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Seeking Bliss and Learning to Grieve: A Case for Theological Autoethnography

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Theological Studies
2018

Abstract

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The use of autoethnography has expanded within social science and praxis-oriented fields. However, the fields of theology and ministry remain skeptical of the method. It is my contention that autoethnography is indeed compatible with practical, reflective, and introspective theological inquiry. That is, autoethnography systematically examines the state and condition of the soul in relation and subject to the Law of Being described by Paul the Apostle and St. Augustine of Hippo. I use personal autoethnographic narrative to supplement methodological and theological theory with example. By engaging and processing the event of my dad's murder, I more critically begin to understand my condition as living under the Law of God and not yet under Grace. Existential wanderings have led to a misuse of alcohol and state of despair in which I fail to live into the fullness of my purpose as a child of God. Autoethnography is a plea for revelation, an appeal for God to structure my being so that I might begin to live under Grace.

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Acknowledgements

Thanks, Dad. I'm findin' my way alright.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: AUGUSTINIAN THEOLOGY, PRACTICAL THEOLOGY, AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY.....	4
CHAPTER TWO: PRACTICAL THEOLOGY, QUALITATIVE RESEARCH, AND RESEARCH DESIGN.....	21
CHAPTER THREE: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC DATA, COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS.....	34
CHAPTER FOUR: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS AN EMBRACE OF PATHOS.....	55
CONCLUSION.....	63
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	65

INTRODUCTION

Autoethnography has taken the qualitative research world by storm.¹ This creative method involves three components: self (auto), culture (ethno), and writing (graphy). Qualitative researchers consider their own personal story, identity, and emotions as intertwined with broader cultural practices. They seek to write about it, stir the pot a little bit and bring some nuance to the academic world. This type of writing may focus attention primarily on self or culture, meaning that the researcher may seek to understand either one in light of the other. Though recommended in current literature, ministry and theological scholars remain skeptical of the method.² Autoethnography, largely, remains unused or protested within American theological inquiry. Interesting that the two are concurrent. How can one protest a method of inquiry without having used it or studied it in depth? A brief correspondence with two British scholars encouraged me to pursue autoethnography in theological study despite my encounter with American scholastic skepticism.³

I this work, I contend that autoethnography is compatible with practical theology as a reflective theological method that reveals the *habitus* of one's

¹ The International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry has declared autoethnography a special interest group for their conferences. Great attention is given to this research method within nursing, education, communication studies, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

² Heewon Chang, Faith Ngunjiri, and Kathy-Ann Hernandez, *Collaborative Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, US: Routledge, 2012) 142; Heather Walton, *Writing Methods In Theological Reflection* (Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd, 2014).

³ I exchanged a few emails with Prof. Stephen Pattison from the University of Birmingham and Prof. Heather Walton from the University of Glasgow. Upon realizing the scarcity of autoethnographic theological literature I reached out to Pattison and Walton seeking advice for this thesis project and recommendations for any literature.

internal soul, that is, thematic practices of knowing and being. If practical theology examines the outward activities of an individual after the revelation of Jesus Messiah found in the Gospel, autoethnography then examines the internal activities of the soul. I make this contention by actually writing an autoethnography, so as to supplement theory with narrative examples. The voice of the text gradually changes in each chapter. I shift from talking theoretically and academically into a conversational tone, as is common with autoethnographic arguments.

In the first chapter, I review and interpret Augustinian theology in light of my own spiritual walk as a framework for reflective, practical theology. Additionally, I make the case that before practical theology considers the effectiveness of actions taken within the world, attention should first be given to the internal processes and practices of the soul. The task is to understand and structure the inward activities of the soul before external activities.

In the second chapter I will explore qualitative inquiry, research paradigms, and practical theological methods. I specifically take Richard Osmer's practical theological method and use it to examine my own soul as context of practice. I ask of myself: what is going on in my soul; why is it going on; what ought to be going on; and, how might I respond? I transition by situating autoethnography as a means to answer these questions.

In chapter three I describe autoethnography and different types of data, share personal autoethnographic narratives to supplement theory with data, and explain data analysis. These elements (data, analysis, and narrative) answer the first two questions, what is going on in my soul and why. Finally, chapter four will

conclude this work by expounding upon the autoethnographic narratives from chapter three with theological theory. I discover autoethnography capacity to answer the third question: what ought to be going on in my soul? And, I recognize that autoethnography itself *is* an answer to the fourth question: how might I respond? In sharing pieces of my story, I hope that the connection between theology and autoethnography comes to light. The study of one's internal soul illuminates how and why the self interacts with both the world and theology. Throughout this process, I've come to understand my soul as emotionally traumatized by my father's murder.

CHAPTER ONE

Augustinian Theology, Practical Theology, and Autoethnography

Augustine's Confessions and his interpretation of Paul's Epistle to the Romans depict considerably interesting ontological, epistemological, and ethical theories. Wisdom and virtue as means of righteous being and knowing occur by means of revelation. We are nothing and can be nothing good without God revealing and working good within us. Augustine first recounts the iniquity of his youth and young adult life throughout Confessions. He begins with stories of struggle in school, too concerned with sport and competition with friends instead of studying and reading. This earns him stern punishment from his teachers. Later, Augustine describes an incident in which he and his friends stole pears from a neighbor's orchard, without any intent to even eat them. These seemingly harmless, childlike endeavors encouraged the growth of nastier habits in adolescence. Augustine discovered the aesthetic pleasures of sex; he loved to love and be loved. Excitement, connection, freedom, attention, and perhaps power enticed his appetite for existential meaning. This extended into his professional, academic endeavors as well. Listening to many great orators of his day, Augustine desired to assume such a role, again loving as he would like to be loved himself.

The Manichean tradition and Neo-Platonism combined with the study of rhetoric occupied much of Augustine's time throughout young adulthood. Reason and wisdom provided a structured, coherent view of the world and thus also a moral standard to be pursued. Augustine desired to ascend the mountain of the Lord. But, he trusted the idols of carnal wisdom and swore by the false god of human reason (Psalm 24:3-4). All the while his mother Monica pleaded for him

to adopt a Christian faith. Indeed, our hearts are restless until they rest in God. But, as Augustine would argue, God gave him over to the desires of his heart.

In loving sex, Augustine failed to, “know the Creator through his creation.”⁴ Augustine objectified the women of his love, failing to recognize them as ends in themselves, creations of the Creator. Further, Augustine claimed to have ascended into wisdom through human reason alas he became a fool.

Anagnorisis, a mysterious existential discovery, lead Augustine to *metanoia*, the conversion Monica had so fervently prayed for. Augustine found himself with a new ontological, epistemological, and ethical perspective. That is to say, as with *anagnorisis*, Augustine found himself as having been changed without being able to name the moment or the source of change. We may think of how we once thought, and think of how we think now, but not be aware of the moment or think of the source of our change.

This carries significantly interesting notions about human agency in pursuit of morality, proper being, and knowledge. We are apprehended, made aware of morality and proper being. That is, for Augustine, our knowledge of morality and being are dependent upon God’s revealing. Or, if Barthian language suits the context better, the Wholly Other or Wholly Unknown facilitates the revealing. The timeless debate of justification by works or by faith alone strike a chord with this topic; with Augustine’s perspective, it seems that humanity lacks agency entirely. Taking the form of a commentary, Augustine’s interpretation of Romans elucidates this topic.

⁴ Paula Landes, ed., *Augustine on Romans* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1982) 3.

For Paul, Augustine argues, there are four modes of being and existing in relation to God: 1) before the Law; 2) under the Law; 3) under grace; and, 4) in peace. The last, being in final and everlasting peace, such eternal freedom lies beyond this finite world. Before the Law, we are unaware of the Law and ignorant of sin. Under the Law we are aware of sin and yet unable to stop ourselves from sinning. Under grace, we are neither concerned with nor subject to the temptation of sin. The Law essentially initiates the process of salvation, given that one must first have knowledge of sin before repentance.⁵ For Augustine and Paul, humanity discovers themselves suddenly aware of their own sin and subjection to the Law. I interpret Augustine's and Paul's theology here as the Law of Being, given Augustine's argument that the Law, "forbids what ought to be forbidden and prescribes what ought to be prescribed."⁶ Like Newtonian physics, the Law of Being structures our world. Our subjection to this Law of Being prompts a multitude of questions. How is it that we came into awareness of the Law? When did we come into awareness? Now that we are aware of ourselves as sinners, have we any agency in pursuit of justification? How might we participate with the Law of Being and find ourselves living under grace?

Humanity proves to be inquisitive, curious about the world, constructing systemic means of tackling questions and problems. Science, both empirical and theoretical, engages a process of developing and testing hypotheses through diligent study. The conclusions of these studies either affirm or criticize and revise knowledge. This revised knowledge then informs action taken within the

⁵ Landes, x.

⁶ Landes, 7.

physical world. A simple example: shipwrights construct stunning works of magnitude that respond to and cooperate with the laws of physics, floating upon daunting and often treacherous waters. Though subject to the tides of the sea, the riggings of a ship, its sturdy bow, and the sails allow a captain to guide the vessel nonetheless, cooperate with the movement and flow of physical reality as it unfolds. Knowledge, ontology, and ethics work in a similar way; Augustine's Law of Being, morality, exists and operates like Newtonian physics. This intangible, ineffable Law of Being structures our living. We are entirely subject to this reality. We must give ourselves to this Law of Being and the one who posits the Law and teaches us the Law.

We must study, intently, the Law of Being inscribed upon our hearts, come to know our being more critically, affirm or criticize and revise what we previously held to be true of knowledge, being, and morality. We are to construct an ethical vessel that cooperates with the Law of Being, as knowing unfolds in our study. How, though? How is it that I came to know the structure of my Being? For Schleiermacher knowledge of being and the Law of Being occur through a feeling of absolute dependence. The feeling of absolute dependence is not mere emotion, but a "sense and inner conviction" of being in relation to God.⁷ I grievously, fearfully recognize my relation to and dependence upon the All Mighty and Wholly Other, the Creative Fire steadfastly burning and convicting my soul unto dust. By what means am I able to construct an ethical system that cooperates with the Law of Being? Autoethnography stands as a worthy method of inquiry

⁷ Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

into my relationality to the Law of Being, compatible with an introspective, reflective, and honest theological system that affirms one's dependence upon the Unknown.

