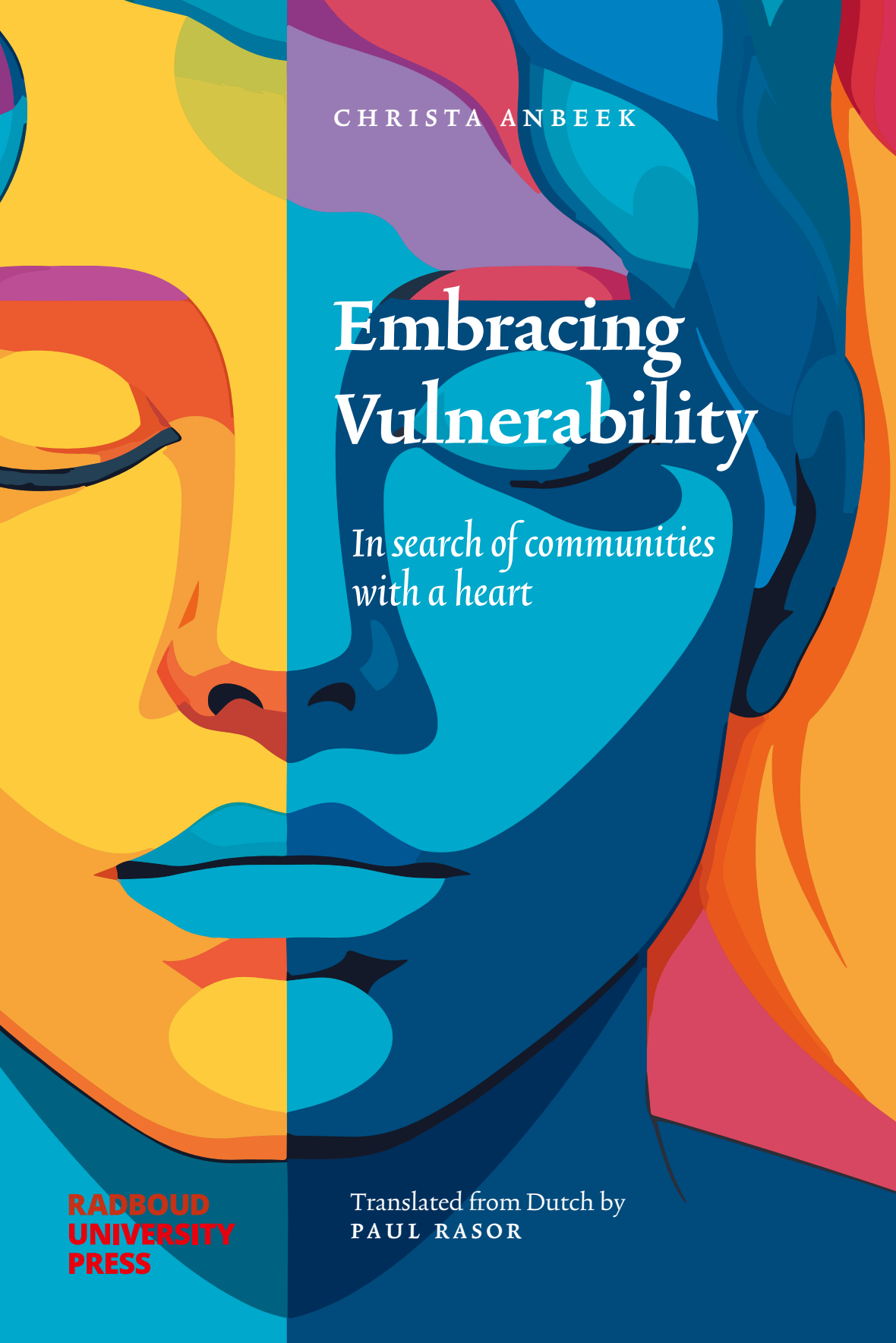
CHRISTA ANBEEK
Embracing Vulnerability
In search of communities with a heart
RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Translated from Dutch by
PAUL RASOR

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Translator's Notes

I am pleased to offer this translation of Christa Anbeek's newest book, *Embracing Vulnerability: In Search of Communities with a Heart*. Anbeek is one of the leading liberal theologians in the Netherlands, and I have long thought that her work deserves to be more readily available to English-speaking readers. I hope this translation will be a step in this direction.

Christa Anbeek's theology is grounded in experience. Starting with experience has been a characteristic of liberal theology ever since Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) argued that religion is grounded not in reason, but in a kind of pre-cognitive mystical experience he called a "feeling of absolute dependence" or a consciousness of being in relation with God. Theology, then, is about interpreting and explaining that experience.[1]

Anbeek's experiential theology has a very different starting point. Anbeek begins not with any kind of mystical or personal subjective experience, but with the reality of disruption, often radical disruption, in everyday life. Or more precisely, with the vulnerability that manifests itself through experiences of disruption. These experiences can happen to individuals, groups, including religious groups, an entire society, or even the whole world. "Disruptive experiences knock the ground out from under your feet," she says. The question then, is: "Who are you when nothing is as it was before? Who can you become, and who can help?"

Anbeek invites us not to deny or run away from our vulnerability, but instead to embrace it: "I have long argued that we should not avoid life's all-encompassing fragility, but rather embrace it. Fragility, uncertainty, unpredictability, dependence, and porousness, however difficult they often can be, are sources of deep insights. Disruptive experiences bring us into borderlands. They make our vulnerability manifest, but also reveal new perspectives and creativity." Anbeek argues that we can find our way through these disruptive experiences in communities with a heart, communities that can arise spontaneously when people who have suffered these disruptive experiences find each other and begin to share their stories.

Our experiences of radical disruption, and the stories we tell about them, are always embodied experiences. They take place in particular contexts and particular times and places and are therefore unique. Yet sharing our experiences with each other opens possibilities for moving forward, for rediscovering ourselves in community. Here, Anbeek touches on themes that we also see in some American feminist theologians such as Serene Jones, whom Anbeek discusses at length, and Sallie McFague. McFague says:

> *At the most basic level, experience is embodied; we are bodies that experience [...] Experience begins with feelings of hot and cold, hunger and satiety, comfort and pain, the most basic ways in which all creatures live in their environments. We live here also and this basic level connects us in a web of universal experience making possible an ever-widening inclusive sympathy for the pains and pleasures of creatures like and unlike ourselves [...] Experience is always embodied for human beings not only in relation to the natural world but also culturally, economically, sexually, socially, and so on. It is radically concrete [...] Even physical reality is experienced differently depending on one's cultural, economic, racial, and gender situation. There is no experience-in-general.*[2]

Anbeek would not disagree with this. Yet there are important differences. McFague builds on the concept of embodiment to construct a way of thinking about God and the world through the metaphor of the body – the world as God's body. Anbeek, on the other hand, finds God language, and especially abstract concepts such as God-beyond-God (Tillich) or the Good (Iris Murdoch), unhelpful. Anbeek says: "If this beautiful but often bewildering earthly life and shared world are our starting points, where do we end up theologically? The *theological reversal* I have chosen, following the lead of anthropologists, means that I do not want to approach reality through familiar concepts such as 'God' or 'the Good.' What does theology look like if we take the encounter with life itself as the source of theological reflection? What do I hear, see, feel, smell and taste? How am I changed by what I encounter? And how can I give this theological meaning?"

We can also see similarities between Anbeek's experiential theology of vulnerability and liberation theology, which begins with the lived experience of oppression. As with experiences of disruption and vulnerability, the experience of oppression is always particular. Liberation theology speaks

from the perspective of a particular community's experience of oppression; it does not try to speak for everyone. Its fundamental commitment is to overcoming oppression in the world. Yet liberation theology is rooted in a biblical faith and linked to a God of justice, a God who acts in history on behalf of the oppressed. The move from the experience of oppression to the experience of God is one Anbeek does not make. We might say that for Anbeek, embracing vulnerability does not lead to God, but to community, communities with a heart.

Anbeek treats scholarly sources and personal experience with equal seriousness. She draws on theologians and philosophers, including Buddhist philosophers of the Kyoto School, anthropologists and sociologists, and other academic sources. She also draws on her own experience as a Remonstrant minister, a university professor, a spiritual advisor in a psychiatric institution, among other professional positions, as well as her experience as a mother, a grandmother, a lover, a friend, and on the experiences of others. Experiences of disruption and vulnerability emerge without warning in all these settings. This book is therefore at once scholarly and deeply personal.

Remonstrants

The Remonstrants, and especially Anbeek's relationship with the Remonstrants, play an important role in this book. This small, liberal religious group may be unfamiliar to non-Dutch readers, so I will briefly introduce it here.

The Remonstrants, officially known as the Remonstrant Brotherhood, emerged out of a theological dispute in the Dutch Reformed Churches in the early 17th century. Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) rejected the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, which held that God unconditionally elects some people for salvation. Arminius argued that human beings had free will to accept or reject God's grace. After Arminius died, his followers formalized his views in a document known as the *Five Articles of Remonstrance* in 1610, seeking to moderate the strict Calvinism of the time. A group of Calvinists led by Franciscus Gomaris (1563–1641) wrote a *Counter Remonstrance* in 1611, defending the traditional views. Years of argument followed. To settle this dispute, a national synod known as the Synod of Dort was held in the Dutch town of Dordrecht in 1618–1619. The Synod concluded by rejecting the Arminian views and adopting what has become

known as the Canons of Dort, sometimes referred to as the Five Points of Calvinism, as the official doctrine of the Reformed churches. Among other things, the Canons affirmed the absolute sovereignty of God as well as the doctrine of double predestination. The Arminians were ultimately expelled from the Synod and some were forced to flee the Netherlands. The Remonstrant Brotherhood was founded in Antwerp in 1619, and the Remonstrants have been in continuous existence since that time. Today they number around 5,000 members and friends.

