and breathlessly waited for her young guests. Amid the sound of her old clock ticking, she sat and sat and, she waited quietly into the evening. As evening came, she felt the ache of rejection and realized that the girls were just teasing her. They did not really like her, and they would not come. With this realization, she went to bed and slept in the sorrow of rejection.

There was one little girl in the gaggle of seventh graders who knew right from wrong. She went along with the gag, but she knew that she and the other girls had trespassed against the old lady. That night she slept poorly. Visions of the old lady sitting in sorrow kept waking her. Her heart went out to the old lady,

and, in her compassion, she wanted to make things right. But she also felt afraid. If she approached the old lady with an apology, the old lady might be furious. She might yell at the girl or guilt-trip her. But summoning her courage, the girl decided to apologize. After school, she went straight to the old lady's house and knocked. The old lady opened the door and stared at the girl. All day long, the girl had rehearsed her apology, and, as she offered it, she trembled. "I'm sorry my friends and I did not come to your party as we said we would, ma'am. We were mean to inconvenience you, and I'm sorry we did." The old woman was silent, and the girl read anger and pain on her face. The girl felt afraid until something like love shone through the old lady's expression. The old lady smiled and invited the girl inside. "I still have some treats left over from yesterday." The girl followed her to the kitchen, and the old lady set out treats, and they ate and drank together. As they conversed, they began to have fun and discovered that they liked each other. When the girl finally left, it was evening. She left with a doll that the old lady had given to her as a present. The girl came back to visit the old lady again and again. For the remainder of the old lady's life they were friends and enjoyed a rare closeness.

This is a wonderful example of the girl being the prodigal son, and the little old lady being the father. The girl's behavior also reiterates Alvin Straight's role modeling of going straight to the person with whom one has to reconcile and not going on a lot of detours. The hurt old lady invited her in and both of them were healed of their sin-induced internal and relational fragmentation. *Christian Holism* finds that at the heart of such reconciliation is love, and this love is our revealed God.

A Slob of Paradise who Reconciled with his Denigrating Dad

A good friend of mine has given me permission to share his story. My friend calls himself "A Slob of Paradise" because he sees himself as a fallen man with a lots of rough edges—although he is deeply committed to Jesus Christ. We met in the tenth grade. In those days, he was high strung, shy, and oddly gifted at delinquency. His father played a big role in his issues. A survivor of staggering rural poverty, his father was angry, bitter, and insecure. He was threatened by his son's gifts and scapegoated him for his own unhappiness. Nothing the young man did could please his father. My friend grew up with his dad unavailable to him as a mentor or a coach. Compulsively, he tried to please his father, but his father always found fault with him.

After we graduated from high school, my friend moved into an apartment near South Street in Philadelphia. At a local bar, he met a pretty girl and tried to flirt with her, but she said, "Look, it's just not gonna work, because I have to get up for church tomorrow, but you can meet me at the Presbyterian Church at Eighth & Pine streets." Getting a date with her would be an interesting challenge, so he went to her church to ask her out, but she ignored him. Yet, he felt that the service was fantastic. It was the perfect service for a young man who had real issues with authority. A missionary from the Sanctuary Movement gave the sermon. In the 1980s, the Sanctuary Movement consisted of radical young Christians who smuggled refugees and dissidents out of El Salvador and Guatemala. The Sanctuary Christians protected political and economic reformers who were death-listed by the Central American oligarchs. My friend heard this Sanctuary missionary speaking, and he was absolutely radicalized. He moved to Tucson, Arizona and joined the movement. He learned Spanish, and, at great peril to himself, smuggled Christians fleeing a well-founded fear of persecution out of Central America to the Mexican border. From there, he would secretly cross the dissidents into the United States, risking a five year Federal prison sentence for each person he smuggled. It was a very successful ministry, and he saved many Christian lives. He was arrested several times, but the charges were dropped, presumably because the government feared a public reaction to the sentencing of Christians for saving other Christians from persecution.