Whereas ethnography explores and describes the habitus, or observable practices, of a social group in a particular context, autoethnography demands vulnerability and introspective criticism of one's own personal practice, or in this particular case, my being in relation to the Law of Being. That is, the individual soul (auto) becomes the subject of study in light of a particular social context, group, or setting (ethno). I refrain from using the word "self" due to its earthly and carnal qualities. The concept of "selfhood" implies distinction, autonomy, and independence of other beings. A soul exists always and only in relation to God. Our task is, of course, to evaluate the soul's being as it stands in relation to God who posits the Law of Being. We must, "open ourselves up for criticism about how we've lived," and adjust accordingly.⁸

When open to criticism, we also open ourselves to *anagnorisis*, a present, conscious rediscovering of our place amid the cosmos, dependent upon the structured nature of life, and subject to the Law of Being. When *anagnorisis* occurs it facilitates metanoia, a shift in how we perceive self, soul, existence, and ontology. Recognizing our dependence upon a mysterious reality illustrates life's duality, *allogtriosis* and *oikeosis*, alienation and at-home-ness. We are dependent upon the One in all and alienated from it. However, we desire union with the One in all. A sense and taste for the infinite itself does not lead to righteousness, or a

⁸ Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, US: Alta Mira Press, 2004) 34.

feeling of *oikeosis*. Desire to live and act righteously are not enough, as Augustine clearly argues in his interpretation of Paul's Epistle to the Romans.

I do not understand my own actions, still celebrating aesthetic experience, pleasing the body's fervent desire for alcohol. I do not do what I want, I do the very thing I hate, loving, "people on the basis of human judgment...the kind of praise I would have liked to receive myself," and further still, I fail to love my enemies and forgive, some of whom are my blood relatives.⁹ I fail to participate in the economy of the Whole, God's divine narrative, to cooperate with the Law of Being. I am immoral, the prodigal's son, wasting away the precious gift of life. I am alienated with a sense of and desire to be at home with the *Hen-Kai-Pan*, the One in All. Like Augustine, "From a hidden depth a profound self-examination had dredged up a heap of all my misery and set it 'in the sight of my heart' (Ps. 18:15)."¹⁰ I am under the Law, aware of it, and not yet under Grace. That is, the Law rules over me, and I am subject to its violent tide. I am drowning in shame, pulled by fleshly concupiscence without hope of relief.¹¹ How is it that I know the Law, morality, the structured order of my being, and fail to cooperate?

Is this blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? If God has revealed in me the Law, and if (as Augustine argues) that I am only capable of good in so far as God works good within me, does my soul's continued reveling in sin imply a refusal to allow God to perform good within me? Augustine states, "the person who despairs of or

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1992) 65; Romans 7:15-16.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1992) 152.

¹¹ Paula Landes, ed., *Augustine on Romans* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1982) 5.

ridicules or belittles the prediction of grace...and who then refuses to repent for his sins, sins against the Holy Spirit...he would be forgiven neither in this world nor in the next.”¹² I am not refusing to repent but am skeptical to make predictions of grace. I am skeptical of resurrection in this life. Revelation, *anagnorisis*, *metanoia*, these have eluded me.

Hence the reason I am so drawn to practical theology. I need make this distinction, practical theology does not and cannot speak of God, the Wholly Unknown and Wholly Other; practical theology is an action inspired by who we perceive God to be, mysterious and ineffable. Autoethnography as practical theology facilitates, responds to, attends to, and evaluates the human condition as finite, fallible, and arrogant in pursuit of wisdom and virtue. Only in understanding my condition under the Law might I begin to live under Grace (*anagnorisis*, *metanoia*). That is to say, as with Augustine’s Law of Being, one must first have knowledge of the Law, an awareness of sin, before perceiving a need for Grace. Autoethnography is an exploration of confession, and perhaps confessional writing itself inviting God to disclose Godself; not setting the conditions under which Grace might appear, but recognizing one’s need of Grace and asking God to direct one’s path toward such a life. As I (auto) engage with the culture of religion and philosophy (ethno), I realize the impossibility of building (graphy) a vessel worthy enough to navigate the tide of life with any skill. Theologians, philosophers, clergy, or religious laity may ask this question of themselves: Who am I (auto) in relation to the culture in whom I’ve placed

¹² Landes, 71.

epistemological, ontological, and moral authority (ethno); and further, what is the life I've built (graphy)? Does my finite, imperfect construction of being reflect the Being and cooperate with its structured order? "In their perverted way all humanity imitates [God]. Yet they put themselves at a distance from [God] and exalt themselves against [God]," these human systems of thought stand as idols, seducing and enticing.¹³ How do I fare against the tides of life?

Remorsefully, repentantly, and selfishly I desire to understand my condition. I've been asked, "Isn't autoethnography navel gazing?" Yes, obsessive looking upon the soul does inflate the ego. But, also no; soulful-reflection with autoethnography does not occur in a void or at the expense of a broader existential view or spiritual cause. Quite the contrary, investigating the story of our lives yields incredible insight:

This story is offered as a paradigm—not in the sense that it represents outstanding, definitive achievement, a sort of heroism in a vacuum, but because it can properly be read as an instance of a pattern, a 'canon', to which others should conform. So autobiography [or autoethnography] is a bid for one's own narrative to be accepted as illustrating a normative or classic ideal. Hence, so often, the need for apologia: the untidy and questionable parts of a story must be shown not to be inconsistent with this overall claim. Both I as narrator and any particular reader will be invited into a fuller understanding of our shared convictions...¹⁴

¹³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 32.

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

I believe in radical vulnerability, inviting others into spaces of deep wondering and wandering. The canon of our humanity, our shared convictions as moral beings seeking righteous fulfillment of the Law of Being, require study.

Autoethnography as method of inquiry systematically guides us, writer and reader, into the rough torrents of our souls, and invites Jesus Messiah to still the water. That is to say, “Every man must continually face the possibility of having to abandon the very belief [ethno; earthly wisdom] that determines his place in the world and binds him to the earthly order of things.”¹⁵ Autoethnography is an exposure and abandonment of the earthly ego (reason subject to the sins of the flesh) as moral authority, discovering the structured order of things, and inviting said order to inspire our being to live into the Being.

I am the wandering albatross, it seems. The obtuse seabird with insatiable hunger often consumes well beyond the belly’s need or content. In consequence the albatross floats stagnant upon the ocean, helpless against predators or the tide. I am the wandering albatross, intent upon consuming the indigestible, toxic, idolatrous wisdom of the academy. Here I am: educated, spiteful, drunken, and helpless, forever adrift upon the crashing sea. Questionable life. Do the caverns of my soul still contain a spark from the Pneuma? The fire of my heart has gone out (Romans 12:11).

How, then, could I live and act according to the purposiveness of my form?¹⁶ I break that in which I boast to know well (Rom. 2:23). The youth of my

¹⁵ Fredrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958).

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

church look to me as a guide, surely God you will attend to them and care when I cannot. Their parents, unbeknownst to them, listen to hypocrisy as I stand at the pulpit. I desecrate the altar with my pride, enjoying the feeling of power in serving the Eucharist, and thus also insult the pastoral vocation of my murdered father who violently died unto Christ in service of others. So terribly emotive, I woefully, angrily lament. The rosary within my palm is of no use to me, it seems. I must confess, seek instruction, and remain disciplined to obtain the true wisdom of the Law (Wis. 6:17). Life is dependent upon God's revealing, that I might change my habitus. So, what is practical theology, then? An awareness of God's revealing the Law of Being through Jesus Messiah; an attempt to understand this Law; and, an attempt to respond to this Law by structuring the inward and outward activities of the soul.

The early church and early theological writings earnestly contemplated the role of ministry in light of God's revelation within the New Testament. Peoples of faith have always been concerned with practice. These concerns included personal practices resembling asceticism and confession. Personal piety was the embodiment of faith, good practice responding to God. For example, the councils of perfection that guided early spiritual practice celebrated the conquering of personal sins of the flesh. Augustine poetically recounts his renunciation of the flesh, awakening to the glory of God's divine order for life, "the pleasure of the bodily senses, however delightful in the radiant light of this physical world, is seen by comparison with the life of eternity to be not even worth considering."¹⁷

¹⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1992) 171.

Indeed, I know these words to be true, but they've yet to make a strong enough mark so as to inspire a change to my habitus.

The words, "Practical Theology," however, wouldn't actually appear as a distinct concept until 1659 in Gijsbertus Voetius' *Selectae disputationes theologiae*. Voetius divided practical theology into three categories: 1) ethics, 2) aescetics/spirituality, and 3) liturgy, canon, and homiletics.¹⁸ Succinctly put, the telos of practical theology at the time emphasized, "the true care for the soul and the appropriate service of the pastor," as a church and moral authority.¹⁹ The practice of Christian faith structures the inward and outward activity of the soul as a worshipful being, engaging the great mystery of life in liturgy. Deeply considered personal piety must also inform work in the world (Jam. 2).

With a multitude of practical theological definitions, modernity tends to privilege work in the world above personal, reflective piety. Practical theologians describe the field as: 1) "the empirically oriented theological theory of the mediation of the Christian faith in the praxis of modern society"²⁰; 2) "the process of placing theology and cultural wisdom into a mutually critical and mutually enhancing conversation with one another for the purpose of evoking and probing"²¹; 3) "an activity of faith and responsibility shared by all

¹⁸ Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 96.

¹⁹ Martin Bucer, *Over de Ware Zielzorg*, trans. Herman Selderhuis (De Groot Goudriaan, 1991).

²⁰ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2014).

²¹ Elaine Graham, *Pathways to the Public Square: Practical Theology in an Age of Pluralism* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005).

believers...to reconnect proclaimed beliefs to actions”²²; and 4) “dedicated to enabling the faithful performance of the gospel and to exploring and taking seriously the complex dynamics of the human encounter with God.”²³ Each of these definitions discuss a particular action taken within the world in light of Christian faith. Practical theology has yet to be captured. A countless assembly of wordy and elusive definitions have been offered, like those listed above. And yet I still cannot tell you, definitively, exactly how practical theology functions. How can theology be “empirically oriented?” Is God Godself not entirely unobservable, beyond the world of tangible experience as an epistemological source, the Wholly Other, as Barth notes? What are we “evoking” and “probing”? What is an activity of faith and who decides what faith is responsible to/for? What is faithful performance of a mysterious Gospel? Is faithful performance even possible?