References and notes

A comment on my treatment of Anbeek's sources is also in order. Several sources used by Anbeek are available only in Dutch. Here, I have left the original titles intact in the bibliographical list of references but have provided English translations in brackets. Page number references to these sources in the notes are to the Dutch originals.

In some cases Anbeek has relied on Dutch translations of material originally published in English. Here, I have substituted the English-language originals in the list of references. Page number references to these sources in the notes are to the English versions. Where Anbeek has used English language sources, I have left the titles and note references unchanged.

Finally, I want to thank Christa Anbeek for inviting me to do this translation and Radboud University Press for agreeing to publish it.

Paul Rasor
June 2024

Author's preface

Some guidance for the reader

Dear Reader,

By taking up this book you have begun an extraordinary adventure. This adventure can, by turns, be moving or bewildering, intriguing or broadening, disconcerting or enjoyable, but it will require effort. In this preface I offer you some guidelines along with some words of warning.

To put it all in context, I should tell you that, in the 1980s, I decided to study theology. This decision appalled my non-church family, but their reaction was not enough to dissuade me. During the first years of my studies, both my parents and my brother died unexpectedly. This had a profound and lasting impact on my development as a theologian and philosopher of religion. Since that time, my research has focused on situations of radical disruption, and in particular on the resources and obstacles offered by religious visions and practices in these situations.

Forty years have now passed since my early years as a student of theology. The world has changed and so have I. What has not changed is the appearance of ever new serious disruptions that affect individuals, groups, societies and even our entire world. These disruptions pose great challenges.

Over the years, the vulnerability of everything that lives and the disruptive experiences in which that vulnerability manifests itself have become increasingly important as sources of my theological and philosophical reflections. Abstract theological and philosophical concepts have faded into the background. As a professor in a small liberal seminary, this provoked questions and reproaches. Am I really a believer? Why do I mention God so little? What is the meaning of Christ for me? What is my understanding of grace? And what of freedom?

During my years as a professor at the Remonstrant Seminary, my most pressing question was: How can liberal theology and faith communities play a meaningful role in contemporary situations of radical disruption? Today, as International Grail Professor of Women and Care for the Future at Radboud University, my research is guided by a related question: How can we help create inclusive and inspiring communities in situations of severe disruption,

communities that give voice to marginalized groups such as women, children, animals, trees, and water?

In choosing the form in which I cast my quest, I drew inspiration from American author Phillip Lopate and German philosopher Theodor Adorno. In *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Lopate explores the various characteristics and techniques of personal essays. A personal essay should be distinguished from a formal essay, an essay that has an academic tone and intentionally presents a question or sets forth a theoretical position on a scholarly topic. A formal essay is never an adventure, but a personal essay always is. It is written in the first person; its tone is at once intimate and bold. It is a kind of conversation, one that is honest, self-revealing, gentle and personal, and it uses the author's own ignorance as a starting point. The personal essay is an extremely flexible and adaptable form. It possesses the freedom to go anywhere, in any direction. The essayist attempts to surround something – a subject, a problem or a mood – by approaching it from all angles, circling and diving like a hawk, each seemingly digressive spiral actually bringing us closer to the heart of the matter. Above all, the personal essayist must be a good storyteller; he or she brings topics together through free association.[3]

Adorno saw rich, subversive possibilities precisely in the "anti-systematic" properties of the essay. Lopate, drawing on Adorno, puts it this way:

In our century, when the grand philosophical systems seem to have collapsed under their own weight and authoritarian taint, the light-footed, freewheeling essay suddenly steps forward as an attractive way to open up philosophical discourse.[4]

According to Adorno, a personal essay evokes resistance because of the intellectual freedom the writer allows herself. The essay does not allow itself to prescribe its own domain; rather it moves between scientific clarification and artistic creativity. As such, it is intangible and quite often evokes annoyance.

Instead of achieving something scientifically or creating something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruples, on what others have already done. The essay mirrors what is loved and hated instead of presenting the intellect, on the model of a boundless work ethic, as *creatio ex nihilo*. Luck and play are essential to the essay. It does not begin with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to discuss; it says what is at issue and stops where it feels itself complete – not where nothing is left to say. Therefore, it is classed among the oddities.[5]

Adorno's diagnosis that the great philosophical systems have collapsed under their own weight and authoritarian taint applies all the more strongly, in my view, to theology. The abstract intellectual edifices of many twentieth-century theologians, such as Paul Tillich and Wolfhart Pannenberg, no longer convince many people and call instead for a new theological discourse. My own narrative and personal approach to theology is an attempt at this.

In the thirteen personal essays that comprise this book, some of which stem from lectures and readings I have given over the years, I take up questions that have been posed to me as a professor of the Remonstrants and the International Grail, questions that continue to engage me. These essays are thus intended primarily as a journey of discovery for myself. What do philosophy and theology have to offer in the face of deeply unsettling experiences? How can I relate to old classical theological concepts, and what new philosophical reflections and analyses can help save us and our earth community from destruction?

As a reader, I invite you to become my traveling companion on this quest. However, a warning is in order here. Over the years, my theological reflections have become narrative and personal. They are private and not generalizable. They go back to my own disruptive experiences or the disruptive experiences of others. These experiences are all tied to specific people, places and times and thus have limited force. Yet it is precisely these experiences that are the focus of this book. My essays are characterized by their intimacy. I confide everything to you: my thoughts, memories, despair, despondency, irritations, sometimes complaints about others, but also moments when I was lifted up, when I felt joy over the delights of life. I connect all of this with philosophical and theological reflections of others and myself. You, the reader, are of exceptional importance here. Traveling companions, friendships, dialogues, being able to be silent together in bewilderment or wonder, and searching together for reflections that offer new perspectives have shown me that I still have not given up my theological quest.

To you, the reader, I wish a fascinating reading experience full of discoveries. To help keep you from getting completely lost, there is an endnote at the beginning of each of the four sections of this volume with a brief summary of the main points of the essays in that particular section.

Finally, I would like to thank Radboud University Press for trusting in my unconventional scholarly work.

Christa Anbeek, June 2024

Introduction

Humans, animals, plants, rivers, air, earth, seas and mountains – robust, strong and resilient – are not indestructible. The survival of nature itself – of which we are a part – however breathtaking, dazzling, overpowering, awe-inspiring and often endearing it may be, cannot be taken for granted. We are threatened by multiple disruptions.

I have long argued that we should not avoid life's all-encompassing fragility but rather embrace it. Fragility, uncertainty, unpredictability, dependence, and porousness, however difficult they often can be, are sources of deep insights. Disruptive experiences bring us into borderlands. They make our vulnerability manifest but also reveal new perspectives and creativity.[6]

Disruptive experiences are part of every life. We are fundamentally relational and vulnerable beings. American philosopher Judith Butler points to our bodies as sites of boundary experiences. "The condition of primary vulnerability, of being given over to the touch of the other, even if there is no other there, and no support for our lives, signifies a primary helplessness."[7] This innate, fundamental helplessness, or openness, or permeability, is necessary for us to develop and flourish. We become someone through relationships with others and can, therefore, be disowned by others. Experiences of grief and violence make painfully clear how intertwined we are, how mutually dependent on each other's benevolence.

Embracing vulnerability does not come naturally. Disruptive experiences are often accompanied by loss, pain, suffering, and isolation. We enter an in-between place where old certainties no longer exist, and new ones are yet to be discovered, a no-man's-land full of dangers and risks where we need to find new pathways.[8] In *Mountain of the Soul* [*De Berg van de Ziel*, 2013] I explored this kind of in-between place with Ada de Jong, who had lost her husband and three children in a mountain accident. Along the way we looked for ways to survive. A painful journey, which at first did not seem to produce much. Exploring the abyss into which her husband and children, along with her own life, disappeared was exceptionally challenging and required a lot of courage. Her courage was perhaps prompted by the fact that the loss involved

her children, whom you carry with you even in the darkness of death. Her future had been stolen. Who are you then? Who can you ever become?[9]

Many of my books focus on disruptions affecting individuals. Only later did I turn my attention to disruptive experiences that affect groups or an entire society, or even the whole world. Realities such as Covid-19, climate change, the refugee crisis, growing inequality, and a new war in Europe bring with them disruptive experiences that impact whole groups of people. Old certainties have ceased to exist; new ones have yet to be discovered. Radical uncertainty and chaos are the new order of the day.