Periodically, during those dangerous years in the Sanctuary Movement, my friend would go on furlough. He would visit his Dad hoping that his father would finally approve of him. He hoped that his father would recognize his intelligence for learning Spanish, his commitment to Christian service, and his courage to risk imprisonment. He hoped that his father would recognize that Central American Christians were alive and in Sanctuary in North America because of his ministry and the risks he took. But his Dad continued as before and always put him down. His father refused to see this man for the good, brave man that he was. With irrational negativity, he continued faulting and criticizing his son. Then, one day my friend decided that he could not allow his father to trespass against him anymore. He thought, "I have to take responsibility for good stewardship over my own well-being, my own psychology, my own soul. Like the people I have saved, I am made in the Image of God. I cannot put myself in harm's way anymore. If my father is going to perpetuate this cruelty against me, I have to take responsibility for preventing it. That could mean cutting off relations, but my first choice is reconciliation—if my father will treat me

appropriately.” So, he made a special visit to his father. He was frightened and, characteristically, his father started criticizing him—not about anything remarkable, but giving and receiving denigration was just the way their dysfunctional relationship worked. This time, though, my friend said, “Dad, you just can’t do this. This is all you do. This is all we do. I come here, and I’m your victim. You relate to me in this surreal and very cruel way. It’s unworthy of you, and it’s unworthy of me.” Then, of course, in a fury the old man interrupted and redoubled putting-down his son to hobble this threatening communication. But his son said, “No, Dad, that’s our old way of relating. If you want to relate to me in this sadistic way, it’s not gonna happen, because I am not your victim anymore. Now, I don’t know exactly what messed you up so much and why you take it out on me. But I am willing to let the past, and what a bad Dad you’ve been, wash away. But you have to knock it off, or I’ll go, and you won’t see me again, because I have to protect myself from your put downs.” To the father’s credit, he heard his son. He wiped a tear from his eye, and the two of them started to reconcile at that very moment. It was difficult but both men entered into a commitment of repair, respect, and reconciliation. Today the father acknowledges that his son is an accomplished international missionary—as well as a very personal missionary to him. The son courageously risked their relationship in order to transform it from sadomasochism to genuine love.

Recently, I attended my friend’s wedding, and it was beautiful to see him and his father with their arms around each other. They smiled at each other a lot and seemed to enjoy genuine affection in their relationship. In following Christ, there is risk, but genuine reconciliation is really achievable.

Clearing Mistaken Assumptions about the Other to Foster Reconciliation: The Madness of Mind-Reading

In my consulting practice, I find that people sometimes entertain skewed assumptions about one another’s motivation and behavior. They read motivations into another’s behavior which are simply untrue. This leads to misunderstandings that cause profound estrangement. Once these misapprehensions are made conscious, however, reconciliation can occur in light of the truth.

I had an interesting consult, for example, with a group of metallurgical engineers. A real problem existed between two of the leaders: the top executive and his talented chief scientist. Shortly after the executive hired the chief scientist, their relationship deteriorated from initial cordiality to malignant acrimony. They argued so much and communicated so poorly that business began to suffer. So they invited me to consult with them, and, in the course of my data gathering, I learned that the chief scientist’s past relationship with her father played a decisive role in her current difficulties with the top executive. Her father had been ragingly alcoholic and ragingly abusive, causing his brilliant daughter to grow into a woman with a father-shaped gap in her heart. She married someone like her Dad, hoping that he would support and endorse her, but he abandoned her to his own preference for drink. She divorced him and remained lonely but was superior in her profession. The top executive of the metallurgical firm recognized her gifts and hired her. Observing her high level of performance, he said to himself, “She’s a wonderful scientist and manager and knows how to drive projects forward. The last thing I want to do is offend her by micromanaging her.” Respecting his chief scientist’s competence, the top executive managed her with a hands-off style, as a sign of respect. But the chief scientist experienced this as abandonment and read the abusive neglect of her ex-husband and father into the top executive’s managerial absence. The way these two people were missing one another was almost Shakespearean. She needed affirmation, but he did not want to offend her by getting into her part of the business. Once their assumptions were made conscious, they were able to work together and become colleagues and friends.

As a cognitive-behaviorist, I find that much reconciliation can occur when estranged parties discuss their assumptions about each other. Often, one party believes they know what motivates another party but are mistaken. This “mind reading error” can estrange husbands and wives. In one case, the husband was disgruntled with his wife for over a year. He entertained the assumption that she knew the exact nature of his needs but simply refused to meet them. This interpretation of her behavior left him feeling rejected and angry. During therapy, his wife was surprised that he complained of so many unmet needs. When she asked, “Why didn’t you tell me you needed me to do those things?”, he replied, “I thought you knew I needed them.” The wife rightly pointed out that she could not read his mind and should not be held responsible for failing to meet needs about which she did not know. Healing of the relationship involved the husband abandoning the assumption that his wife could read his mind. He took responsibility for telling her what his needs were. Once the wife had the information, she was able to meet those needs, and the couple fell in love again. Clearing away his erroneous assumption was the beginning of their reconciliation.