Practical theology recognizes the ineffable profundity of the story of Jesus Messiah and seeks to do something, respond to this radical event. Put simply, theology is God (*theos*) talk (*logos*). Thus, as I interpret it, practical theology literally means: God talk concerned with action (*praktikos*). In other words, action that waits for and responds to revelation, *anagnorisis*. As we discover our soul’s eternal connection to and dependence upon God we reconstruct our being to mirror the Being. We aspire to structure the inward and outward activities of our soul, embodying the love and grace of God, in pursuit of justification.

The Enlightenment opposed such theocentric morality. Instead of practice

²² Joyce Mercer and Bonnie Miller-McLemore, eds., *Conundrums in Practical Theology*, vol. 2 (Boston: BRILL, 2016).

²³ John Swinton, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. (London: SCM Press, 2011).

responding to perceived encounter with the Wholly Other, inspired by the love of God as Augustine states, ethics became principles deduced through reason without any need of God. This era displaced the church as an authoritative voice for spiritual growth and emphasized the individual subject's autonomy, celebrating subjective reason. Heitink states:

The enlightened person has become a different kind of person. Each has become the subject of her or his own experience. This leads to a new understanding of religion and church that rebels against all forms of authoritarian faiths and develops through subjective reflection and rational deliberation.²⁴

Immanuel Kant contributed to this movement with his deontological ethics. Humanity, per Kant's categorical imperative, should act in accordance with that which might be made a universal law. Practical cognition enables humanity to deduce and act according to principle, though imperfectly. The only unequivocally good thing is a good will acquired through reason.

At the center of each observable practice, however, in each specific context is the practice-r, an agent. Explicitly, the soulful being who embodies a confessing heart.²⁵ Richard Crouter contends, "it is not methods but the mind of the theologian implementing the methods that influences individuals within the

²⁴ Heitink, 19.

²⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1992) 26.

religious community.”²⁶ An acting agent possesses more power than practice itself. A, “doer exists before the deed,” certainly, and a theologian convicted by God exists before their practice.²⁷ That is, a passive being reflects, contemplates, and reacts to conviction then chooses to act in one way or another. This ontological fact illustrates the necessity for self-exploration, to draw out the purpose of our heart (Pro. 20:5). Further, obedience to the Law of our heart, the Gospel of Messiah, is virtue, an embodied affirmation of our existing in relation to God (Rom. 2:20). I wonder, what does it mean for humanity to practice their faith according to its true, intended nature? How might we achieve virtue in our faith practice, and participate in God’s order for our life? I’m not concerned, necessarily, with the effectiveness of contextual practices. I’m concerned with ‘bildung’, cultivating the man according to the nature of his soul as eternally bound with the divine, “after whom he is fashioned.”²⁸ I, an acting agent within a church community, must cultivate my soul according to the nature of the Being after which it has been structured. Cultivation fertilizes the soul, preparing it for God to plant the seed of grace.

The desire exists, *oikeosis* with the Hen-Kai-Pan, the One in All, “Who is over all, and through all”; how might we walk in a manner worthy of our calling (Ephesians 4)? We desire to ascend the hill, as David has, and stand in the Lord’s

²⁶ Richard Crouter, “Shaping an Academic Discipline: The Brief Outline on the Study of Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schliermacher*, ed. Jacqueline Marina (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁷ Patti Lather and Elizabeth St. Pierre, “Post-Qualitative Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, no. 26:6 (2013): 629–33.

²⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989)8, 10.

holy place (Psalm 24:3). Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* addresses this issue, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."²⁹ Is our will to do good enough to attain justification or righteousness, as the Enlightenment suggests? Or, must we submit in confession, professing faith in the mystery of an unknown, gracious God, upon whom we are wholly dependent? What agency do we hold? Augustine affirms the latter, "one should understand that we are able to do good works through love, and we have love through the Holy Spirit...therefore no one should glory in his works as though they were his own, for he does them by the gift of God."³⁰ In contrast to Augustine, Origen believed human will capable of resisting sin. For Origen:

Paul's order, "Do not let sin reign in your mortal body" (Rom 6.12), assumes the existence of free will and our ability to avoid sin...that everyone is capable of paying out to righteousness and sanctification the service he was previously paying out to the devil, once one's purpose has been converted to better things.³¹

Of course, free will exists. Clearly Augustine and Origen disagree on the means by which the free will lives according to the structure of its intended nature, in union with God. Is a good will of humanity itself, deduced through reason, or inspired

²⁹ Romans 12:1.

³⁰ Paula Landes, ed., *Augustine on Romans* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1982) 31; Augustine discusses this again after regarding Romans 9:15.

³¹ Thomas Halton et al., eds., "Origen: Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans Books 1-5," in *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Thomas Scheck (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001) 29.

by the love of God alone? As we've discussed, modern practical theological literature largely focuses on the structure of and actions taken by the church as moral authority. Such literature neglects to consider the fallible nature of humanity and fails to address the internal convictions of an individual, acting agent. Practical theology should earnestly contemplate the state of one's *positionality* in relation to God, one's corrupt moral condition, and one's agency to improve each before tackling the question of contextually situated, outward practices.

In review, Augustine's theology and interpretation of Romans depict humanity as dependent upon God's revealing. We come into awareness of sin when aware of the Law. God posits the Law and thus makes us aware of our moral depravity. God not only reveals the Law to us, but also through God we learn to live under grace; it is only by God's good will within us that we participate in goodness and grace. Though we remain beings with free will, the extent to which we use our free will in pursuit of righteousness is dependent upon God's revealing. Righteousness seems, then, to be the product of a cooperation of two wills. And this implies that the human will alone, or human systems of reason like religion and philosophy, are inadequate in and of themselves.

Practical theology typically responds to God's calling humanity to righteousness through a study and perfection of actions taken within the world (e.g. preaching, parish leadership, pastoral care, etc.). It is seen as the practice of faith in God within society. However, practical theology fails to consider the disposition of the acting agent who performs said pastoral action. Structuring the

internal activities of the soul after God's Law of Being should be a precursor to improving external, pastoral activities. The use of autoethnography as a critique of knowledge produced by self and culture (religion, philosophy) explores the state of one's dependence upon God's revealing in pursuit of righteousness.

CHAPTER TWO

Practical Theology, Qualitative Research, and Research Design

The task set before us, structuring the inward activities of the soul according to the Law of Being, requires a systemic approach: research.

Anagnorisis is not an empirical event (i.e. observable), nor comprised of quantifiable data. We can recall how we once thought, and how we think now, but we cannot think the moment of change, the evolution in our thinking.

Anagnorisis is similar to what John Locke would term ideas, “Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding.”³² *Anagnorisis*, an instance of the Divine ordering life in such a manner to facilitate a shift in our perspective, manifests as new ideas within the mind and soul, perceptions, thoughts, and understanding of being. But, how is it that I come to experience the Divine structuring and ordering my life? From where does new mindedness of morality and being originate?

According to Locke, ideas are the product of qualities: “The power to produce any idea in our mind, I call quality of the subject wherein that power is. Thus a snowball having the power to produce in us the ideas of white, cold, and round—the power to produce those ideas in us, as they are in the snowball, I call qualities.”³³ The Wholly Other, Wholly Unknown, ineffable God (as a quality) possesses the power to produce in us the idea of being, or the Law of Being, bestowed to us through *anagnorisis*. According to Paul, which St. Augustine

³² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Hazleton, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1999).

³³ Locke, 116-117.

notes in his Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, “through the law comes knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).” In remembering the structured order of life, the Law of Being, also comes knowledge of sin and thus new mindedness of, “how low we lie,” our sharp moral depravity.³⁴ Our being transitions from living prior to the Law to under the Law.³⁵ And, thus the question remains, how is it that we might live under Grace? Qualitative research designs offer an opportunity for the practical theologian to engage with the human condition under the Law, to critically understand the condition of allotriosis, and thus to structure the inward and outward activities of the soul according to the Law. We must first study the experience of encountering the Law then study our condition of being subject to/under the Law before determining an appropriate course of action to honestly, and authentically live under Grace.

The qualitative research process begins with a paradigm, a worldview through which knowledge is filtered.³⁶ Knowledge does not exist independent of a knower. Awareness of our locale, our worldview or paradigm, cultivates the contextually situated knower who is absolutely crucial to the research process. Mittwede explains, “paradigms are essentially matrices of deeply held assumptions.”³⁷ We are contextually situated beings and this influences our understanding of the Law. In other words, knowledge of the Law is coeval with

³⁴ Landes, *Augustine on Romans*, 5.

³⁵ Landes, 5.

³⁶ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) 13.

³⁷ Steven Mittwede, “Research Paradigms and Their Use and Importance in Theological Inquiry and Education,” *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 16, no. 1 (2012): 23–40.

interpretation of the Law. Paradigms are the foundation of the research process and guide the inquirer throughout, for better or worse. Researchers invoke a number of paradigms, with emphasis upon these four: 1) positivism; 2) post-positivism; 3) critical theory/critical realism; and, 4) Constructivism.³⁸ Each paradigm privileges particular research questions over others, and thus understands being (ontology) in a particular way. Guba and Lincoln explain ontology as the, “form and nature of reality,” and what can be known about said reality.³⁹ In addition, ontology also involves our movement or existence within the known nature of reality. The paradigm we operate within essentially clarifies our understanding of the Law of being and reality themselves, and our location within reality as a being in relation to the Law.

Similar to practical theological thought, “The diversity of qualitative approaches can be dizzying and makes agreement about their appropriate use, in what forms, and according to what standards difficult, if not impossible.”⁴⁰ As both qualitative researchers and practical theologians evaluate research paradigms’ compatibility with our task, we seek to structure the inward and outward activities of the soul after the Law of Being, thus clarifying the most appropriate research method for autoethnographic study. The following summaries briefly attend to the origins and principle patterns of epistemological

³⁸ Mittwede.

³⁹ Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, “Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research,” in *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1998), 195–220.

⁴⁰ Patricia Leavy, *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Oxford University Press, 2014), <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199811755.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199811755>.

thought for each of our research paradigms, and their potential use in theological inquiry.

August Comte's development of positive philosophy or positivism in 1890 asserted that empirical knowing (i.e. tangible, sensory experience) is the only means of knowing, "there is no real difference between 'essence' and 'phenomenon'."⁴¹ That is, the essence of a thing and the phenomenon of an experienced thing are one and the same. We come to know by formulation and testing of hypotheses regarding the empirical, experienced and observable world. Further, positivism asserts the possibility of objectivity during the research process, in which the inquirer may completely detach him or herself from the matter or subject of inquiry. A theological positivist holds that definitive knowledge of God might be acquired through revelation as an observable experience; Dietrich Bonhoeffer appraises Karl Barth's work as such.⁴² Yet, Barth conceptualizes God as the Wholly Unknown and Wholly Other; that contradicts Bonhoeffer's analysis. The experience of God through revelation as a phenomenon does not necessarily reveal the essence of God Godself. We always interpret phenomenon as they occur and thus always project false characteristics onto the essence of a thing.

