

TITLE

LISTENING TO THE RHYTHMS: PREPARING FOR THEOLOGICAL CONVERSATION

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I believe that postmodern experience has given us two wonderful things. A renewed emphasis on conversation, and an embracing of the body. From postmodern thought we get an openness that celebrates physicality. That is, we learn to see the body as a place of meaning. In addition, postmodernism also celebrates conversation. Conversation being an unsystematic and unpredictable time of discovery and knowledge. It is from these two standpoints that I want to begin our discussion today.

A conversation is a wondrous thing. It represents the joy of connecting with the life of another. Through this simple act, conversation brings together human experience. It represents a unique intimacy in the life of another. This level of intimacy is not something achieved. We cannot make conversation happen. Perhaps a more helpful analogy is to say that we "fall" into conversation. No one really remembers how a conversation started. We may be able to remember some of the first words or even the first question, but this is not when conversation started. We cannot pinpoint the moment simple words become connection. The moment is a blur, and only after reflection does one realize what has just occurred. It is as if we have crossed some previously unknown border between connection and solitude. And in this crossing, we can almost feel the vibration of the other. We have begun to "hear" the other. The self has just experienced the rhythm of another. Listening has begun. Listening is thus the gateway of theological reflection. Until we learn to listen, the context and situation remains elusive. The theologian is deaf to the world around them.

But once we learn to listen, letting go of the "noise," a new world of sound begins to unfold. This sound consists of the rhythms of everyday life and experience. It is pure unfiltered rhythm. It is what we feel when we finally let go of the expected and embrace the shocking, that which challenges and provokes. This is not a scholarly, philosophical, or even theological

rhythm. It is the rhythm of life. These rhythms we feel the moment when we leave the house, walk through the city, or enter a worship service. It is what we feel in the presence of another person. We live in the rhythms of others. We live in the rhythms of love, joy, passion, and even anger. That is there is between us a rhythm of emotion and experience. Our love reaches outward as does our joy, our sorrow, and even our anger. We both give and receive rhythms. These rhythms hold the potential of conversation. For the conversation to begin, one must let go and allow these rhythms to overtake the self.

Rhythms

When it comes to conversation, theological or otherwise, there are no rules for how to do it. There are no predetermined parameters of where, when, or how theological conversation must occur. During genuine conversation, there is no fear of the other suddenly saying "stop you are doing it wrong!" One does not need any special training to listen to the movements of everyday life. Special training in semiotics or metaphysics is neither desired nor required. All that is required of the theologian is the self.

Henri Lefebvre describes this listening as rhythmanalysis. Rhythmanalysis is a non-reductive mode of listening to everyday life and experience. It implies that "[e]verywhere where this is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm."¹ Rhythm intimately connects to organic life. It is a process where "rhythm enters into the lived"² as an intersection between place, time, and energy.³ Rhythm is a process of becoming.⁴ No moment or activity defines or sets it in stone. For the theologian, each day grows into itself rather than into any predetermined mold. When one wakes up, there are no guarantees that events must

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, by Henri Lefebvre (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 25.

² Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 86.

³ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 25.

⁴ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 87.

always occur the same way. Rhythm suggests that experience implies memory, growth, and difference. Mundane repetitive tasks may fill the everyday experience. However, within the everyday lies the possibility of the unexpected. Each day and every moment bring with it the hope of difference and the "not yet." Within each day is an embedded promise that the future is not set. Every day we may walk out the door, towards the same job, following the same route, and conclude the day by returning home in much the same way. Yet there are no guarantees that the next day will be like the last. We may walk out that same door only to discover a new route, make a life changing decision, have a profound idea, or even fall in love. Rhythms presuppose variation and difference daily. Rhythms never remain the same.⁵ For the theologian this means living for the unexpected. We should not seek what know, what we are comfortable with, but what we do not know. That which makes us uncomfortable. We do that by embracing the body, not escaping it. Theological knowledge should begin with the senses.

Rhythm and the Body

The human body is the starting point for rhythmic listening. It serves as our metronome.⁶ The body is rhythmic consisting of various beats, thumps, and frequencies working together.⁷ In combination with its social setting, the body is never silent. The body calls so that someone

⁵ Rhythms are much like the waves of the sea. At first glance it appears that with each wave the same thing is occurring repeatedly. The sea appears to be repetitive and boring. If one looks closely enough one will notice the subtle variations between each wave. Some are large and small, other crash furiously against the shore while other gently touch the sand. Actions may appear to be the same, but there are subtle variations occurring each time they are performed. Lefebvre explains that to understand rhythm one must look to the sea. He writes that "[e]ach sea has its rhythm: that of the Mediterranean is not that of the oceans...It changes ceaselessly. As it approaches the shore, it takes the shock of the backwash: it carries numerous wavelets, right down to the tiny quivers that it orientates but which do not always go in its direction." *Rhythmanalysis*, 88.