Churches and philosophical groups are also vulnerable and may find themselves in in-between places.[10] Over four hundred years ago, in 1619, the birth year of the Remonstrants, the followers of Arminius (1560–1609) were expelled from the Synod of Dordrecht. Arminius held that people could not be predestined for eternal life regardless of how they lived. Without free will not to sin, God becomes the creator of sin. This is contrary to God's goodness. His opponent Gomarus (1563–1641), in line with Calvin (1509–1564), defended the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty. People are powerless to influence the choice between eternal life and eternal damnation. Years of prolonged conflict followed. Theologians on both sides took up the cause and wrote *Remonstrance* and *Counter-Remonstrance*. Theological disputes were marked by mockery and bullying. The president of the Synod, Johannes Bogerman (1576–1637), settled the controversy by raising his arms and angrily shouting "*ite, ite!*," "go away, get out." Abroad in Antwerp, the exiled ministers proclaimed their brotherhood in Christ.[11] Four hundred years later, the Remonstrants still exist, but the future is extremely uncertain. About five thousand friends and members remain, but there is no new growth. What worked for a long time no longer works. In 2013, I was appointed as the first female professor of the Remonstrant seminary. My assignment was to help discover a new future for the Remonstrants.[12]

The international Grail Movement was founded more than 100 years ago by Jesuit priest Jacques van Ginneken (1875–1945). During its early years, it was known as Women of Nazareth. Women's special gifts were to be used for the conversion of the world. In 1923, Van Ginneken was appointed professor of linguistics at the newly founded Catholic Theological University in Nijmegen. He inspired several young women students to join his lay movement. They reenergized the movement; their big dream was to establish a

women's university in Java. This dream remained unfulfilled, and the university never came to be. However, their inspiration, energy, creativity, piety and cooperation helped Grail movements flourish in many countries, focusing on projects for women's welfare and development.[13] Over time, the emphasis shifted away from conversion toward the transformation of the world. A century after its founding, the International Grail faces new challenges. Old certainties are gone, new ones are yet to be discovered. How can it adapt to the changing times? At the university where it began, renamed Radboud University in 2004, a chair in Women and Care for the Future was established, hoping to inspire young women once again. My research assignment as the new professor was:

In situations of disruption, how can we help create inclusive and inspiring communities that give voice to the marginalized, such as women, children, animals, trees and water?

While the International Grail and the Remonstrants are different in many ways, both recognize that old certainties no longer work. They are not alone in the space between old and new. Countless other churches, faith communities, associations and even political parties face the challenge of reinventing themselves. These disruptions bring with them disorder, fear, homesickness, suffering, and displacement, along with endless discussions and internal conflicts. What is our identity? What vision moves us? What contribution can we make to the present and future world – a world that has, itself, fallen into disruption?

Disruptive experiences knock the ground out from under your feet. Who are you when nothing is as it was before? Who can you become, and who can help? These questions engage me in both my work and my private life. My own loss experiences have been a rich source of research, as have experiences of others. Children and loved ones died, young people became psychotic and could not finish their education, relationships were destroyed by addictions, a family fell into a ravine. Everywhere I went, I was confronted with disruption.

Disruptive experiences, whether of individuals, groups, churches, societies or the whole world, differ greatly. They are bodily experiences, tied to a specific place and time. They take place within a certain social context and are affected by power relations.[14] Disruptive experiences are diverse, multifaceted and concrete. They bring you into an in-between place, a borderland, somewhere between the old and the new. Fear, uncertainty, suffering

and isolation play a huge role in this unknown territory. It's no picnic to be forced to leave the familiar behind and wander around in a place where you don't know your way.[15] You become a pioneer. Over time, I came to recognize that these in-between places also contain opportunities. Sensibility is heightened. This can intensify suffering, but it can also sharpen our awareness of beautiful things. Desire and creativity are enhanced. Pioneers are open to connection and cooperation with others. You can go farther together than alone.[16]

Communities with a heart

Disruptive experiences bring people, groups and entire cultures to borderlands, also called liminal zones. These are full of risk, but they also offer unique opportunities. The search for who you can become is an art that requires minimizing risks and taking advantage of opportunities. How can we draw on sensitivity, desire, creativity, openness and cooperation to transform disruption into new dreams and possibilities for connection and coexistence? What partnerships can we build in borderlands?

Pausing to reflect on disruptive experiences and trying to discover what they are showing us is the first step. What is at stake? What has been lost? What pain, fear and uncertainty are caused? What beauty is revealed, what precious moments? Whom do we encounter in the in-between places? What dreams are born? What opportunities present themselves? How can we take advantage of these opportunities to design and create something new together?

Facing disruption squarely, examining it more closely and starting anew takes courage. This is the second step. The root of the French word *courage* is *coeur*, "heart." Courage is a matter of the heart. It is not about valiant individuals. We need each other to calm our anxious and insecure hearts and to discover together what more is available to us: a multitude of perspectives, creativity, insights, knowledge from experience, and possibilities for renewal.

In circumstances of profound disruption, people often help each other spontaneously. They let themselves be touched. They come to each other's aid and declare their solidarity. But the opposite also happens. People turn away. They pretend it doesn't concern them or retreat into themselves.

How can we make our hearts beat together? How can we help and care for each other? Where do communities with a heart emerge and how can we strengthen them?

In this book I invite the reader to join a meandering search for communities with a heart. What building blocks do I find, and where do I find them? How do they help us embrace our all-encompassing vulnerability and bring about transformation? What theological and philosophical reflections help us along, or perhaps distract us, as we try to build something new?

Route

The search for ways to embrace vulnerability in communities with a heart consists of four parts, with several essays in each part. Part 1, *In-Between Places*, deals with various liminal zones or borderlands. What do these borderlands look like and what chaos lurks within them? What unsuspected opportunities are hidden in them? Initially, I examine ideological groups in in-between areas, particularly the Remonstrants. What vulnerabilities can be seen in a faith community at risk of disappearing? Anthropologists and sociologists of religion show how religions worldwide have fallen into transitional areas. They suggest ways to prevent total demise and give the forces of renewal a chance. The abstract analyses of these scientists prompt me to return to personal stories of dislocation. What can we learn from vulnerable people in borderlands? What building blocks can I find for communities with heart?

In Part 2, *Theological Reversal*, I explore how borderlands provide inspiration for dancers, poets and dreamers. In uncertain in-between places, they express their despair and hope. They attend more closely to their own in-between areas. What's at stake?

A complex meeting of a research group on changing religiosity leads me to decide to prioritize fieldwork, like anthropologists. I want to explore how (groups of) people in vulnerable situations live and what choices they make. What places of promise do I find when I look around? My philosophical and theological search for communities with a heart begins with the ordinary, often messy and vulnerable condition of living together.

This is exactly the opposite of how I was educated theologically forty years ago. Most theologians and philosophers drew a sharp distinction between

ordinary, often tainted, imperfect and finite life, and God, the Ultimate, the Good, the unnamable, perfect and infinite. Theology created a gap between vulnerable life and religious faith. Instead, I want to embrace vulnerability in my search for communities with heart.

In Part 3, *Beckoning Vistas*, I consider women philosophers' analyses of being carried and born. Experiences of early life lead to a phenomenology of fundamental vulnerability that does not stop at birth. We are thoroughly dependent on each other to grow into acting persons. This brings with it important responsibilities; we must care for each other. Power imbalances play a role in how vulnerable we are. Experiences of being violently overpowered lead to being lost and broken ourselves. Sharing stories about what happened with others who listen and can retell our story is important for creating new connections and meaning. Drawing on women philosophers, religious scholars and theologians, I discover an interesting theological route toward communities with heart. Instead of abstract concepts such as God, the Infinite, and the Good, we find *concrete persons*, *intimations of transitional areas*, and *verbs*. These suggest a direction.

In Part 4, *Breathing Space*, I undertake a closer examination of breathing: air, flow, life force. Breath brings me back to my teachers in sitting Zen meditation. Something ineffable reveals itself in silence. Breathing is essential to speaking, and speaking creates direction and meaning, according to a linguist and philosopher. But not everything that breathes speaks, or does it? How can we learn to listen beyond the human?

Short days and long dark nights at the end of the year offer time and space for old and new reflections. The world has changed, and so has the place of religion. How can seekers of meaning find direction and connection? And what can the spiritual treasures buried under the dust in old storehouses mean here?

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues for an *ecumenism of friendship*, deep and patient conversations between young and old, rich and poor, religious and nonreligious. His proposal raises the question of who has a place in this house of friendship. A richly varied group of sentient beings take their seats at the friendship table. They consider how we can embrace vulnerability in communities with a heart.

In the *Epilogue*, I review what the search for building blocks for communities with a heart has led to. I bring together eight cornerstones: facing disruptions openly, being silent, speaking boldly and practicing multi-voiced listening, minimizing risks and optimizing opportunities, dreaming, setting direction, working cooperatively, and being willing to fail and start over. I conclude with a brief reflection on what these cornerstones can mean for philosophical and ideological groups in in-between places.

PART 1

In-between Places[1]

1 Rumbling in the distance

For weeks, an envelope sat unopened on my kitchen table. It was the monthly circular letter from the Remonstrants. Most of the time, I opened it only when the pile of clutter on my table grew too large. I usually flipped quickly through the pages, sometimes picking out something to read later, and tossed the rest in the recycle bin. This time, a curious friend beat me to it, and without asking he opened the envelope. "Hey, did you see that? They're looking for a new professor."

I looked at the yellow sheet of paper on which the vacancy was described. The position, which for centuries had consisted of a full-time professorship, had been split into two parts. The Remonstrant seminary was looking for two part-time professors, one in practical theology and one in systematic theology.

"Isn't that something for you?" my friend asked.

I shook my head. "I am way too far on the fringe. For this kind of position, they are looking for someone from inside. Four years ago, they wanted to appoint a general secretary who came from outside. Everything was going well until the conference of ministers intervened. Following the lead of the chairman of the time, all the ministers voted against it. After that, many congregations no longer dared to give their support. The professor who is now going to be replaced had to meet with the intended general secretary, who was already on his way to the General Assembly where he was to be appointed, to inform him that his new job was off. No, this is not for me," I decided. "Too far inside the church, and even if I wanted it I wouldn't stand a chance." Two weeks later, I received a call from the general secretary of the Remonstrants, the one who had been appointed after the rejected candidate. A hip, creative gay man with whom I got along well.

"Did you see the job posting for the new professor?" he asked.

"Sure. I'm curious to know who you are going to appoint," I replied.

"We're calling all the Remonstrant ministers who have Ph.Ds.," he said. "Could it be something for you? We're looking for someone who can think outside the box and has ideas for the future of Remonstrants."

I promised to think about it.