Post-positivism criticizes positivistic knowing by questioning humanity's capacity to acquire objective truth, asserting that such objectivity remains a mere ideal. Researchers' contextual identity and societal positionality, according to

⁴¹ Mittwede, "Research Paradigms and Their Use and Importance in Theological Inquiry and Education."

⁴² Mittwede.

post-positivists, unconsciously project said positionality and identity onto research conclusions. That is, the researcher may never fully detach one's self from the topic of research. Self-reflexivity introduces means for researchers to develop awareness of their "fingerprint" within data gathering, analysis, and evaluation. This self-awareness enables researchers to account for and frame their literature for readers. For example, an ethnographic researcher may either have an *emic* or *etic* perspective. Those with an emic perspective of a particular social group are themselves a role player or key stakeholder within said social group. An etic perspective implies that an ethnographer's positionality lies outside the social group. Thus, in evaluating a social group's habitus, the emic and etic perspectives provide very different accounts of practice within the social group. Awareness of one's positionality (like an emic or etic ethnographer) enables the researcher to account for their approach to study. However, an awareness and explanation of researcher positionality does not imply the removal of their "fingerprint" from the conclusion.

Other criticisms of positivism argue that the removal of subjectivity from social science research, in pursuit of objective reality, neglects authentic attention to the humanness of participants' lived realities; and further still, "positivism does not account for the contextual influences on people's lives, focusing only on capturing facts."⁴³ As Carl Jung once noted, the sum of the whole does not do justice to the individual parts. Similarly, what has been taken to be an "objective

⁴³ George McKenzie, Jackie Powell, and Robin Usher, *Understanding Social Research: Perspectives on Methodology and Practice* (London: Falmer Press, 1997); Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods* (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2011) 14.

fact” depicting a comprehensive reality often doesn’t do justice to individual, day-to-day lived experience. In pursuit of pure, unmediated fact, the quality of human experience takes a back seat.

In light of both positivist and post-positivist paradigms, and the task at hand, the qualitative theologian asks: Is objective knowledge of the Law of Being possible? Or, is knowledge of the Law merely subjective interpretation of one’s realizing their dependence upon some mysterious reality? The Law of being is not empirical nor quantifiable, but discerned. That is, knowledge of the Law comes to be as the result of one’s emic evaluation of their own moral positionality as insufficient, failing to remedy a sense of *allogtriosis*; and thus, knowledge of the Law of Being is theorized to be some morally, mysterious reality sufficient in and of itself, a *telos* to be pursued. Knowledge of the Law is coeval with interpretation of the Law. Qualitative theologians best refrain from pursuit of objective knowledge. Rather, they should focus efforts to conceptualize and articulate their experience of feeling subject to a mysterious reality and attend to the contextual influences of their lives.

Developed by the Frankfurt School, critical theory is another paradigm approaching inquiry from a different angle. Critical theory largely focuses on reflection, transformation, and self-emancipation from social structures, institutions, and ideology. Leaning upon Immanuel Kant’s conceptualization of ‘Critique,’ critical theory entertains the frailty of knowledge. It seeks to emancipate the individual from social institutions and dogma that appeal to fallible knowledge as an absolute. Similarly, critical realism:

Recognizes that it is the aim of science to depict reality as best it may—and since this can be only an aim, the critical realist has to accept that this purpose may well be achieved by scientists with but varying degrees of success.⁴⁴

We as humans are fallible and so are our systems of thought, specifically 'knowledge' produced through scientific inquiry. Peacocke's description of critical realism proves helpful for our practical theological endeavor. Philosophy, Christian dogma, and a great multitude of human systems claim the truth of absolute being but have yet to provide any existential solace. In and of themselves, they are not an adequate account of the Law of Being nor do they enable humanity to effectively live into the Law. Hence the reason Peacocke argues further that critical realism is the most appropriate paradigm for theology.

Given that religious and theological languages are inadequate, there are varying degrees of success in our capacity to articulate mysterious reality with language.⁴⁵ But, saying something is better than saying nothing. Critical realism would not have theologians think entirely *ex hypothesi*, that everything inquiry produces is entirely fallible, in need of revision, or should be discarded as worthless. Simply put, critical realism demands epistemic and ontological humility. What is said of God and the soul in relation to God may always be revised. Critical realism seems compatible with Augustinian confession as an introspective practical theological mode of inquiry.

⁴⁴ Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming--Natural, Divine, and Human*, enlarged (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993) 12.

⁴⁵ Peacocke, 14.

Piaget's constructivism contends that humanity constructs and produces meaning and knowledge in the learning process. Having a large influence upon pedagogical research and theory, constructivism depicts learning and development as an active, participatory process. For the qualitative researcher, constructivism likens to post-qualitative criticisms of positivism, insofar that knowledge is seen as fallible due to the intermingling of the study-er and the studied. What we understand about a particular thing is not necessarily the essence of a thing in itself. However, a distinction must be made between constructivism and post-positivistic paradigms. Constructivism, to certain extents, sometimes contends that knowledge itself is socially constructed, essentially denying the existence of an objective reality. However, this paradigm contradicts the basic assumptions we've made thus far, that a Law of Being exists outside of knowledge that we construct.

The purpose of our inquiry is to structure the inward activities of the soul after the example of Jesus the Messiah as the embodied, incarnate exemplar of a mysterious, all pervasive Law of Being, which makes for the following epistemic and ontological assumptions. That is an objective reality (Law of Being) exists; knowledge of this Law is possible, though partial, limited, and fallible; and knowledge of the Law is coeval with interpretation of the Law. In other words, we know the Law only in light of our positionality within the world and in relation to the Law, therefore confusing the true essence of the Law with our own subjectivities. Furthermore, knowledge of the Law must always be revised in an attempt to adhere to the Law. And practice must also always be revised in an attempt to adhere to the Law. Because of these assumptions, a critical realist

paradigm becomes apparent. Having designated this paradigm, the next step in developing this type of qualitative research study is to decide upon a particular method compatible with our paradigm and purpose of inquiry.

Though qualitative methods have been used within sociology and anthropology to evaluate religious practice and experience, only recently have these methods been picked up by practical theologians. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat delineate the intersection of practical theology and qualitative research methods providing examples of how various methods may be used in particular instances. They consolidate this research process with a diagram depicting four stages that unfold in a continuous, cyclical process. The first stage (current praxis) describes, “the situation,” which involves a process of observation, reflection, engaging with relevant academic literature, and learning to speak intelligibly about what is observed.⁴⁶ The second stage (cultural/contextual) involves a lengthier process of reading literature, “to enhance and challenge our initial impressions and begin to develop a deep and rich understanding of the complex dynamics of the situation.”⁴⁷ Then, for the third stage (theological), the qualitative researcher includes theological reflection, highlighting implicit and explicit themes within the data drawn out through the prior stages. Swinton and Mowat conclude their research cycle with a fourth stage (formulating revised practice) where they pull together insight from each stage and work to, “produce new and challenging forms of practice that enable the

⁴⁶ Swinton, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 94.

⁴⁷ Swinton, 96.

initial situation to be transformed.”⁴⁸

Describing or stating the problem and posing a question, literature review, and theological reflection are combined to evaluate, criticize, and improve practice. Because this is a cyclical research process, there may be numerous instances of progress and regress. Insight gained in theological reflection, for example, may prompt a researcher to regress back to the second stage to read more academic literature.⁴⁹ But the research process, as Swinton and Mowat have conceptualized it, seems to move infinitely forward. With the completion of stage four researchers move back into stage one, evaluating the newly revised and implemented contextual practice.

Richard Osmer’s method expands the possibilities of qualitative inquiry within theology beyond Swinton and Mowat’s line of argument. Osmer attends more intentionally to the variety of research methods and their relevance and effectiveness in particular episodes and situations. But, similar to Swinton and Mowat’s four stages, Osmer delineates four questions for the practical theologian to consider: 1) What is going on, 2) Why is this going on, 3) What ought to be going on, and 4) How might we respond? Additionally, Osmer notes four tasks to answer each question:

- The descriptive-empirical task. Gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes.

⁴⁸ Swinton, 97.

⁴⁹ Swinton and Mowat articulate that their four stages largely pull from the hermeneutic circle and the action research tradition.

- The interpretive task. Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring.
- The normative task. Using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from “good practice.”
- The pragmatic task. Determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the “talk back” emerging when they are enacted.⁵⁰

Osmer entertains the use of phenomenology, narrative, ethnography, and several other qualitative methods as approaches to these four tasks. Osmer, Swinton, and Mowat’s collective work depict a concise process of evaluating a contextual habitus, a practice, interpreting and evaluating said practice, and responding with appropriate revisions.

To emphasize, this research process produces knowledge about a contextual practice and not theological reality itself. Swinton and Mowat clarify theology as, “an independent source of knowledge that draws on qualitative research for the purposes of clarification and complexification but has no need of it in terms of its self-understanding.”⁵¹ In other words, theological reality exists independent of and prior to qualitative inquiry and the qualitative inquirer. But, qualitative methods themselves are a lens in which to view, attend to, and analyze

⁵⁰ Osmer, 4.

⁵¹ Swinton, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 87.

an individual's relation to theological reality. An appraisal of habitus thus evaluates of one's lived interpretation of theological reality.

Osmer, Swinton, and Mowat are concerned with the habitus of professional practices, the effectiveness of preaching in a particular social context, for example, as a lived interpretation of theological reality in relation to self and others. However, we are not asking these questions of a context or observable practice, as Osmer, Swinton, and Mowat do. Rather, in this study, we ask the former questions of the acting agents themselves. I am asking these questions of myself, the internal wondering and wandering of my soul: What is going on within my soul? Why is this going on? What ought to be occurring? How might I respond to the conflict within my own soul?