Not Choosing or Choosing Reconciliation with God through Christ: The Example of Faustus and an Anti-Faustus

Because God wants to reconcile with us, he designed the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to clear away the debris of sin that alienates us from a loving, dynamic relationship with him. God loves us so much we can repeatedly offer our sins (Even the big ones!) to Christ's sacrifice and conclude our disastrous alienation from the loving Trinity. Yet, God respects our freedom. We can choose to reject Christ's sacrifice and God's desire for no-fault reconciliation. We can remain in hellish alienation—at a cost. This negative psychospirituality has been explored in a play by Christopher Marlowe (a contemporary of Shakespeare's), who wrote a play entitled *Dr. Faustus*.

A brilliant scholar, theologian and scientist, Faustus taught at a big university in medieval Germany. After reading many, many books, he suffered from boredom, restlessness, and low grade depression. He did not love anyone, nor did he seem to like himself. Faustus cultivated morose thoughts and focused on how terrible he felt. He refused to get involved in prayer, spiritual direction, or spiritually therapeutic disciplines that might have helped. Instead, he closed himself in his office and engaged in weird reflections. He mused, "I would sell my soul to the devil in order to get some glamorous, occult knowledge to spice up my life." Mephistopheles, a henchman of Satan showed up and said, "I heard that. We can definitely work out a deal. Here's the contract: we'll give you all the occult knowledge that you want. You'll be able to have spells and supernatural, forbidden powers that every wizard in Europe will envy. In return, at the end of a period of years, we will get your soul for eternity. Is it a deal?" Faustus exclaimed, "Where do I sign?" Faustus the moron! He signed the contract with Mephistopheles and received the forbidden, occult powers. Faustus then ravaged Europe, sabotaged the church, and pursued interesting, useless knowledge through conversations with devils. Suddenly, at the end of the contract period, Faustus realized that he had made a terrible mistake. On the eve on which Mephistopheles and other devils were to claim his soul and drag it into hell, Faustus wrung his hands in his office. He said to himself, "Even now one drop of Christ's blood could save me!" Then, in the next instant, he could not bring himself to throw himself on the mercy of God. He just could not do it. There was some flaw in the employment of his free will.

Marlowe, in his depiction of Faustus, neglected to depict what happened in the scholar's developmental and learning history that compromised his character so much. But the fact is, Faustus refused to avail himself of that salvational drop of Christ's blood. In the image of Christ's blood, God showed Faustus that Jesus was literally dying to destroy the sin that estranged Faustus from the Trinity. In that image of shed blood, God said to Faustus, "Forget the occult stuff and dealing with the devil, the false gods, your narcissism, whatever. Give all the bad stuff and the consequences to me. I'll pay the price. Just come back! On my cross I'm dying to reconnect with you!" But Faustus was unwilling to allow Christ's blood to accomplish this reconciliation. Instead, he chose hell. In a horrible, bloody scene, the devils came, and they dragged him to perdition. The next morning, upon entering his study, his university colleagues found the smoking remains of Faustus' academic robes. That was all that was left. Something went wrong with Faustus' choosing. God offered Faustus reconciliation, but something perverse in the scholar's nature caused him to choose the torment of estrangement. Faustus' story is a cautionary tale.

When we think about reconciliation with God, however, we should be optimistic. *Christian Holism* embraces the good news of the Christian revelation—which is that God came into the world to save us from our mistakes and to delight with us in this world and the next. A charming medieval story about the final mortal moments of an old sinner illustrates this transpersonal reality:

The Devil and the Dying Man

It is said that the devil came once to a dying man. He held in his hand a long parchment roll in which was set down all the man's sins from birth to the passing hour; all the idle words he had spoken, all the falsehoods he had told, all the impure and profane words he had uttered, all his angry words, all his wanton words, all his scandals, all his omissions. Next came his thoughts; and then his acts of sin, arrayed under the ten commandments. It was a frightful listing indeed. Then Satan said, "What have you as a set-off against this list of sins?" The sick man replied, "Put this down first: 'The blood of Christ cleanseth from all sin;' and underneath add this: 'Whosoever believeth in Me shall not perish, but have everlasting life.'" Whereupon the devil vanished; and the sick man died with these words on his lips, 'Whosoever shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth?' (Brewer, 1992, p. 212)

The hero of this little story is an anti-Faustus, a man who uses his free will wisely. He chooses to evade the hell of estrangement from God by assenting to let the shed blood of Christ destroy the alienating effects of his mistakes. His choice leads to reconciliation with God: a reconciliation which Jesus images for us in the form of a party in heaven (Lk. 15)—a transcendent enjoyment of dynamic harmony with the Trinity and our loved selves. Wonderfully, we can choose such reconciliation.

Reference Note

1. For an excellent discussion of this point read Ornish (1998).

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