A few days later I received a call from an elderly colleague who was a Remonstrant minister as well as an endowed professor of European Culture. I admired her for her books on European art, film, literature, music and religion.

"The old boys network needs to be broken, or nothing will ever change," she said. "Wouldn't you like to apply? It's high time for the first female professor at the Remonstrant Seminary."

After some deliberation, I decided to apply for the position of professor of systematic theology. In my letter to the selection committee, I wrote that I was convinced that my work, which focuses primarily on people looking for meaning in modern society, could be important for the Remonstrants.

> *The common thread in my work is the question of how life philosophy can contribute to people's experience of meaning in a modern society. I have focused in particular on situations where life's meaning is no longer self-evident: what does religion then have to offer? My emphasis has been on the Christian, Buddhist and humanist traditions. I am not interested simply in the theory of a religion or life philosophy but rather in examining how religion takes shape across its full breadth: doctrine, experience, community, rituals, stories, social context.*

In my letter, I explained how my ordination as a Remonstrant minister in 1998 enabled me to work for ten years in a mental health care institution. I experienced up close how religion can be a help or a hinderance in people's search for meaning. The very fact that I was a Remonstrant minister often led people to new perspectives. Being allowed to think for themselves, not having a prescribed confession, being able to have doubts, looking beyond boundaries and still forming a faith community – all this was new for many of the people I worked with.

I added something about the book *Berg van de Ziel* [*Mountain of the Soul*] I was writing with Ada de Jong, who lost her husband and three children in a mountain accident. And a few sentences about my experiences at various universities. I said that it seemed to me a challenge to make a contribution within the context of the Remonstrant seminary to the question of how the Remon-

strant community can and will take shape in the future. I concluded by saying that I looked forward to being able to expand on my application in person. This wish to expand on my application was largely fulfilled. The first interview with the selection committee was pleasant, and the conversation was animated. One of the questions was what attracted me to the Remonstrants, as compared to the Humanists where I was then working as an associate professor. The answer was not difficult: the vestiges of communities that are still there. The network of local congregations, some very small, but even so. People who share much with each other, are involved with each other, want to depend on each other and work together for … "Well, for what really?" I asked myself ten years later. Self-preservation? Church preservation? Fearful self-interest? My naiveté and idealism at the time produced golden edges around the dark clouds of Remonstrant reality. How did I see the future? I had plenty to say about that, too. Droves of people who no longer understand the language of faith yearn for meaning and connection, with each other and with something higher, especially when things are not going well. I had seen this as a spiritual caregiver in psychiatry. This is where a free space can emerge and where Remonstrants, with their aversion to dogmatism and denominationalism, can play a crucial role.

The second interview went very differently. I didn't understand why. "What do you do when you get criticism from Remonstrants?" was one of the questions. "What if some people don't accept you as a seminary professor? How good are you at building bridges?" Only much later did I learn that the selection committee had brazenly rejected the doomed crown prince for the position and given preference to me. A fierce argument was raging in the background.

The Grail Movement

The dissertation I completed in 1994 dealt with the ways Christian thinker Wolfhart Pannenberg and Zen Buddhist Keiji Nishitani thought about death. Afterwards, I went to live and work at the Tiltenberg, the estate of the Grail Movement. I organized international symposia on Buddhism and Christianity and was responsible for all Zen programs. At that time, I was driven by idealism and unseen possibilities and had little regard for unruly reality. I did not know that a feud had been going on for years within the Dutch Grail Movement over the place of Zen meditation. Does Buddhism

belong in a women's movement that was originally Catholic? How do the many Buddhist programs and their large numbers of participants relate to the sparse Christian retreats, for which there was much less interest?

The arguments quieted down when one of the Grail women, the one who had introduced Zen to the center and had led the Zen programs for years, became seriously ill. She asked me to take over her duties and responsibilities. I felt honored. I looked up to her. She had lived in Japan for twelve years, spoke fluent Japanese, and captivated me with her love for the simplicity and beauty of silence and for the aesthetics of Japanese culture. After her death in 1995, arguments flared up again. I decided to join the Grail Movement; perhaps in this way I could gain more influence and help connect the warring factions. A noble endeavor that was doomed to failure, but I didn't see that at the time.

You can't just join the Grail. A group of wise Grail women was assembled. Along with another prospective member, I had long monthly conversations for a year about my desire to join the select group of Grail women. Finally, membership was granted in a special celebration.

For the occasion, I had written the story "Lion and Lamb." The title refers to an address delivered by Jacques van Ginneken, the founder of the Grail Movement, on August 17, 1932, at 4:00 p.m. during a retreat for Grail women. In this lecture, Van Ginneken discusses how the Old Testament speaks of Jesus and what we see of his character in the Gospels. The rabbinic school imagined the Messiah as the Lion of Judah who would afflict all pagans with his iron scepter. A royal figure who would mainly fight and help the Jews gain world domination and do other great things. The anchorites see Jesus primarily as the Lamb from Isaiah, who does not complain when his wool is shaved off and he is led to the slaughter. Van Ginneken concludes that both prophecies came true in Jesus. In the Catholic Church over the last two centuries, it has become customary to depict Jesus as sweet and pious. It can be helpful to see that Jesus was a lamb, but also to read those chapters where Jesus showed himself to be quite different. Van Ginneken writes that the greatest invective known in all world literature has the signature "Jesus of Nazareth." "And you will not find an invective like that anywhere; next to this, Dutch poet Willem Kloos with his invective sonata is a naughty little boy."[2] All of Matthew chapter 23, Van Ginneken continues, is one big public invective against the Pharisees. He calls them a brood of

vipers and more. This was not the first time. "He had previously taken action against the hypocritical Pharisees. Then it was not scolding, but ridicule. Jesus was an artist. He made caricatures of the Pharisees. Caricaturists are not the gentlest of men: it is a sign of a lion's heart."[3]

Van Ginneken encourages the Grail women to imitate Jesus, not only as a lamb but also as a lioness. God's kingdom needs this. "A lamb knows how to tolerate, to be resigned, to lay down. A lion can cope. He takes joy in his abilities and successes."[4]

Sixty-four years later, my imagination ran away with Van Ginneken's speech. I wrote a story about a miraculous birth and read it at the Grail celebration on Oct. 28, 1995, in which I was confirmed as a member of the Grail Movement.

On a beautiful late summer day, not long ago, a lion was in the dunes enjoying a late autumn sun. The lion had walked quite a distance and stood by the sea watching. Back in the dunes, he had feasted on a few rabbits and was now lounging contentedly. Suddenly his attention was drawn by an animal approaching from afar. The lion looked intently to see what it was, and before long his heart began to pound with joy. A lamb, a nice juicy lamb! The lion had not dared to dream of such a conclusion to this day. He crept softly backward to hide under a bush. He waited with bated breath, ready to pounce and tear the lamb to pieces as soon as the moment was right.

As the lion lies waiting for his chance, he becomes fascinated with the lamb. He is charmed by her slender legs, pointed muzzle and beautiful white woolly curls. Instead of attacking and tearing her apart he speaks to her. Over time, lion and lamb fell head over heels in love with each other. Their path was not a bed of roses. Other lions became furious and other lambs were terrified. However, they were not discouraged and built a house on the edge of the dunes. It was not long before a great miracle came to pass. Three lion-lambs were born, three beautiful little animals. They had their father's wild mane and their mother's pointed muzzle. Their bodies were covered with a woolly, slightly curly beige lion's coat. They had slender sheep's legs, with four strong, sturdy lion claws. Lion and lamb had never seen such beautiful animals.

In the evening, when father lion put the little ones to bed and lay with them for a while, he would whisper to them, "What pretty little lion-lambs you are. With your white snouts and thin legs. You must do your best to become more like your mother. Don't always just roar but learn to speak in a soft voice. Don't always act tough and strong but be gentle and kind to each other. And don't always try to be the boss but also be able to follow others."

And the next day, when mother lamb put the children to bed and lay with them for a while, she would whisper to them, "What wonderful lion-lambs you are. With your beautiful golden locks and sturdy lion claws. You must do your best to become more like your father. You must dare to speak in a loud voice in public, even if you are not sure if the other animals will listen. And sometimes have the courage to take charge, even if no one has asked you to do so. You must dare to go alone when necessary, not always being afraid and looking for others."

The happiness of lion and lamb and the lion-lambs did not go unnoticed. The strange situation was the subject of conversation all over the dunes. More and more you could see all kinds of animals wandering around by the fence of the big house, wanting to behold the miracle for themselves.

Bears and hedgehogs and snakes and pigeons came, and foxes and frogs and sparrows and mice, and most of them couldn't believe their eyes. That such a thing was possible… That you could have so much fun together and learn so much from each other… They had never thought of that before. It was as though their eyes were opened for the first time.

And the hedgehog looked at the bear and said, "How soft and big you are, can't you tell me a little more about what it's like to be a bear?"

And the dove whispered shyly to a snake, "You seem so wise and so smart, can't you tell me what it feels like to be a clever snake?"

And a frog went crazy for a mouse and the fox fell in love with a sparrow, and the strange company of animals at the edge of the dunes grew bigger and bigger.

A year later, I was distraught over bickering within the Grail. I told my daughter the sad continuation of the story. Lion and lamb had a serious accident that they did not survive. Now what was to be done with the lion-lambs? The lions didn't want them; they looked far too much like lambs. The lambs didn't want them either; they looked far too much like lions. After a long meeting full of bleating and roaring, it was decided that the lion-lambs would go back and forth, one month with the lions, one month with the lambs. The oldest became more and more like a lion, the youngest more and more like a lamb. After three months, they no longer wanted to go back and forth. The oldest stayed with the lions, the youngest with the lambs. The middle one didn't feel at home anywhere. She wandered endlessly through the dunes, getting lost on her slender legs with their sturdy lion claws. She disappeared without a trace and was never heard from again.