All of these—paradigm, research question, and research tasks (i.e. method)—are components of the design phase and a means of orienting the project. The qualitative theologian then delves into the selected research method to address each question and task. Autoethnography serves such a purpose. Autoethnography allows a qualitative theologian to conduct a study of self in relation to a particular social, cultural, and mysterious realities. As critical realists, the autoethnographic theologian concerned with understanding their relation to the Law of Being remains skeptical of epistemology produced by human systems (ethno) rooted in the culture of philosophy and religion. These human systems inadequately depict the nature of mysterious reality. Moreover, these systems fail to consider the immediacy of individual experiences in relation to mysterious reality, the Law of Being. Autoethnographers and, “qualitative researchers [noting this problem], therefore, embrace the contingencies of

knowledge and the unique experiences of individuals—contingencies and experiences often disregarded in large-scale...research projects.”⁵²

Autoethnography desires to attend to and address Osmer’s practical theological questions and tasks, keeping the acting agent’s internal condition of their soul as a primary concern.

⁵² Sandy Jones, Tony Adams, and Carolyn Ellis, eds., *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, US: Left Coast Press, 2013) 27.

CHAPTER THREE

Autoethnographic Data, Collection, and Analysis

We've only generally discussed autoethnography as the study of self in relation to a cultural, social, and mystical realities. A full description and analysis of the method is needed. Autoethnography emerged as a method amid developing skepticism of scientific knowledge, protesting positivism explicitly, and perhaps more tacitly post-positivism as well. The nuance of emotion, narrative, the aesthetic, and lived experience (though empirical, observable) escape the confines of traditional scientific research. Autoethnography entertains these nuances by embracing the, "contingencies of knowledge," acknowledging the range of possibility in broadening horizons within research.⁵³ Jones, Adams, and Ellis conceptualize four characteristics of autoethnographic work that ground it within but also push and pry at the seams of traditional research. Autoethnography involves a review and critique of culture or cultural practices, contribution to current literature, an embrace of "vulnerability with purpose" and the development of a, "reciprocal relationship with audiences...to compel a response."⁵⁴ Autoethnography calls readers, and all of humanity into conversation, to question the norms of dogmatic knowing and being, reframe and critique one's relationship with culture, play with the possibility of an academic hinterland, and to appreciate the mystery of lived experience.

Here I will introduce portions of my own story to reveal my position as being subject to the Law of God. Like Augustine, aware of and in pursuit of

⁵³ Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 27.

⁵⁴ Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 22.

wisdom and virtue I have still yet to attain either. This story serves as a criticism of my relationship with religion and philosophy as cultural and social institutions. Like a cultural trickster this story is intended to, “expose ‘the elephants in the room’ of cultural context: social and organizational practices which beg robust scrutiny and critique but which are taken for granted as unquestioned, normative, ‘business as usual’.”⁵⁵ What religious or philosophical cultural practice stands as an elephant in the room, deserving critique? Religious and philosophical practices which operate with the assumption that wisdom and virtue might be attained and grasped through human effort. Such practices neglect to consider *anagnorisis*, the impossibility of apprehending wisdom and virtue, as opposed to being apprehended by wisdom and virtue. My story, an examination of theological autoethnography, depicts first a neglecting of and then a plea and a prayer for *anagnorisis*.

“What are you trying to get at with your thesis? Beyond your argument, why are you writing this,” Joseph asks. He mentored me in undergrad and of late that relationship has begun to transform into a friendship. “Well,” I start and then pause to consider, “I don’t know man. It’s like, I just want authenticity. Everyone is walking around as if they know what they’re doing. I sit in class and listen to what folks have to say and I’m like, we have no idea what the fuck we’re talking about.” We were sitting side-by-side on a bench on the Gainesville Square, and I felt Joseph turn his head away from me, bearing in mind what I’d said. “Like, I’ve recently been reading about critical theory, critical realism,”

⁵⁵ Ivor Goodson, Nigel P. Short, and Lydia Turner, eds., *Contemporary British Autoethnography* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2013) 5.

continuing my thought, “You know, recognizing the fallibility of human institutions. I’m no expert or anything on that stuff, just the idea is intriguing to me. And, I think that’s why I resonate or identify with Augustine, and Paul, they’re conversion experiences. Anagnorisis.”

They were apprehended by something bigger than themselves, they found themselves living and being differently. They were apprehended and made aware of virtue and wisdom. If anything, my thesis is a fucking prayer for anagnorisis. Autoethnography is a theological practice of humility, authenticity, just putting it all out there, like Jesus take the wheel shit or something. Whatever mysterious entity or reality that runs the show, I’ll just let it be what it is and do what it does. In the meantime, reflective, introspective, critical writing helps structure my own living and being after one principle: that I am subject to the Law, and dependent upon that in which posits the Law. Life can be nothing more and nothing less, just an awareness of dependence. And it is my hope, someday, that I find myself apprehended by a mysterious wisdom and virtue.

Heather Walton contends that three forms of autoethnography are useful for the reflective theologian: evocative, analytic, and performative.⁵⁶ Evocative autoethnography, per Walton’s argument, deepens the research process through narrative. It seeks to deeply engage with the personal emotions embedded within a story in light of a particular social context. What do emotions reveal about the experience of a particular culture or society? Analytic autoethnography seeks to

⁵⁶ Walton, *Writing Methods InTheological Reflection*.

bridge the gaps between autoethnographic, emotive narrative, and empirical data. Leon Anderson argues that the beginnings of autoethnographic research were justified and celebrates creativity. But with analytic autoethnography, Anderson offered, “an alternative to autoethnography, one that is consistent with qualitative inquiry rooted in traditional symbolic interactionism.”⁵⁷ Finally, Walton mentions Tami Spry who explores the process of textualizing the body and then performing the text of our bodies. The performative autoethnographer understands a text as somatic and not simply semantic. Greater knowing and understanding might occur in the performance of a somatic text, like when preaching a sermon.⁵⁸

As an evocative autoethnographer I gather data for the descriptive-empirical task: an appraisal and sharing of “patterns and dynamics” within my soul that describe my condition as subject to and under the Law. For the descriptive-empirical task, I may gather data through the following six means: 1) personal memory/recollection; 2) archival materials; 3) self-observation; 4) self-reflection; 5) self-analysis; 6) interviews.⁵⁹ Use of multiple data gathering methods enhances credibility and triangulation of the phenomena.

Personal memory recollection isn’t always reliable, if the purpose is to remember a particular event exactly as it happened. However, for autoethnography, personal memory recollection proves to be quite useful because

⁵⁷ Leon Anderson, “Analytic Autoethnography,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 4 (2006): 373–95.

⁵⁸ Tami Spry, *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, US: Taylor and Francis, 2011).

⁵⁹ Heewon Chang, Faith Ngunjiri, and Kathy-Ann Hernandez, *Collaborative Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, US: Routledge, 2012) 74.

we remember how we want to remember, and that clarifies deep, internal motives. The four Gospels are an excellent example. Each author's personal memories recall and share information about Jesus' life in very distinct ways. Each narrative has a motive seeking to emphasize a particular point. Similarly, in telling the story of our lives, we highlight certain parts and let others fall into a forgotten abyss. This is more or less an unconscious process. As I recall and tell a story, I am also interpreting the story, recalling as I want to recall. Awareness of self as emic to the story is crucial. Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez recommend writing memories in free-flow with as many details as possible.⁶⁰ If recalling a memory in free flow proves difficult, an autoethnographer may write down specific pieces of information related to the story (e.g. place, person, emotions, etc.). From these may develop a more comprehensive story. I share the following personal memory as an example.

I used to remember the events of December 1st, 2008 with extreme clarity. But, almost ten years removed now, some parts have become a little foggy. And, that is frightening a bit, because I might also forget what I felt. I remember feeling off during weightlifting class, some days are just bad days, your form is subpar, and you have low energy. I remember being called over the intercom to head to the counselor's office. I remember being surprised to see my youth pastor and associate youth pastor there with my school counselor in her office. I imagine that I narrowed my eyebrows, tucked my chin into chest, and tilted my head. I remember them saying that my dad had been in an accident. I

⁶⁰ Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez, 75.

remember asking if he was ok, and they responded, “we don’t have any details yet.” I remember going back to the weight room, telling my coach that my dad had been in an accident and I needed to leave. I remember tearing up, and then suppressing it, I was in a weight room. I remember a couple of guys still lifting, acquaintances, say as I left, “hey man we’re praying.” I remember being in one of two cars headed to a family friend’s house. I remember getting out of a car, beginning to walk down the driveway with my youth pastors and siblings, and then seeing my senior pastor (in a suit, grey maybe?) step out of the garage to greet us. I remember my sister beginning to cry a bit, sort of like a brief yelp an animal might give when startled.

I remember our senior pastor greeting us with a smile, extending his arm toward the garage door, inviting us into the house. I remember walking up two or three stairs from the garage into the kitchen of the house thinking, “God I don’t think it’s the worst, but if it is, I trust that everything will be ok.” I remember moving from the kitchen into the living room. I remember seeing my mom on the couch crying with two of our dear family friends. I remember my mom saying, “oh my children, I love y’all. I love y’all.” I remember being confused. I remember sitting on the large sectional couch. Were we spread apart or huddled together? I can’t remember. I remember my senior pastor standing there with a contemplative face, he might have been slightly clinching his jaw.

I remember my senior pastor saying, “We don’t know any details yet, but your dad has died.”

Fuck. God damn it. It was the worst.

I remember my sister's cry, my brother's, and my mom's. I remember the swell of two deep breaths that lead to a brief, awkward, strong weep, and then nothing. This was reality. I remember someone at some point explaining that my dad had been shot and killed. We'd later find that he'd actually been stabbed and then run over with his own car while trying to flee.

I remember desiring connection. I deeply, severely wanted to be connected with someone, something.

I remember thinking, "ok. I've got this. I can do it."

That first week I went back to school my peers would say things like, "I hope those bastards get life in prison." Another day that same week, there was a knock on the door in my first period class. Someone poked their head in and asked if they could see me. When my teacher said yes, I went out into the hall. A couple of the more popular girls in my grade had baked some brownies or something for me. I don't remember what they said, but I remember smiling big and thanking them. They seemed surprised that I didn't appear upset. I don't know, maybe it was a knee jerk reaction after having received so many condolences. Just smile, nod your head, and say thank-you.

Like, at the viewing, you just stand there and smile as everyone walks by. Four hours of it. The line of visitors looked like something at a theme park, almost endless. I remember that those whom I called friends, folks I hung out with most often, they didn't come. And others whom I didn't know well at all shared very intimate moments. It's kind of strange, to be so vulnerable with an acquaintance. My dad was well known in the Gainesville community at the

time. He'd worked as a hospice chaplain and part-time as a youth minister at a very small church in Pendergrass.