⁶ Stuart Elden, introduction to *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, by Henri Lefebvre (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 6.

⁷ Lefebvre states that "[t]he body consists of a bundle of rhythms, different but in tune." *Rhythmanalysis*, 30.

somewhere might listen.⁸ In order to listen we cannot ignore the body. We must be in tune with our own body to connect with surrounding rhythms. Escape from the body, either into the mind or some metaphysical plane, keeps us from listening. It dulls the senses to our surroundings. Without the body, we cannot hear the rhythms of others.⁹

Our bodies help connect us with the rhythms of our environment. The rhythms of everyday life are always moving and changing. Rhythms both natural and social continually vibrate and interact with one another. The wind and the rain, the gentle rustling of tree leaves, running water, and many others create a symphony of natural rhythms.¹⁰ The earth is continually moving, vibrating, and shifting.¹¹ Listening to one's environment includes everything, even smells,¹² when listening to one's environment. In addition to nature, there are numerous noises, movements, and murmurings of the contemporary society. A city street consists of a plethora of rhythms calling out to us.¹³ People shuffling, cars and buses honking, footsteps echoes off the pavement, construction, and so on bombard one with movement, sound, smells, and sight. The rhythms of the natural and the social, lead us into an immersive experience. As theologians we must be grasped to enter into this experience, listen to the rhythms, and enter its conversation.

⁸ Lefebvre believes that philosophy has not ignored the body. He writes, "The body. Our body. So neglected in philosophy that it ends up speaking its mind and kicking up a fuss. Left to physiology and medicine..." *Rhythmanalysis*, 30.

⁹ See for example when Lefebvre writes that "the surrounding of bodies, be they in nature or a social setting, are also *bundles, bouquets, garlands* of rhythms, to which it is necessary to listen in order to grasp the natural or produced ensembles." *Rhythmanalysis*, 30.

¹⁰ According to Lefebvre, for the one that listens "nothing is immobile. He [or she] hears the wind, the rain, storms; but if he [or she] considers a stone, a wall, a trunk, he [or she] understands their slowness, their interminable rhythm. This *object* is not inert; time is not set aside for the subject. It is only slow in relation to our time, to our body, the measure of rhythms." *Rhythmanalysis*, 30.

¹¹ Quantum theory footnote unfinished*

¹² For example, Lefebvre writes that "smells are a part of rhythms, reveal them: odours of the morning and evening, of hours of sunlight or darkness, of rain or fine weather." *Rhythmanalysis*, 31.

¹³ The rhythms of society are immersive. Lefebvre explains that "[one] who walks down the street...is immersed in the multiplicity of noises, murmurs, rhythms." *Rhythmanalysis*, 38.

That is, we must immerse ourselves, our bodies into the heart of the everyday.¹⁴ This act of immersion into the everyday transforms people into presences rather than things. It helps theologians approach others as a living whole and less like studied objects. Theological reflection must act as a living presence. It must live in the moments of life. So, what one is listening for is organic rhythm. Our environment is a living and changing movement comprised of living and changing people. Everything that theology explores is alive. What we study concerns the rhythms of heartbeats rather than mechanical clocks. That is theology is a human endeavor. Within rhythm there is meaning. Immersion into conversation is an immersion into meaning. Therefore, rhythmic immersion is the theologian's baptism. We are immersed into life and emerge from our baptism as changed people. It changes us to seek meaning within life, between people. Rhythm is our baptism into meaning.

Meaning

Meaning opens in the space between people. It is a matter of contact and reaching out within space. Space is neither a bridge nor a vacuum. It is a place of action and connection between individuals. A state of encountering the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others. It is not an empty space. Rather it is as Jean Luc Nancy writes, "the heart of a connection, the interlacing of whose extremities remain separate even at the very center of the knot."¹⁵ Here at the heart of connection are individuals reaching out to one another. It is a crossing of separate but connected individuals. As individuals reach out, the between "stretches" towards the two. Here being-singular becomes being-with. In the space, being realizes its true existence, that existence

¹⁴ Lefebvre writes, "He garbs himself in this tissue of the lived, of the everyday." *Rhythmanalysis*, 31.

¹⁵ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 5.

lives in “an affirmation of the world.”¹⁶ It is taking refuge in being and entering into a state of contact of one with another.¹⁷

Existence is contact between people, therefore meaning lives in the giving and receiving between individuals. Meaning circulations back and forth through a mutual sharing. One cannot will or control this circulation of meaning. It happens between all things and moves in all directions. Circulation is a process of contact. It reflects that existence is a matter of being-with instead of being. Being must be being-with. Being-with reflects that meaning circulates. There is no control of meaning from the perspective of an I. Theologians do not control meaning. We do not create meaning. We instead live in the meaning. Our existence, as do all beings, lives in the circulation between the I and the other. To break that connection is to break life itself. As theologians we break that connection in our refusal to listen to the situation. When we refuse to ask the difficult questions of “what is going on?” or “why is this happening?” We break this connection when we give up on situation. When we seek for the answers outside of what lies before us. Theological being is being-with, being-with-others.