The valley

Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912–2009) describes life as a journey through an open landscape. Smooth and rough stretches, light and dark places – all can conceal the unexpected. We travel through this landscape on large and small expeditions, constantly interacting with everything around us. It is important to take breaks that allow us to take in the inherent preciousness of life: a beautiful sunrise, a loving smile, moving music, a cloudless sky. Being able to feel at home is an important life goal. This requires movement toward this goal as well as just being. Inner silence opens you up to life's wonder.[5]

The open landscape where I catch my breath from life's large and small expeditions is a vast Swiss valley. On the sunny flanks and terraces of the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau lie the mountain villages of Wengen, Mürren, Gimmelwald, and Isenfluh, and deep in the valley Lauterbrunnen.

One of the very first literary descriptions of this area dates back to 1776. The valley is much older, but until the late eighteenth century it attracted hardly any travelers from abroad. That has changed dramatically.

In 1776, the minister and naturalist Jakob Samuel Wyttenbach (1748–1830), a native of Bern, made a journey through the Alps. He traveled from Lauterbrunnen to Kleine Scheidegg and from there toward Grindelwald. At Wengernalp, he saw an ice avalanche crashing down from the Jungfrau. In his travel diary he wrote:

> *My companions, tired from climbing, went to rest under the leaky roof of the dirty shepherds' camp while I made some more observations with my thermometer. Suddenly I heard a thunder-like roar rolling through the valleys. Startled, I stood up from my shepherd's chair and looked around at the clouds. The shepherds laughed at my fear, and without saying a word pointed their fingers at the cause of the roar. Such magnificence! Huge masses of snow detached themselves from the steep mountain sides, rolled down through the serpentine fissures in the rocks, crashed in wave after wave into the low places, shattered to pieces with a thunderous blast, and flowed into the valley in a fine dust, covering it, as it were, with a white foam. The recurring roar was similar to rolling thunderstorms and the amplified reverberations made the whole area tremble. As soon as one such avalanche had emptied itself into the depths, fresh streams followed, pouring down from an astonishing height, eventually flowing like fierce forest water over high cliffs. I saw this magnificent spectacle more than eight times in an hour, a good fortune granted to few travelers.* [6]

In 1931, Father Jacques van Ginneken visited the valley; he, too, was deeply impressed. Inspired by the surroundings, he wrote a travel letter encouraging the Grail women to be like mountain streams.

> *How beautiful are those mountain streams! They are examples of extremism. I heard Jesus whisper to me: "When I say: I am the way, the truth and the life, most people think that I mean a smooth, dry, wide highway, like the one leading from the viaduct in The Hague to Wassenaar. But I want to tell the Women of Nazareth that by this road I actually mean for Myself and for them a mountain stream, a banjir, full of large stones to obstruct the way, with ever-changing dangerous rapids and formidable waterfalls at every turn. Such mountain streams sweep away everything they encounter in their path." So you must all become such mountain streams, as pure as that clear, sparkling water, but breaking through the rocks with just as much force, even if it takes agitated suffering and frothing resistance, forward, always forward. That is the revolutionary method of apostleship, about which I have spoken during your retreat. And then you will dig deep grooves even into the stony ground of hardened hearts, until they hear Jesus whole and entire forever.*[7]

I read these travel letters just before the summer of 2020, during which I spent six weeks catching my breath in my beloved valley. That spring, Covid-19 had erupted in all its ferocity. I had been ill. In the mountains my lungs recovered, along with my soul. Hiking along wild rivers and waterfalls that found their way through hollowed-out rocks, I had to smile at Van Ginneken's absurd imagery. Almost every summer over the past thirty-five years, I visited the Lauterbrunnen valley, known for its 72 waterfalls. At least twelve were visible from the balcony of our house. I was pregnant with my daughter there. A quarter-century later I was there with my daughter, then twenty weeks pregnant. She had been there several times a year as a child, often with me. We were there with my oldest grandson Joseph as a baby, as a toddler, and again with him and his brother. In the summer of 2020, they were seven and two years old.

That year, three days after returning from six long weeks in the mountains, Joseph had a bicycle accident that resulted in serious leg injuries. A year later, he still couldn't walk. Unexpectedly, I left for a week in the mountains without my daughter and the children. There were new setbacks following my grandson's last surgery, making a summer vacation abroad impossible, only trips close to home. The advantage of two years of Covid-19

was that the youngest, at three years old, hardly knew that such trips existed. He feasted his eyes. The oldest, then eight years old, was still childlike enough to enjoy small outings as well. I enjoyed them too. But between the trips I kept working, even though I could sense how tired I was from the past year. I had canceled a vacation to Portugal, too uncertain. Maybe a week in Switzerland?

"Why don't you go now?" asked my daughter's father. "The house is empty all summer; you can move right in. I can move into your house and watch the kids." Within a few days, everything was arranged. On Sunday, I left for Antwerp, then via Brussels, Luxembourg, Metz, and Nancy to Plombières-les-Baines, where I spent the night. The next morning, I drove through 35 tunnels toward Interlaken and entered my beloved valley. A strange calm descended on me. It was all still there, the 72 waterfalls, which the youngest called "drinking falls" when he was one and a half years old. The mountains, the starry nights, the bright sunlight in the afternoon on the lower balcony, chirping crickets, mice gnawing at the house, a cat from somewhere in the neighborhood coming to beg for food, my body wanting to run up the mountain, drops of sweat beading on my back, a cold shower on the balcony, the beer at the end of the afternoon that makes me drowsy.

Back in this sanctuary, it felt like the dust and pain of a hectic, distressing, anxious and sometimes despairing year was settling down. The next morning I bought goat cheese from a farm near Staubachbänkli. Made from the milk of the goats that pranced and played in our alpine pasture the year before. Running frantically to the little hut at the bottom of the meadow when it started to rain. The big log next to the hut, where the youngest's shoes ended up when he tried out his throwing power in an unnoticed moment, was also still there. "The goats will come again soon," said the woman from the farm.

I visited the valley for the first time four weeks after the sudden death of my mother and brother. We had cleaned out their houses and I left for Switzerland. I was so exhausted that I couldn't walk any farther than to Staubachbänkli. That was in the summer of 1986; now it was the summer 2021, 35 years later. Memories swirled through me. Who knows what is to come, beautiful and not so beautiful, extremely painful and then light again. Last year, three days after we returned from a weeks-long stay in our

beloved valley, the accident that colored the past year happened. That leg sadly forever scarred, and also his soul. Never again so uninhibited.

In the mountains where I had worked on my graduate thesis, portions of my dissertation and parts of other books, I decided to start writing again. I would write about in-between places, where you sometimes end up voluntarily, but more often without having chosen it. Places where familiar and self-evident realities no longer exist. Vacations in the mountains or other places can create a temporary in-between place, a refuge to catch your breath from the hectic pace of everyday life. If all goes well, you return to your everyday life reborn. In other borderlands, you end up in a place you have not chosen; it just happens. A disruptive experience turns your life upside down and takes you into a place where you don't know your way. In other in-between places, you don't even realize at first that you have entered a borderland. Slowly but surely, the realization of being lost dawns on you. This happens quite often to philosophical and ideological groups. Gradually, things get bogged down, and we no longer know how to continue. As a philosopher of religion, I want to reflect further on faith communities in transitional areas. What risks materialize and what opportunities present themselves? What will it take for the emerging vulnerability to be transformed into new communities with heart? The next step in this quest is to explore further the in-between place of the Remonstrants.

2 Remonstrant turmoil

In 2019, the Remonstrants celebrated their 400th anniversary, and the run-up to the festive commemoration was stormy. Ideas bubbled up in the small, creative and diverse community. The art of making a thousand flowers bloom turned out to be complicated and, notwithstanding the principle of tolerance, fuss arose. In September of this 399th year, my book *For Joseph and His Brother: From Survival to Play and Other Matters of Ultimate Importance*, was published. In this book, I used narrative to develop a theology of vulnerability. Critical reviews appeared in the church magazine *AdRem*. Several Remonstrants let it be known that they had had enough of this and would not read the book. People outside the Church thought otherwise; a few months later, my book received the audience award for the Best Spiritual Book of 2019.

The festivities celebrating the Remonstrants' 400th year began on a December evening in 2018 at the Evangelical Broadcasting Company (EO) building in Hilversum. A select company was invited to the premiere of *God in the Low Countries*, a documentary about the struggle between Arminius (1560–1609) and Gomarus (1563–1641). Afterwards, there would be a debate between contemporary Arminians and Gomarists moderated by EO celebrity Tijs van den Brink. Fifteen minutes before the start, I became acquainted with the fellow Arminian who would be seated next to me at Tijs' table opposite the Gomarists. He had received his doctorate years ago with a dissertation on Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) and was therefore historically well grounded, and he worked as a lawyer at the Supreme Court. I felt reassured; with this companion at my side, I was in a strong position. After only a few minutes, he confided to me that to do his job at the Supreme Court, he meditated every day during the break. Five to fifteen minutes was enough to get through the rest of the day. He had a cottage close to St. Willibrord's Abbey in Doetinchem, where he sometimes participated in a Zen program. The attic of the abbey's pigsty had been converted into a Zen garden, and the sty was now the meditation room. Years ago, I had once participated in a Zen weekend there. Outside, it was oppressively hot, and in the musty sty I

imagined I could still smell the pigs. Drops of sweat beaded on my back. I decided to leave the pigs and Zen behind and took a walk through the beautiful, gently rolling countryside. I probably walked past his cottage, but of course I didn't know that at the time.