My dad often had cool stories about hospice chaplaincy, the mysterious, eerie, and yet affirming experience of sharing in the last moments of another's life. Moments before one of his patients passed, my dad began reciting Psalm 23, "Ye though I walk through the valley." At this, the daughter of the patient began to weep. My dad tried to console her, but she responded, "no you don't understand. My mother asked earlier today if she could put on her nice socks. I asked her why, and she responded with, "I'm going for a walk today.""

Ye though I walk.

Why, though, youth ministry? I never asked him, but he seemed to know my question. He took me to his small five- to ten-person youth group a few times as an attempt to show me, I think, what his life's work meant. The congregants were simple folk; rural, impoverished living had done a number on them, hopelessness. It was a drastic difference from what I understood to be the "youth group experience." As we'd drive out to Pendergrass, approach this old, derelict country church, I felt depressed. I attended a youth group with a state of the art facility in a \$20 million-dollar building. Lights, sound system, flashy guitars, basketball court, pool tables—that was my experience. Youth group, for me, was more of a social event. I went to be seen, really. Religion was secondary. The Pendergrass youth room looked like a standard issue, drab, white-painted-concrete-block school classroom. It smelled like dust and age. My dad was spunky, enthusiastic. He spruced up their youth room with pre-teen style decorations, a bean bag chair, bright colored garb, and some Hawaiian

themed stuff. I remember rolling my eyes at it all, but not wanting to say anything and hurt my dad's feelings. Maybe it was a theme for their youth group bible studies at the time? I can't remember. I just remember my affect in response to these rural, simple surroundings. I felt isolated, alone, removed from the world, and small. And, I felt like my dad was watching me. "Do you understand now, son?" he'd ask with his eyes.

My God, if I could see that look just one more time.

Archival data includes documents that the autoethnographers themselves have produced or are written and produced about them, including: 1) official documents like birth certificates, recommendation letters, school transcripts, and work evaluations. Essentially any physical artifact created about the autoethnographer that is valuable. It overs personal documents like journals, class papers, artwork, lyrics to a song, and the like. Anything the individual has composed for themselves or others. In my own case, I could gather together as archival data: any academic papers written during school, notes taken while reading books, lesson plans for my youth group, power points for the youth, music chosen for youth programs at different times of the year, sermons written, and more. What I have produced over these past few years combined with other historical artifacts with me as the subject, taken together provides an interesting view of my existential locale as student, pastor, and son of a murdered father.

Church felt like home during my last two years of high school. I'd grown up active in church, it wasn't really a choice. Youth Choir, choir tours, Wednesday night youth group meetings, weekend retreats, mission trips—that was my life. I don't know that I'd thought the Church could fix anything. Church

was familiar and comfortable. It helped to believe in something. And, my dad had devoted his life to the Church's work. But, the world around me moved on. Every day at least for a brief moment, I thought about my dad and how life would be different had he not been killed. He'd still be coming to my track meets, still drive me to school, we'd still be doing yard work on Saturday mornings. I used to hate it, but I'd give anything for another Saturday pulling weeds while my dad cut grass.

I entered undergrad two years later at Georgia State University as a guitar performance major. I'd always loved music, everything from classical to rap. But, I'd spent ten years studying blues guitar. Blues lead guitarists are expressive, your entire body and soul are collectively invested in improvisation, spontaneity, and emotion. But, the endless amounts of practice required for musical study sort of squandered my love for playing guitar. It became a chore. And, I'd found a new love: philosophy. Sometimes I chuckle at the thought of my eighteen-year-old self taking Intro to Philosophy. But, that class made a mark, for sure. I remember riding in the car with my girlfriend at the time, who is now my wife, saying that I had thought up a proof for the existence of God. I don't quite remember the structure of my argument. Something like: If $A=B$ and $B=C$, then $A=C$. I was trying to reason my way to an absolute. Blues guitar and philosophy made for an interesting course of study in my late teens.

Two years later I found myself at Young Harris College. My new infatuation was rock climbing. It's fair to say I was all over the place. Not sure what I wanted to do, I bounced around trying on different faces and identities, seeing which one brought structure and clarity to the world. Outdoor leadership

at YHC made sense. Initially, the program appeared to be all about play. We called them hard skills, learning to navigate a white water rapid in a tandem canoe, tying appropriate knot systems for tree climbing, mastering the art of backcountry cooking, anything of the like. But, as I progressed through the course of study, there was a great shift of emphasis from hard skills to soft skills. Namely, we studied experiential education pedagogy, practiced large- and small-group facilitation, reflected upon the qualities of effective and empathic leadership, and philosophized the essence of outdoor experiences. What broader existential truth are we engaging with through the outdoors? How do outdoor experiences clarify “being”? What do we learn about ourselves and the world?

Three classes significantly influenced my personal learning and growth. Wilderness as a Metaphor explored the concept of wilderness as something including but not limited to the outdoors. The final project required each student to explore their own personal sense of wilderness and describe the encounter. I described my own personal wilderness as, “transcendental, a place of turmoil, and a means to establish an existential philosophy of life.” The title of my final project that semester read, “Words are my Walk.” Some folks had this saying, “let the mountains speak for themselves.” But, I wasn’t satisfied with that. I needed to express what I felt so deeply. Words, at the time, were like a pair of existential hiking boots. But, I’ve come to learn that boots wear out after a period of time, and you need to get yourself a new pair. Additionally, there’s no guarantee that the boots will prevent rolling an ankle on the trail. There is a

sense of pride, though, when retiring a pair of hiking boots. You think about all of the places and spaces explored together.

Questions that Matter, as Joseph coined it, attempted to introduce students to research methods. In essence, we were allowed to ask any question we wanted for the final project. Over the course of the semester, Joseph advised us and guided us through the process, recommending different routes we could take to answer our questions. That was my introduction to autoethnography. I asked, "Who am I in the world and outside of a function?" Clearly, there were three components to my question: self, world, and writing. How do I understand myself, my true identity, outside of any function I perform within any societal system. I'd been reading Parker Palmer, Martin Buber, and Carl Jung. At the time, I felt misled by the church and religion, that I possessed value only in so far as I performed a function: believing all the right things. How could I maintain a belief that had failed to do justice to my individual life experience? My dad was stabbed and run over with a car, damn it. I mean, that kind of rips a gaping hole in one's theory about meaning and purpose in life.

An I-You relationship stood in place of an I-Thou relationship. Both I and dogma were primarily concerned with self-preservation, and no consideration of potential symbiosis occurred. I had no need of religion or the church. The feeling was mutual. Autoethnography made sense, an emotional review and critique of one's relationship with self, social system, and mystical reality. Who am I in the world and outside of a function?

Finally, Seeking Bliss. The beginning of Spring semester 2015 was a bit rocky, as I remember it. After going to the first meeting of Seeking Bliss, I pulled

Joseph aside afterwards and expressed concern. “I don’t think I’m ready to talk about things like happiness and bliss and all,” I expressed. Joseph stated while introducing the class that happiness and bliss have always remained “elusive.” And, that precisely was my hesitance to continue with the course. How am I supposed to talk about bliss when it seems so elusive? I wasn’t sure that I even had a framework to begin with. Rather than speak from experience, I felt like Seeking Bliss would be purely speculative. I didn’t know what it meant to be blissful and happy. Why talk about it?

Three papers for Seeking Bliss help illuminate my thinking at the time: Optimal Experience, Finding Happiness, and Finding Leisure. The leisure paper contains significant insight I should revisit over the years. I explain that leisure implies being in union with the self, and that union with the self leads to bliss. Bliss is defined as an experience of the infinite. Further, I argue that leisure is not inherent but the result of disciplined practice. “Leisure is,” I argued, “a mechanism of travel to navigate the labyrinth of our metaphysical relationship to the power of life. Leisure is a pathway to bliss.” Though I didn’t know it at the time, such a thesis is very Platonic, disciplined and refined practice results in true virtue and union with God. I assumed that I might arrive at or acquire a final, complete awareness of the world, union with self, and union with God. My journey began. I decided to relentlessly seek bliss, words would be my walk, and Candler School of Theology just made sense. Religion. Philosophy. I’d study and master their systems. I’d find answers. Why the fuck are people so shitty? Why am I so shitty? I’ve got big shoes to fill. What must I do in this life to find peace?

Apparently, I've yet to find an answer. I'm a saunterer, a "holy-lander," searching for Easter." What is this resurrection the Church celebrates? I wish I were Augustine, or Paul, who found themselves transformed and renewed. I'm on fucking empty, and thus despair. I'm, "maneuvering through pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty."⁶¹ I despair for want of answers. Apathy stands as a placeholder, because despair weighs too much. Desire to feel with depth and intensity manifest as the consumption of alcohol. And, so it goes. The habitus of my soul. I desire happiness in God, the authentic happy life, but I relapse into whatever I have strength to do; my will is not good alone.

Self-Observation data primarily tracks actions, activities, time and people as they interact.⁶² For example, when leading a lesson with my youth group, in the moment, I often jot down notes about my posture, tone, and eye-contact and how others react to behaviors and actions. Sometimes after a lesson, I record my thoughts with a voice memo on my iPhone. Voice recordings and any other self-observation techniques are a means of being steeped in present emotion and revisiting it later. Other times, I reflect on sermons and compare the feeling of deliverance with the feeling of writing them.

During St. Columba EYC (episcopal youth community) on Sunday evenings, we've been working through a series entitled, "Questions that Matter." The spirit of our talks mirrors the spirit of Joseph's class in undergrad. I'm all about problem-posing and inquiry-based learning. So, I had my youth spend an evening together coming up with questions they wanted to ask. I gave them

⁶¹ Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 32.

⁶² Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez, 78.

very clear instructions, “This is a free-for-all. You can ask me absolutely anything. There are no bad questions. What do you want to talk about? Talk to me about something that’s just been burning inside you.” One of my youth asked something that made me quiver, “If we are created in the image of God, why do we sin?”

Come on man! Like, dude, what a question to ask. I reacted very excitedly to his question, hoping that someone would bring it up. Every now and then while teaching, leading a discussion, preaching, or designing curriculum, I realize what’s been prepared is as much for myself as for the group I’m with. I’m preaching to myself, having a discussion with my own self. During my drive home, late Sunday evenings I’ll turn on some music (recently it’s been an orchestral variation of Thomas Tallis’ Third Tune), and I reflect taking note of the day’s happenings. I’m often drained, not physically, but emotionally. So much of my intimate self is intertwined with lessons and homilies that I feel exposed. And yet, in being exposed I feel powerful. I’m finding some sort of agency in ministry.