That is being depends on being to exist. Being-singular represents the rejection of the other. Being-singular points to the self as its own origin. What happens outside the self becomes secondary or accidental. Being suffers under the illusion that it is its own creator. Instead, Nancy writes, “plurality of beings is at the foundation of Being.”¹⁸ This points to a fundamental shift in how one views the self in relation to others. A single self, being, does not represent being to its fullest extent. On its own, being is a static concept. Being represents a state or a quality, where it should be an action, or a becoming. Within itself, being is unfinished. In order to change and

¹⁶ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 9.

¹⁷ Nancy writes that meaning, “is a matter of one or the other, one and the other, one with the other.” *Being Singular Plural*, 5-6.

¹⁸ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 12.

grow being must connect with being. Relationship is at the heart of what it means to be human. Being is existence, yes, but existence for and with others. Relationship, I believe is also at the heart of what it means to do theology. Our being, speaking of theology, is a being for and with others. What we do and the work we produce should not be separate from how we live and connect with others.

Being connects-to-being, Being lives in connection with being. The static gives way to the dynamic. Others are necessary for the existence of each being. To understand one's own being, existence, being reaches out to being. It embraces the plurality of being. The origin of our existence does not being with ourselves, but with the other. Existence lives in each instant in connection with the other. To have being, is to be in the world. As such, to live in this world is to live for the other. It is never for the self. Being is lived, it is played between one and the other. In the in-between, being plays. Being plays in this space so that we can understand one another. Without this play, this interaction between you and me, being has no understanding. It only sees the reflection of the self. One cannot understand being until one understands that, as Nancy states, "Being is communication." In the same way, I would argue that theology is communication. That our being, our existence as theologians, depends on our interaction with others. We do not understand until we seek to understand others. Unless we seek others, we will only see ourselves. Meaning that theological reflection can easily become self-reflection. Our theological works become autobiographies. To avoid this, we must move beyond ourselves in order to connect with the other. Theology exists because it is relational. We think about others and for others. We give voices to those who have no voice. We tell stories for those who have never had their story told. Theology's being reflects our own being. Being is relationship.

Theology as Relationship

Being is relationship. Being-singular-plural reveals that at the core of being is not the isolated self. Being-singular is being-plural. Being is being-*with*, this *with* being the essence of existence.¹⁹ The mind is not the foundation of existence. One does not begin with the self in order to establish the self. What does one have to gain from living within the mind? Only that which one already knows. Descartes' "I think therefore I am" establishes nothing. More fitting would be "I relate therefore I am." Relation is not an addition to being. The mind does not exist alone. The *with* of being, relationality, is our true nature. Its form comes from function. Being is not first *is* before it is *with*.²⁰ Being begins *with* before it can do anything else.

Being-with is being-singular-plural. It brings the self and the world into balance. The self needs the world and the world needs individuality. The goal is not to eliminate one or the other. Paul Tillich argues, "The self without a world is empty; the world without a self is dead."²¹ All beings participates in the world. The world is a place of action. Through the self, one acts in the world, the self is not one with it. Being-singular signifies estrangement with others or plurality. We lack a connection with other selves.²² Being-singular-plural points to the barrier that one needs to overcome in order be *with*. Being-with is our destiny, but that destiny requires traversing a barrier.²³ It is reaching out across the space between existences. Yet it is this

¹⁹ Being-singular-plural or being-with lies at the core of Nancy's philosophy. He explains that being-singular-plural "means the essence of Being is only as coessence. In turn, coessence, or *being-with* (being-with-many), designates the essence of the *co-*, or even more so, the *co-* (the *cum*) itself in the position or guise of an essence." *Being Singular Plural*, 30.

²⁰ Nancy emphasizes this point by writing "it is not the case that the 'with' is an addition to some prior Being; instead, the 'with' is at the heart of Being." *Being Singular Plural*, 30.

²¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume I* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 171.

²² Tillich writes, "We can approach other beings only in terms of analogy and, therefore, only indirectly and uncertainly." *Systematic Theology*, 168.