At Tijs' table, it turned out that after four hundred years, most Gomarists had become Arminians. Only a small minority in the Low Countries still adhered to the doctrine of double predestination. God has become more generous, and human beings now determine their own destiny. If you ask for mercy, you get mercy; this was the unanimous conclusion of a bland and uncontentious debate.

Afterwards, the minister of Rotterdam approached me with a broad-shouldered bodyguard in his wake, who turned out to be a church council member.

"We have decided," he solemnly informed me, "that the celebration of 400 years of the Remonstrants will take place in Rotterdam and that I will preach the sermon."

The personnel and location of this liturgical anniversary celebration had been in dispute for some time. No one had thought of including a female voice. A few weeks before, when I ventured into the lion's den and asked whether the seminary's first female professor should not also have a place in the program, I was told that I should have let them know earlier. Now this notification. I didn't quite know what to say. Fortunately, my attention was distracted by two people who wanted to say something about the lecture I had given that same week in the philosophical café in Amersfoort.

More than two months later, the time had come. The festively decorated Arminius Church in Rotterdam was filled with Remonstrants from all over the country. There were greetings and handshakes; embraces are rare among Remonstrants. I was one of the four ministers; I was to speak briefly in the last part of the celebration.

On the Tuesday preceding the anniversary celebration, a long article had appeared in the newspaper *Trouw* entitled "Are the Remonstrants drifting away from their Christian foundation?" Anonymous sources from the Remonstrant congregations in The Hague and Rotterdam expressed concern about their church's liberal drift. The concerns focused on the seminary and its professor. "She is developing a theology of vulnerability, an approach

that has roots in feminist and liberation theology. She draws on experiences that either surprise or disturb people: beauty, love, and loss or injustice. With the theology of vulnerability, she wants to give them a means to explore these experiences together, to stand up and seek a new direction," the journalist explained in the article. The unnamed and faceless Remonstrants cited their statement of principles:

The Remonstrant Brotherhood is a community of faith, rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ and faithful to its principle of freedom and tolerance, that seeks to honor and serve God.

They saw none of this in their professor's theology of vulnerability, "which begins with human beings and can also end there." According to the critics, the seminary training would no longer have a specifically Christian character. Training had also been shortened so that new ministers, in their view, had "insufficient knowledge and insufficient theological substance" to function in the Brotherhood at the required level. That "level" was significant: Remonstrants liked to boast that they had "such good ministers."[8]

The anniversary Sunday, a few days later, was a splendid celebration full of beautiful music. A cantata composed especially for the occasion, "Finding Rest in Wonder," was performed for the first time.[9] Four ministers in black robes spoke. My colleagues spoke the opening words, greeting and prayers, and read Bible verses. The Rotterdam minister who had demanded the sermon referred to the newspaper article. He called the factional struggle a sign of life.

As the only female minister, I spoke at the end of the long celebration. I began by explaining the statement of principles: "When you sign the statement of principles, you make the choice for a distinctive community of faith, which has never been afraid to practice the lived faith and its theology in freedom and from new perspectives. Tolerance is paramount: we limited human beings can differ in our views; no one has a monopoly on the truth."

I pointed to the 2006 Remonstrant confession of faith as an example of free and idiosyncratic theologizing. The order of the classical confession is turned upside down. It begins not with "I believe in God the Father, the almighty Creator of heaven and earth," but with the human being who marvels and is perhaps bewildered at what happens to her or him and realizes that the mystery of life beyond oneself points to "what is infinitely greater than we can comprehend."

We realize and accept that we do not find our rest in the certainty of what we profess, but in wonder at what is given to us and bestowed upon us; that we find our destiny not in indifference and greed but in vigilance and in connection with all that lives; that our existence is not completed by who we are and what we have, but by what is infinitely greater than we can comprehend.

"The confession does not stop with human beings," I continued. "On the contrary: we are overtaken by the Spirit which animates and leads us to Jesus Christ, the disturbing face that looks upon us, icon of God, window on God, unnamable." I spoke these words because they all appear a little further on in the confession.[10]

"Nor is the Unnameable our final goal," I said, following the cadence of the poetic confession. "We return to ourselves, small, limited and fallible as we are, called to be church in the sign of hope."

I tried to further illustrate the church as a place of hope with a few images: place of mercy, oasis of rest for the restless, place of encounter. "Place where we see and are seen, allow ourselves to be urged to go beyond ourselves. How can we give shape to this hope? How can we make clear what we are about, especially today, in our land, in our cities, where many no longer speak or understand the language of faith?"

"By continuing to do what we have been good at for four hundred years." I answered what I thought were important questions. "Committing ourselves to disruptive experiences of wonder, suffering and injustice. This language of experience, which is not easy, is familiar to everyone. Arminius, too, sought a way through the terrible experiences of the Spanish War and the plague, which hit his family hard. From there we set out on unknown paths in which we are guided by the dreams of our predecessors: grace, wholeness and liberation for all!"[11]

Here, the words got stuck in my throat. I took a deep breath and let my gaze travel along the pews filled with elderly people, up to the balconies that nearly collapsed under their weight. My eye fell on the stained-glass window with pastel shades directly opposite the pulpit; a ray of sunlight illuminated the face of Jesus. And behold: there was the inspiration for Francesca's dream!

Afterwards, it was mostly women who spoke to me. "How nice that you are here, in the church hall with ordinary people," someone said to me. Only then did I realize that there was also a hall for special guests. I strolled lei-

surely over to it and was immediately badgered by a man who thought that the professor of the Remonstrants should make a case for participation in an alliance of Reformed churches. Two women from the eastern part of the country saw my awkward position and freed me by inquiring if there was a nice seminary student who could come and serve their congregation. In gratitude, I promised to encourage one of my favorite students to apply. With a sigh of relief, I left the heavy, dark building and walked through an early spring to the train.

In that same anniversary year, Remonstrant administrators, ministers and congregational representatives wrote a policy vision for 2020–2030. For inspiration, ten individuals were asked to write down their dreams for the Remonstrants. After some hesitation, I decided to submit Francesca's dream.[12]

In 1205, Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) received a vision in the run-down little church of San Damiano: "Go, Francis, repair my house, for you see that it is about to collapse." Francis takes the dream literally and begins repairing this little church. To get money, he sells the expensive fabrics from his father's store and his horse. His father is furious and drags him to court. Francis takes off his clothes and, naked, hands the bundle to his father. "From now on I will say only Our Father who is in heaven and no more father Pietro di Bernardone."

Many centuries later, in 2019, Francesca is in the large stately Rotterdam Arminius Church of the Remonstrants, at their four-hundredth anniversary celebration. They are a group of learned, headstrong, quarreling believers. Centuries of discord bind them; they are even proud of it. The posh minster in a solemn black robe preaches about a conflict of opinions, a sign of life! The statement of principles as a touchstone to distinguish who belongs and who does not!

Suddenly she hears a voice: "Tear down my church, Francesca. These people have taken everything for granted!" Francesca reacts confused, how can she destroy this gigantic building? Then a ray of sunlight falls on her through the stained-glass window with the peaceful face of Christ. He beckons her and whispers, "Come out into the light." She walks out of the church, into the busy Museum Square. A beggar greets her. She wanders on, following the light, deeper into the city, heading for where for no reason something new will begin.

The dream cost me dearly. Especially the Rotterdammers were furious and demanded my resignation and even dismissal. At the Annual General Meeting in June of that year, there was a heated discussion about the meaning of dreams, followed by a vote. Oddly enough, the vast majority voted to allow me to stay. "Congratulations, you won," said the chairman of the Rotterdam Church Council during the lunch break before shaking my hand. I didn't quite know what had happened to me. Where on earth had I ended up when I applied six years ago for this position in a faith community where, until then, I had always been a fringe figure? Had I known then what I know now, would I have made the same choice? This low point in a year of celebration still leaves its mark. That same June, I gave a lecture at a commemorative symposium in Antwerp, the birthplace of the Remonstrants who fled four hundred years ago. I spent the summer weeks in Switzerland, reflecting on my speech for the final symposium, "In Everything Love," a central theme for the Remonstrants. Even after that, the question of how we can once again become places of hope, communities with beating hearts, would not let me go.

3 Borderlands

On Pentecost morning 2021, I was enjoying running my usual round of about three-quarters of an hour. Before my run, I watched a few scenes of the Remonstrants' online Pentecost celebration recorded in Haarlem. Twenty-five years ago, I was an intern there. The images of the building, the garden and the church hall all looked familiar. Hardly anything seemed to have changed, except that everyone had gotten older. No doubt many of the faithful had passed away; most were old even then. Because of Covid-19, only those who had a function were present at this online service. The rest, like me, sat at home staring at a screen, invisible to each other. The very young preacher from that earlier time was now middle-aged. She wore a nineteenth-century black robe with a white floral lace collar that concealed her shape and gave her a grandmotherly appearance. The organist, with whom I worked enthusiastically during my internship and whose musicality had graced the few services in which I presided, seemed now to be in her early sixties, with long, gray hair. A somewhat younger-looking minister walked around in a purple robe, a cross on her chest. Another minister, or text reader, I didn't know exactly, also had long, gray hair. The ministers read texts, spoke the customary formulas, and explained the enigmatic sayings. It reminded me of Roald Dahl's *The Witches*, in which a boy is turned into a mouse by witches who have a deep hatred for children. I read the book to my daughter when she was about eight years old, and from then on, we searched everywhere for witches. We lived on the Tiltenberg, the estate of the Grail Movement, about ten kilometers south of Haarlem. Grail witches wandered around here regularly. You could recognize them by strange pimples or warts and the shape of their noses. Their eyes turned purple when they looked straight at you.