The call to ordained ministry is clear, I think? Sharing in life’s adventure, identifying and empathizing with others as they navigate chaos, both joy and sorrow. Like, man, I don’t know any more than you do, but we’ll keep on keepin’ on together. The Maundy Thursday foot washing supposedly affirms one’s call to ministry. “Do you know what I have done for you,” Jesus asks in John’s Gospel. I do, and Jesus has set an example for me to follow. But, I often do not participate in foot washings. I respectfully declined once during a spirituality class and again this year during Maundy Thursday mass. It doesn’t feel right

unless the one who does the washing exhibits an affectual quality mirroring my dad. Otherwise, it feels like existential assault, the taking of an intimacy I'm not willing to share. There are times when that happens, though, intimacy is taken.

Self-reflection/self-evaluation are distinct forms of data gathering in that they consider, "meanings and impressions." Memory data, archival data, and self-observation each are records of happenings, past or present, including emotion. Self-reflection/self-evaluation applies meaning to the events and encompassing emotion. For example, I might recall a youth group session that went well, review the lesson plan and power points used during the evening, review personal notes about my deliverance, and wander through the various emotions evoked during the session. Self-reflection/self-evaluation is the application and incorporation of meaning upon data. However, this process of meaning making and encompassing insights may adapt to the present moment of the researcher. That is, the meaning applied to an event of the past is intertwined with the present consciousness of the autoethnographer.

Carolyn Ellis' writing resonates with me. Perhaps it's her diligent attention to emotion, narrative, and her devoted advocacy for experimental research methods. She's written about the phenomenon of stories being shaped by her own consciousness, "How I tell my current story depends on how I've told my story before, and the responses each version received. The telling is also affected by the kind of week I had, what mood I'm in...it is impacted by what I last read and studied."⁶³ What I've stated thus far, about my dad's death, was

⁶³ William Tierney and Yvonna Lincoln, eds., *Representation and the Text: Re-Framing the Narrative Voice* (Albany: New York Press, 1997) 119.

shaped by my memory (that is what I unconsciously and consciously choose to say) and also shaped by my mood at the time. Surely, Augustine proclaimed the truth when saying, "I combine with past events images of various things, whether experienced directly or believed on the basis of what I have experienced; and on this basis I reason about future actions and events and hopes, and again think of all these things in the present."⁶⁴ I'm not sure that meaning within that story will or could ever be constant. The meaning of the story changes as I change. Is that anagnorisis? Only ever knowing one's self as changed? Huh.

You know, I try to avoid telling the story despite having a deeply seeded urge to. I feel like I have to say something profound about it, capture the essence of an ineffable experience. I want to make fucking sense of it. But, how can I tell a story always as a changed individual?

That moment is gone, in the past. The experience in and of itself will only ever be a memory. Each time I tell the story, the meaning has changed, and I have a new perspective or take on its implications for my life. Is that anagnorisis? I don't know. Doesn't really feel like this miraculous instance of being apprehended. How would I tell the story and write these narratives had I not been introduced to Augustine's Confessions or his interpretation of Romans? Or, maybe I should ask, why do I filter the telling of the story and its meaning through Augustinian theology? Augustine wrote beautifully, philosophy as poetry and yet somehow grounded in the relatability of human experience.

⁶⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 187.

Really cool. Words are my walk and I want to walk as Augustine did. I want to write in a manner honestly depicting a life lived with fervor and error, something that tells the true nature of life's adventure.

Interviews are also a helpful method to gather data about the self. Meeting with a mentor, friend, teacher, co-worker, or spouse and having them ask a series of questions allows an opportunity for the autoethnographer to process dialogically with someone else. This proves to work well for those who shy away from journaling, but welcome open and deep conversation. Recording the interview and listening to it after the fact enables the autoethnographer to process questions and answers multiple times with an etic perspective. Additionally, the interviewer might also provide their own input for the interviewee to examine and compare with other materials.

“You’re just shittin’ on yourself, dude. Is that really fair to yourself? You’re not being very nice to yourself.” Joseph had a point. Although, his feedback on the first section of my thesis wasn’t quite what I’d expected. It isn’t so much that I think poorly of myself, quite the opposite. I’m very confident in myself as a youth director and lay minister, I’m damn good at what I do. But, I have exceedingly high expectations. Maybe Joseph is right, it’s not really fair to myself to set the bar so high. I need to take a chill pill and just let things be. Another note. Just now, when saying that I think highly of myself, I only referenced my capacity to perform a job well. Do I equate my worth and virtue with success in the work place, in academia? This is a central theme, I unconsciously see myself as a means to an end. Perhaps that’s why I asked such a question in Seeking Bliss, “Who am I in the world and outside of a function?”

Data analysis begins with a bird's eye view of sorts.⁶⁵ This macro-view of data allows the researcher to see general trends and themes within the entirety of all gathered material. Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez recommend spending a fair amount of time here before transitioning into a micro-view of the data that attends to the intricate details of individual documents/sources. Many forms of data analysis find their roots in grounded theory that asserts that data gathering and analysis essentially occur simultaneously.⁶⁶ Most qualitative researchers operate with this assumption, and for our purposes we have already expressed that knowledge of the Law of Being is coeval with interpretation of the Law of Being. As we gather data about our positionality in relation to the Law and the one who posits the Law we are always already interpreting said data as well.

Formally, though, researchers use grounded theory coding to aid the analytic process that is a labelling, categorizing, and summarizing process. Coding should begin at the start of the data collection process and continue until project completion. Additionally, researchers may write "memos" (a type of field note) as they collect and analyze data through coding. This will track the researcher's immediate reactions, interpretations, and thoughts throughout. Memos also serve to create definitions for particular coded sections of data, draw a comparison with similar literature, or simply take the form of a question, etc.⁶⁷ This type of data analysis works well with historical/archival data.

⁶⁵ Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez, 103.

⁶⁶ Uwe Flick, ed., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis* (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2014) 153.

⁶⁷ Flick, 163.

The review and analysis of various data and writing autoethnographic narrative have begun to reveal my soul's habitus and also begun to answer Osmer's second practical, theological question, "Why is this going on?" I despair, become apathetic, and develop unhealthy habits. Despite the desire to transcend this cycle, I repeatedly exhibit the same behaviors. I despair because I am dissatisfied with knowledge the world produces, or that I produce. And yet, I still seek answers. Knowledge is a means of accessing or returning to true being; from whence will adequate knowledge come? Impatience and numbness prompt the abuse of alcohol. I'm tired, I need to feel something. Why does this happen? This journey has grown from the root of my dad's murder. But, the event in and of itself is not the answer to "why?" Rather, the emotional trauma inflicted upon my soul answers the question "why?" I am living with trauma. Trauma is the "why?"

My wife and I were sitting out on my grandparent's porch one evening before dusk. It's one of my favorite hobbies. When folks ask what I do in my free time, I often say that I like porch sittin'. And you know, just about every porch works the same way, each has the same view. The world falls asleep. I had a beer in hand just sipping and listening to my wife. We share about our days and what we found most interesting. I'll often talk about some philosophical concept or theological idea I thought was cool. My wife, a psychometrist, often shares about her cases at work, or the assessments she's scheduled to do the next week. This particular evening, she shared about her developing interest in psychological trauma, "It's just the root of everything, I think. It explains how we navigate the world and why we do what we do."

Autoethnographic data gathering through memory, archival materials, self-observation, -evaluation, -analysis, and interviews reveal my condition, my soul's habitus, as being subject to the Law and not yet under grace. Unhealthy habits, anxiety, and despair are the result of trauma. Why are these things happening? Why does my soul live in such a manner? Emotional trauma. "God's spirit is never separated from us," Shelly Rambo states, "but experiences, such as trauma, can render this love...altogether lost."⁶⁸ I am not separated from God's love, but have become numb to it. Trauma has robbed the experience of divine love. I must recover it, somehow.

⁶⁸ Chelle Stearns and Shelly Rambo, "The Spirit's Witness: An Interview with Shelly Rambo," *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology and Culture*, 2015.

CHAPTER FOUR

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS AN EMBRACE OF PATHOS

What, then, ought to be going on within my soul? Prophetic discernment best answers this question, according to Osmer; intertwining the data and analysis with theological concepts facilitates the interpretation of situations or contexts in which we are an actor.⁶⁹ The situation and context of my agency, the soul, has already undergone an extensive survey. And, now I must examine my soul's habitus more critically with theology. My soul having been traumatized seeks to live into my father's vocation, but steepens in alcohol for assurance and emotional stability. This in turn invigorates a desire for virtue, to conquer life's challenges and step into awareness of God's grace. I ought to be living under grace. But, I am still subject to and under the Law of Being.

Osmer explains that biblical prophets would speak the word of God to an isolated and confused Israel, a people that has lost its way. Similar to the prophets, Jesus assumes such a role. But, his character within scripture involves more than prophecy. Jesus is not just the messenger, but also the message itself, the Divine Word.⁷⁰ Prophetic discernment is the listening to and interpretation of Divine Word as distinct and authoritative above all creeds and doctrine, "that may lead the world [or my own soul] toward disaster."⁷¹ Listening to Jesus as both messenger and message facilitates emancipation and freedom from

⁶⁹ Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, 131.

⁷⁰ Osmer, 135.

⁷¹ Osmer, 135.

oppressive knowing and being. Such discernment and listening begins with an identification of divine pathos.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, pathos is an expression of sadness or even suffering.⁷² Osmer argues that sympathy is participation with divine pathos.⁷³ The human capacity to sympathize is the recognition of suffering as a universal human experience and also the recognition of God's expressing sadness in response to our suffering. If I am to engage in prophetic discernment, seek emancipation and liberation from oppressive knowing and being by listening to Jesus as the Logos, I must first open myself to divine pathos, sympathize with my own suffering and allow God to grieve and process with me.⁷⁴ How could I expect grace to abound and shape my being to mirror the Being without acknowledging divine pathos as an implied prerequisite for grace?

The extension of grace is divine pathos, an expression of sadness and suffering. It is not by faith in Jesus as the alleged Son of God that facilitates emancipation, liberation, and salvation. Nor do my works, my soul's habitus and agency, inspired by the figure of Jesus bring forth such freedom and life. It is by faith in God's sadness and suffering *with* me that I begin to understand grace. God doesn't have a hero complex, interrupting the course of history with the death of Jesus on the cross as humanity's salvation from sin. No, the cross implies that from within God's expression of sadness and suffering emerges

⁷² "pathos, n.". OED Online. March 2018. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/Entry/138808?redirectedFrom=pathos>
 (accessed March 03, 2018).