²³ Tillich describes this separation stating, "Being a self means being separated in some way from everything else, having everything else opposite one's self, being able to look at it and to act upon it. At the same time, however, this self is aware that it belongs to that at which it looks. The self is 'in' it. *Systematic Theology*, 170.

reaching out that completes the self. Being-singular, without plural, is hollow.²⁴ One must live existence in the *with*. We have certain skills that help us understand the nature and purpose of things, and to seek out the deep mysteries of God. Yet if we do not have the other, our skills have no purpose. If we seek God but forget our brother or sister, then we have failed to do what is hard and exceedingly difficult. The most difficult task is connecting with our brother or sister. For it is there, I would argue, that we find not only purpose, but God as well.

Living *with* is living in participation with the other. No one, Tillich argues, “exists without participation, and no personal being exists without communal being.”²⁵ Being needs the resistance of other beings. Existence is encounter with existence. Thus, we do not truly know ourselves until we enter the space of the other. Being-singular discovers existence through being-with. Being-singular-plural is representative of the personal encounter needed for the self to live and grow. Meaning that our individuality remains a mystery until one encounters the individuality of the other.²⁶ Existence comes through personal encounter.²⁷

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Christian life. The Christian life, Karl Barth, who was not a postmodernist, argues, as “children of God as a creation of the Holy Spirit we have to do with a determinateness of human life understood as *being* and *doing*.”²⁸ The call of

²⁴ The self needs the world. Tillich argues, “Without its world the self would be an empty form. Self-consciousness would have no content, for every content, psychic as well as bodily, lies within the universe.” *Systematic Theology*, 171.

²⁵ Tillich continues stating, “The person as the fully developed individual self is impossible without other fully developed selves.” *Systematic Theology*, 176.

²⁶ Understanding oneself comes from understanding others. How does one understand individual unless one pushes against the barrier of other individuals? Tillich states that the “individual discovers himself through this resistance...In the resistance of the other person the person is born.” *Systematic Theology*, 177. This correlates with Nancy’s arguments of existence being an origin and creation. Existence is born out of encounter. It is the creation of a world.

²⁷ Tillich argues, “Persons can grow only in communion of personal encounter. Individualization and participation are interdependent on all levels of being.” *Systematic Theology*, 177.

²⁸ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), 369.

God is also a call to action. The theologian is united to God and to others. It is impossible to regard ourselves as either one or the other. To act or not to act. God calls us to act.²⁹ The outward action, being-plural, is who one is as a Christian. This outward action, Barth explains, “means that he [or she] cannot cease to testify that God in Christ has found him [or her]. Therefore his [or her] being makes necessary a very definite doing. He [or she] simply cannot suppress or conceal or keep to [oneself] what he [or she] is.”³⁰ The call of God is the call to being-with. Being-with the intended state of all persons. The Christian life does not privilege one’s inward state over the outward. Rather one’s inward nature is drawn toward the outside. The life of Christ does not close us from others. It opens us, our being-singular to being-singular-plural. The life of Christ is a life lived *with* others.³¹ The life of the theologian is an extension of the Christian life. That is our life is lived with and in the now. We embrace the rhythms, we live in the everyday, and we connect with the situation around us. As practical theologians, here I intentionally use practical as opposed to theology in general, as practical theologians we fully embrace this scenario. As practical theologians we remind ourselves of this fact. That the work we do is current and contemporary. We build not for the future but for the now. It is the air we breathe and the fuel for our soul. Therefore, we must continue to ask the difficult questions of today. For I believe that what our world needs is not more systems or methods or even models. What our world needs is good honest thinking and reflection on the issues facing all of the various contexts

²⁹ Barth states that one is “confronted only by God, and no one can represent him in the confrontation. But if we look at the doing or outward aspect of this same man [or woman], we find that in spite of his isolation this same man [or woman] is united in society as an individual with the whole Church, related, of course, to God, but in God to others. The impossibility of regarding him [or her] strictly from the one standpoint or the other means that we cannot treat either of these insights as exclusive. The fact is that they belong together.” *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 369-370.

³⁰ Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 370.

³¹ For example, Barth explains, “In the freedom of God he [or she] himself [or herself] became free and the child of God. This is the irresistible summons to action. This is what he [or she] has to reveal and declare. This is what his [or hers] whole existence has now to proclaim and attest and affirm. It is in this decision that he [or she] now lives.” *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 370.

we find ourselves. Richard Rorty describes this situation. Comparing the works of systematic and edifying philosophers he writes:

Great systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments. Great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms. They know their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over. They are *intentionally* peripheral. Great systematic philosophers, like great scientists, build for eternity. Great edifying philosophers destroy for the sake of their own generation. Systematic philosophers want to put their subject on the secure path of a science. Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause – wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is *not* an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described.³²

What I am asking us to do today is to keep space open for wonder. Perhaps there is, as Rorty writes, something new under the sun. Therefore, we do not have to accept what is must be what is for always. As practical theologians we do not build for eternity. We believe in the now. We listen to the now and connect with the now. Thank you.

³² Rorty, *Mirror of Philosophy*, 369-370.