During my run, memories surfaced of a Pentecost celebration two years before, in 2019. The Remonstrant seminary was on a study tour to Antwerp, where we attended a multicultural service held by the joint Protestant churches. A small but diverse immigrant group was part of the regular

group of worshippers. They brought children, drums and a small choir. The service was designed along strict Anglican liturgical lines, which kept the cheerful messiness from degenerating into chaos. All the ministers sat at the front of the church, including me. During the communion, I distributed the bread, but my role was limited to that. I was not feeling well that morning. Even the swinging, upbeat music did not grab me.

The day before, I had lectured at the Vineyard, another Protestant church in Antwerp. The church was hosting an international symposium celebrating four hundred years of the Remonstrant Brotherhood, founded in Antwerp in 1619. As soon as I entered the building, the neglected and desolate atmosphere of the interior fell over me like a damp blanket. I would have preferred to turn around and wander through the city, but I was stuck like a mouse in a trap. Three historians spoke, animatedly sketching the glorious Antwerp history of the courageous Remonstrants who fled from the Low Countries. I was the only one invited to speak about the Remonstrants' future. As I listened to the three historians, I became increasingly nervous. They extolled the achievements of the Remonstrants over four hundred years and praised the fervor of liberalism. I would soon be telling everyone that the Remonstrants were at an impasse, an in-between place. I spoke about *liminality*. This is where it all began, but I was talking about today's Remonstrants, four hundred years after their founding. Old certainties no longer work, and new ones have yet to be discovered. Sometimes, this happens in the lives of individuals, but groups or an entire culture or churches can also find themselves in a borderland. Certainties previously taken for granted are brought into question or even overturned. This storm shakes people out of their certainties and forces them to reflect on their experiences. It can change their entire lives, livelihoods and identities. I talked about the borderland, the uncertain future and its disruptive nature, and how we can respond to it.

The term *liminality* comes from anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1873-1952). In his book *Rites of Passage* (1906), he describes a threefold structure of rites of passage: stepping out of the known and familiar, the in-between area, and entering a new area. The in-between area, *liminality,* had long fascinated me. I wrote about it in *For Joseph and His Brother,* but I recently discovered some new publications. Like me, Hungarian sociologist Árpád Szakolczai connected

the threefold structure of rites of passage to boundary experiences that constantly happen in real life. All certainties previously taken for granted disappear like snow in the sun. These experiences force us to reflect on who we were and who we want to be.

> *A transformative event, as a technical term in sociological analysis, is definable as something that happens in real life, whether for an individual, group or entire civilization. It suddenly questions and even cancels previously taken-for-granted certainties, forcing the people swept up in this storm to reflect on their experiences, even their entire lives, and potentially change not only their conduct in life but their identity.*[13]

Border experiences occur constantly and have lasting consequences. *Liminality* implies deep fear and suffering for those who enter such a borderland. The creative forces that are released are inseparable from the tragic experiences: loss of who you were, loss of identity. Characteristic of the transitional or in-between area is "not knowing." The path is yet to be discovered. In the rites of passage of the traditional cultures described by Van Gennep, this was not a big problem. The ritual guide, a priest for example, was experienced and knew the way. He or she could ensure that those in the in-between place could make safe passage. In modern life, Szakolczai warns of the "*trickster*," the deceiver. Peripheral figures who normally don't amount to much cast themselves as compassionate leaders of the desperate, as saviors of humanity. As unsolicited advisors who claim to have seen the light.

That afternoon in Antwerp, I enthusiastically related everything I had read about liminality to the Remonstrants. I presented my theology of vulnerability as a possible way to get through the borderland. But how? Not with the impostors as leaders, the know-nothings who suddenly see their opportunity. No one knows the way! How then? The "*communitas*" itself as a guide, the lost who have in common that they don't know. How? By "*exposure and sharing*," opening yourself to the boundary experiences and the turmoil, fear, uncertainty, regret, guilt and nostalgia for the past they evoke in you, sharing this with each other. Sharing the desires and dreams that are awakened in this in-between area. Repeatedly being together and talking together, not allowing the one to be reduced to the other. Nurturing differences and cultivating friendships. Stimulating the imagination by expressing your dreams. Having structured dialogues, as if walking along a

river, wandering, looking for stepping stones along which you can get to the other side. Sharing, speaking and dreaming, coming to shared action and together creating a new reality where we can feel at home again. I referred indirectly to the game *Between Sun and Moon: Dialogue game about experiences of beauty and chaos* that could be useful in conducting these structured dialogues.

A deep silence followed my talk. When the moderator tentatively asked if there were any questions, a Remonstrant minister raised her finger.

"Where is Jesus in this story?"

I don't remember what I answered. My lecture clearly did not fall on fertile soil. A student who was sitting behind the moderator of the Remonstrants told me later that she had been nervously shifting back and forth in her chair during my lecture. She bit so hard on a fingernail that it broke off. My colleague who moderated the discussion asked later if I couldn't imagine that people don't like hearing during a festive reunion that their faith community, of which they have so many good memories, is falling apart. A minister from another religious group in Antwerp was enthusiastic. "It inspires me that you are so honest in naming the state of affairs; we are not allowed to do that."

Some students were also inspired. Since then, several theses on vulnerability, liminal experiences, liturgy and community have been written. A year later, the global disruption from Covid-19 also helped the thinking about liminal experiences, but it had not yet come so far. For the time being, as the first female professor of the four-hundred-year-old Remonstrants, I was and remained a suspicious stranger with the exasperating ability to spoil parties.

Pioneers

In my earlier work, I related liminality primarily to individuals. In my dissertation, I wrote about the meaning of loss experiences around death. Loss of children, parents or loved ones can turn the world upside down. Nothing is as it was. How do you find a way, and how can Buddhism and Christianity help? Over the years, this has remained the central question of my theological and philosophical reflection: How can you come from disruption into a new place? What can help with this, and do experiences of fundamental vulnerability add anything? What do you discover through these experiences that you would not have discovered otherwise? What valuable perspectives? The practical application of philosophical and theological

insights had always been a special interest of mine: Zen meditation, yoga, being absorbed in nature, music, prayer, dance, visual arts. Through my work as a spiritual caregiver in psychiatry, I became more aware of the opportunities for dialogue in the in-between places, the relational aspect of possible transformation. I guided many group discussions and worked intuitively. I didn't know exactly what resource we were tapping by talking back and forth about disruptive experiences, but the content of the conversations was often extraordinary, and they did have a connecting effect.

The philosophical insight only came a few years later when I supervised a student's master's thesis on the philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) and immersed myself in Arendt's work. Her philosophy gave language to what I had seen happening in group discussions about disruption. By being present for each other, each with a unique identity, people reveal themselves as a "who," both to each other and to themselves. We enter the human world with words and actions, and this entry is like a second birth. This self-disclosure, the candid quality of speaking and acting, is most evident where people are together with others and neither for nor against them, that is, in pure human solidarity. Nothing else can or should be at stake. The in-between area is a power-free zone with no hidden agendas. Being born again is a risky venture where the one needs the other, and the other needs the one.[14]

The power-free zone was more or less the case with the groups in psychiatry. Everyone was in the midst of disruption, and the participants, for all their differences, were equal on a fundamental level. The masks were off, there was little to lose and much interest in discovering a way together. You might well ask whether the spiritual caregiver breaks the power-free zone. I was paid by the system that determined who was sane and who was not.

Later, I investigated the in-between area together with Ada, who had lost her husband and children. She sought contact with me because she did not know anyone in her own circles who had experienced great loss. How do you find a way? Endless conversations followed. The most important factors seemed to be contact, feeling, speaking, screaming, crying, being silent; having someone who dares to listen and who also speaks, or shouts and fights; taking responsibility for yourself and the other; putting yourself in perspective, relaxing, being able to laugh together, playing. The widowed and orphaned mother acknowledged that all this was important, but not important enough to enter a new world. She did not want that new world

at all. This taught me that in borderlands, you cannot force openness to the new, neither in yourself nor in another.[15]

Only later did I start thinking about disruption and liminality on another level. A student wanted to write a thesis on what she called "a collective contrast experience." She examined how ministers and volunteers at the Schiphol Airport chaplaincy tried to bring meaning to the care of relatives of those killed in the downing of MH17.[16] Not only individuals, but groups of people, or an entire society, can enter a state of disruption.

A chance encounter with my former colleague, Staf Hellemans, made me start to apply the concept of liminality to the Remonstrants. In the spring of 2019, waiting for a train to Antwerp, I ran into Staf in Rotterdam. He was a sociologist of religion living in Mechelen. We shared an office during the years I worked at the Catholic Theological University in Utrecht. We had not seen each other for a long time and decided to catch up on the train. Just that week, there had been articles in the newspaper *Trouw* about the Remonstrants' 400th anniversary, and he inquired interestedly about the ups and downs of this small, remarkable religious community. He had previously directed his sociological attention toward the Remonstrants. His work deals with the end of world religions, and he takes the Catholic Church as a case study, but "you see similar processes in other groups." He was writing his farewell address, which he would give in May of that year. He promised to send me an invitation.

The great transformation of religion

Hellemans' farewell address starts out grand and compelling. He announces the end of the era of world religions.[17] In sociology of religion, the period in which world religions emerged is referred to as the Axial Age. The term was coined by Karl Jaspers, and it designates the period from about 800 to 200 BCE. During this time, monotheism emerged in the Middle East, Confucianism and Taoism in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India and philosophical movements in Greece. These religions and philosophical movements arose independently of each other but share several characteristics: a higher conception of the sacred, a universal view of the world and people, regard for the place of the individual in the collective and the cosmos, and some major religions that dominate the field.