⁷³ Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, 136.

⁷⁴ Osmer, 137.

resurrection. “But surely,” Augustine proclaims, “the Lord’s death was an act of good will, not the payment of a debt.”⁷⁵ Divine pathos is an act of good will. As loudly and fervently I plea for anagnorisis, desiring to be grasped and apprehended by grace, God responds with God’s own petition, “ye of little faith.”⁷⁶

Faith in God’s capacity to still the waters of my soul, my habitus, ought to be of primal concern, not constructing an ethical or onto-epistemological vessel to navigate the violent tide. How might I seek, facilitate, encourage, or discover such faith? Servant leadership, Osmer would answer, as the pragmatic task in response to the “ought” question. But, what does it mean to be a servant unto myself? How might I learn to sympathize with my own suffering? The servant leader who desires to transform the context of their agency must, “carry out the “internal work” of discerning their own core values...confront their own hypocrisy in failing to embody the values they espouse.”⁷⁷ I must do this internal work and confront hypocrisy. I’ve already done so in naming a developing abuse of alcohol. I do not do what I wish to do but the very thing I hate, as Paul and Augustine would say.

What am I getting at with this thesis? Why am I writing? Words are my walk, a means of exploring existential wilderness. But, god damn it, I’m fucking tired of this wilderness. Tattooed on my arm is a tribute to the Seeking Bliss class I took in undergrad. It reads, “Take a walk in the wild, find a Virgil.” By no

⁷⁵ Landes, *Augustine on Romans*.

⁷⁶ Matthew 8:23-27.

⁷⁷ Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, 148.

means am I a Dante's Inferno expert, but anyhow, I figured if I took walks in the wild I'd always find something, or someone sent by God to direct my path, help me navigate my own sense of self and being. But, like Deanna Shoemaker, "It occurs to me that I am seriously directionally challenged; in fact, being lost has become a defining metaphor in my life."⁷⁸ Maybe God is just like, "hey man, how bout' you stay lost for a while?" Well you know what, if that's the case I'll just sit here and keep drinking my beer. I'll pour God a glass and wait. No more walking in the wild, I'll just settle down and give the fuck up. I'm going to drink. I'm going to cry. I'm going to marvel at the beauty of wilderness. I'm going to chuckle and smile at the adventure that's brought me here. I don't know if God will show up or not, if I'll find a map to keep on goin', a new pair of hiking boots, or if Virgil will miraculously appear. But, whatever. I shouldn't have assumed that walking into the wild would be a temporary endeavor, that I'd eventually find my way back. Perhaps that isn't the point, anyway. I'll stay lost in my emotion and grieve.

You know, the church really didn't prepare me for this. I don't know that anything could adequately prepare someone for the murder of their father, and the deep existential wandering to follow. I mean, I don't blame the church at all for anything. It's just worth noting what they taught me, and how it structured my journey from the start. Life and the message of God in the person of Jesus was wrapped up into a pretty little box with a bow. And then, someone fucking stomped on it. The church is so bad at talking about reality, in my opinion. The

⁷⁸ Jones, Adams, and Ellis, *Handbook of Autoethnography*.

reality of our world is messy. But, that shouldn't deter us from ignoring or fretting over it. If anything, rolling your sleeves up and getting dirty in the world is the best way to go.

Even after realizing this, I still see the mark of that fallible doctrine, life and meaning in a pretty little box. As I've really worked hard to intentionally process everything, I guess I thought I could clean it all up. There's this song by Mandolin Orange called "That Wrecking Ball." It sort of gets at a few key parts of life, but one part sticks out:

Every man bears a burden, his own beast by the horns, that he hides from the world, when he's young and strong. Looking over his shoulders, half tattered and torn, still standing tall. But every year rolls on like a runaway train. Every beast grows stronger as the pendulum swings. To and fro, and on she goes. That wrecking ball.⁷⁹

I mean, wouldn't it be better if each human could speak honestly and openly about their wrecking ball. We're all in the same spot, more or less, confused and just trying to make our way without getting too worn down.

The Gospel is often taught to mean "Good News." Being raised Baptist, I heard that phrase often, the good news of Jesus Christ. Maybe there's some truth to that. Maybe the church did teach me something worth holding on to. Jesus as an embodied expression of sadness and suffering is good news. It's pretty good news when we figure out that God grieves with us and for us.

⁷⁹ Mandolin Orange, "That Wrecking Ball," in *Such Jubilee*, Yep Roc Records, 2015, Spotify.

*Maybe that'll fit like a good pair of hiking boots. I'll put on some gospel shoes and find my way.*⁸⁰

Osmer argues that getting lost might be the key to finding one's way.⁸¹ Indeed, unless I am lost I will never find my way. For *the Way* appears to us when we are lost. Jesus as the messenger and message of divine pathos appears in wild places, the space of our suffering. Jesus, divine pathos, calls us to follow in his steps. "You know the way to the place where I am going," Jesus says to the disciples.⁸² Thomas asks in response, "Lord we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"⁸³ But, we do know. Jesus leads us home. Union with God, a moment of *oikeosis*, is found when we grieve with God. We are at home. To structure the inward activities of my soul after the Law of Being and the one who posits the Law is to embrace pathos. We will be restless in the wild until we rest in divine pathos. I must learn to rest in divine pathos amid emotional wilderness. That is my pragmatic task, the final stage of Osmer's practical theological method.

In seeking bliss I'm learning to grieve. The cool thing about autoethnography is the ability to include serendipitous data and insight. Anything and everything is considered autoethnographic data, worthy of consideration. Well today, just before writing these words, I paused to gather my thoughts. I'm sitting at my boss' desk at church. It's always messy. I notice yet another delivery box. He is always ordering books, so I figured I'd see what

⁸⁰ Mandolin Orange, "Gospel Shoes," in *Blindfaller*, Yep Roc Records, 2016, Spotify.

⁸¹ Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*.

⁸² John 14:4

⁸³ John 14:5

he bought. I didn't find a book and come to find out it was just a box used for storage. Inside I found small packet of paper entitled, "Helping Yourself Heal When Someone Loved Dies," put together by a Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt. One of the pages reads, "Some questions have answers. Some do not. Actually, the healing process occurs in the opportunity to pose the questions, not necessarily in answering them." Right on Dr. Wolfelt. To some, this might seem obvious. But, it's worth being said anyway; and the serendipity of the moment couldn't be passed up. I'm seeking bliss and learning to grieve. A part of learning to grieve is asking questions of self, existential reality, and inviting a conversation partner: You.

Autoethnographic inquiry uncovers the habitus of our soul as it has been shaped by and engages with society and the world. It answers the questions, "what is occurring, why is it occurring, and what ought to be occurring within our soul?" Further, the process of writing autoethnography is itself, as hindsight reveals, an embrace of pathos. Autoethnography is a pair of gospel shoes, a way forward in the wild or perhaps the source of confidence needed to stay put and be patient. Autoethnography helped me name the pragmatic task, an embrace of pathos, but is also the pragmatic task itself. It is a means to an end and an end in itself.

What of righteousness, though? The beginning of this endeavor articulated a strong concern for the acquisition of righteousness and virtue. If the task necessary to acquire righteousness is to structure the activities of the soul after the Law of Being as revealed in Jesus Messiah, and if Jesus Messiah himself is both a messenger and message of divine pathos, then a soulful participation with

and embrace of pathos itself is an act of virtue and righteousness.

Autoethnography itself is an act of virtue and righteousness. The process of writing autoethnography is 'bildung', cultivating the man according to the nature of his soul as fashioned by the divine.⁸⁴ This process is more important than the product. "For it is not the discovery," Augustine proclaims, "but the mere search for wisdom which should be preferred."⁸⁵ Again, asking questions is a natural and necessary part of grieving and healing. Anagnorisis, the discovery of one's self having been changed, is of little concern now. Change happens and God works whether we are aware or not. I think the best use of my time is being present with myself.

I will continue to write, process, grieve, and heal. Claiming ownership of this story and being kind to myself are paramount. Moving forward, I could shift my focus. The habitus of my soul, of course, involves more than the story of my dad's murder and personal iniquities that have developed due to emotional trauma. Writing autoethnography in celebration of my soul's habitus, how I've endured and remained devoted to spiritual growth, that also deserves attention. Study self, soul, religion, philosophy, the church, and the Unknown, autoethnography allows for each and explains their interconnectedness. It is an opportunity for theology to do something different.

⁸⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

⁸⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*.

CONCLUSION

Beginning with a discussion of Augustinian theology, I explored a Law of Being. Augustine's interpretation of Paul's letter to the Romans depicts four means of being and knowing in the world: before the law, under the law, under grace, and in peace. Before the law we are unaware of sin. Under the law we are aware of sin and desire to become righteous. But, we fail to do so. When we are under grace, the body and spirit are still subject to the sins of the flesh but neither consent nor desire to concede. In recognizing my own being as subject to the law, I desired to more critically understand this condition. Further, I wondered how I might begin to live under grace. Would *anagnorisis* occur? Would I have this conversion experience or sudden change in perspective so as to more fervently live with righteousness?

Critically understanding one's condition as subject to and under the Law requires research. And, in this endeavor I argued that critical realism, a subset of critical theory, is the most appropriate research paradigm. Critical realism is skeptical of human institutions and seeks to emancipate humanity from oppressive epistemology and ontology, that is, means of knowing and being that perpetuate idolatry and ignorance because of their being subject to the sins of the flesh. But, in its skepticism of religious and theological language, religion and philosophy as human institutions, critical realism recognizes the necessity for each. This paradigm structured my thinking when engaging with Osmer's practical theological method and its four questions: what is going on; why is it going on; What ought to be going on; and, how might I respond?

Upon asking these questions of my soul, I described autoethnographic data gathering and analysis. Simultaneously, I used the autoethnographic process to write various narratives. In writing narrative, I discovered my soul's habitus: a state of despair, apathy, and developing abuse of alcohol, the root of which is emotional trauma inflicted by the event of my dad's murder. The task then was to confront and process this emotional trauma, discern a means of transitioning from under the law and toward living under grace. In the end, I recognize that grace is found in the person of Jesus as an expression of divine pathos. Structuring my soul's activities after divine pathos means that I need to learn how to grieve with God. In grieving with God I find union and a sense of being at home, I find grace.

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