What is striking about the religions emerging during this period is the sense of a transcendent reality. Not a hundred thousand small local gods and goddesses, but one transcendent God, also referred to as "the transcendent" or "ultimate." If there is no God, then there is a transcendent, all-encompassing "Buddha nature" or "nirvana." Another characteristic of world religions emerging at this time is that they take into account the misfortunes of individuals and have a sense of tragedy. Human life is a vale of tears full of suffering and injustice. Religions or wisdom traditions offer a way out that applies to everyone, wherever you live in this vale of tears. Ways to liberation.

The major world religions are teetering, and secularization is one of the symptoms. Hellemans does not mean to say that religion is disappearing but that religion is changing. He sees secularization as the decline of organized religion. The churches are losing their monopolies and oligopolies and, in their place, we find a turbulent religious field with many new players: religious entrepreneurs, monastery shops, spiritual farms, loose rituals and virtual meeting places to name just a few examples.

The Catholic Church, his case study, will have to relate to these competitors. In doing so, it finds itself in an institutional crisis. There is a shortage of priests and nuns and institutions are increasingly suspect. The Church is less and less able to influence the outside world. It is also unable to convey its core value, the transcendent or liberation, to people.

A sweeping diagnosis, it seemed to me. The Church is in an in-between place. The old no longer works, and the new has yet to be discovered. Hellemans sees threats and opportunities. The longing for meaning and transcendence remains. Here, the age-old ways of reflecting on the sacred may still have something to offer. A world church is resilient: when things go badly for the Church in some places, it flourishes in others. Moreover, the Church's hierarchy easily receives media attention. At the same time, he warns against relying too much on the value of the Christian message. Invest in a creative and attractive offer. At the same time, be searching and humble. And watch out for internal divisions!

My former officemate's farewell address and the texts I read about liminality gave me the idea to make a speech about the great transformation of the Remonstrants. I highlighted the threats and opportunities. The Remonstrants are not a world church but a small Dutch religious group in a major

institutional crisis. The governing body consists of volunteers who are often over seventy years old. The trendy term VUCA applies to them: *volatility, uncertainty, complexity* and *ambiguity*. Radical uncertainty and an unclear future have plagued the Remonstrants for decades. This is not due to internal incompetence but is rather a symptom of a much larger crisis.

On the other hand, adventurousness, courage, openness, compassion for suffering people, and a strong sense of injustice are embedded in their DNA. That's where it all began. Arminius argued for a merciful God. It could not be that children and women who died early because of the plague or Spanish war, like much of his own family, were doubly unlucky. As long as they said YES to God's grace, heaven's gate would open for them. Away with this double predestination, even if it costs us our lives! This is how they arrived in Antwerp. In a new place, they started something new.[18]

The desire for meaning and transcendence remains, Hellemans says, but more can be said about this. Global crises such as climate change, migration, growing inequality, loneliness and lack of meaning create many liminal experiences. People yearn for new orientation, connections and transformation. Not only is the era of world religions coming to an end, but the era in which humans saw themselves as the center of the universe is crumbling on all sides. People long for connection with that which transcends themselves. This is where new reflections on the sacred and grace can offer perspectives. How religious liberals think about the sacred or transcendent is not forever fixed. Values and truth are contextual and changeable. In other words, there is creative, innovative theological work to be done that would serve liberals extremely well.

Remonstrants are not the only ones in the in-between area. Liminality affects many more groups and people. This is frightening but also creates opportunities: being present for each other, listening, telling, playing, laughing, dreaming, bringing forward what is still valuable, creating something new together. The old no longer works and the new has yet to be discovered, but it will come. Together with others we will marvel at how we are reborn.

Fortunately, the symposium marked the end of an intellectual season and another liminal period began. I stayed four weeks in the mountains, where heaven and earth touch. I hiked, played, swam, looked through the spray of waterfalls at the play of light and shadow against the rock faces across the

valley, stared at night into the bright starry sky, and lay in bed mulling over my next contribution to the final symposium of four hundred years of Remonstrants: *In Everything Love!*

Traces of love

That summer I read a few crime novels and some scholarly literature, looking for new insights. In his book *The Secular Experiment*, Hans Boutellier, professor of Polarization and Resilience at the Amsterdam Free University, examines the social significance of religion. In the Western world, religion has become a private matter, resulting in a social sense of directionlessness. What do we actually stand for? What is the value of Western skepticism in the face of truth claims of religions new to the West, such as Islam?

According to Boutellier, the meaning of religion has three aspects: communal connection, social influence and inner conviction. The first two have lost much of their importance in the West, as Hellemans also pointed out. Inner convictions have not; on the contrary, people are more driven by them than ever. Our society has embarked on a massive field experiment: "We're going to try it without God from now on; let's see what happens!" What does this radical retreat from the organizing power of religion mean for public morality? And what are its implications for contemporary coexistence?[19]

After a long excursion, Boutellier concludes that we should not pin our hopes on grand visions, great leadership or a new unifying religion, all of which are risky, but on *flashes of commonality*. Western hope is to be found in a cacophony of opinions, views, insights and beliefs that we share with each other. In every context, moments occur when one is touched, when another is recognized as a fellow human being, when common purpose is found. The improv society develops not as a big system but from concrete projects, programs and everyday practices. He refers to theology only in the epilogue of his book, specifically public theology. He has mostly avoided it; he mentions a few names of colleagues only in a footnote. He has sympathy for them, but their debates start from faith, whereas he wants to explore the secular condition. According to Boutellier, faith, hope and love are too important to be left to theologians.[20]

Small encounters can matter. Concrete projects and everyday practices deserve priority over big systems. "God can emerge" in provisional communities, oddly enough still with a capital letter.

Yet this argument seemed to me an oversimplification. Very different, even horrible, things can also arise in small encounters and provisional communities. History has shown countless examples of this, and it still does. Sharing beliefs can take dangerous forms, not infrequently based on fear and exclusion. This, too, often begins in small ways.

And why should we dismiss the often-ancient life wisdom and religious insights in advance? They have provided direction in the past, and who knows, they may yet be useful. Precisely in their polyphonic diversity, they may be able to offer a wider outlook on an all-too-human secular experiment. We still have to hold them up to the light. Nothing can be taken for granted anymore; everything will have to be rediscovered as valuable or worthless.

How was it that I was not excited by Boutellier's theory? Everything in it seemed right, all neatly referenced. I could heartily agree with his proposal to start with small encounters and provisional communities, with the caveat that it is not only roses that bloom there.

Unfortunately, he does not tell stories. Could that be a characteristic of the secular experiment, that it is mostly abstract? The flashes of commonality, the concrete projects and practices of everyday life, crucial for a public morality, are not given a face. The moments when he is touched, when he recognizes another as a fellow human being, are not given smell and color and do not excite my imagination. My imagination lives on broad vistas, which might be small and cozy but can also be disruptive, frightening and disturbing. I live on stories that allow me to empathize with who the other is and imagine who I am and can become.

Perhaps my penchant for stories drove me to the little English church in the mountain village the next Sunday morning. The minister, from Oxford, spoke about the "consider the lilies of the field" passage from the gospel of Matthew. He and his wife were in the village for a few weeks for the second time that year. He preached, did some pastoral duties, a Wednesday Bible circle, and otherwise enjoyed the spectacular nature, as did the other vacationers who filled the little church. The beautiful flowers and high mountain peaks connected them. Why toil and work when beauty is given? He referred to a painting by the Scottish painter William McTaggart (1835–1910) titled *Consider the Lilies*. This painter was from a poor rural family in West

Scotland and was endowed with great talent. When he left for Edinburgh at the age of 16, the minister warned him that "Art is the devil's game." In Edinburgh, his background and great creativity kept him outside the established circles. He was ahead of his time, a Scottish forerunner of Impressionism. He was, in many ways, an "outsider" and was tormented by melancholy. One day, he looked at his children playing in the garden, an everyday scene, and "felt loved by his children and accepted by God." He made a painting of it, *Consider the Lilies,* dancing children in a garden with luxuriant blooming lilies. A charming summer picture, full of young life, bright colors and an abundance of joy. So too are God's love and grace, said the minister, though we can constrict them by caring poorly for each other and poorly for the earth. The service concluded with a hymn.

I left church that morning inspired. Watching children playing in the midst of beautiful nature and feeling something of divine love in them had touched me. At the playground near the church, my daughter, her two children and the children's father were waiting for me. We went to the swimming pool in the village and played and splashed surrounded by high mountains. In the late afternoon, I decided to go to Evensong. The minster spoke again about love. He brought forward three moments from the life of Jesus to explain what love is: the foot washing, the cross and the resurrection. The foot washing represents serving other people. The cross represents self-sacrifice; serving is boundless, so much so that you must be prepared to give yourself up. The resurrection stands for "endlessly meaningful." Serving others and dispossessing yourself are not in vain but signify something great.

Amazed and confused, I walked home. This could not be a coincidence: twice a church service about love! I had the feeling that something was being made clear to me in view of the theme of the closing symposium of four hundred years of Remonstrants, *In Everything Love.* But what exactly, I did not yet know. The tops of the mountains turned red and remained silent.

4 Motherland

Hiking in the mountains that summer, I thought further about my speech for the final symposium, *In Everything Love.* In the uncertain, risky in-between place, how can we form a community of love, a community with a heart?

Two books helped me; two mothers who tell poignant stories about love for their children. In *Blue Nights*, Joan Didion writes about the loss of her daughter. In *Why Religion?* Elaine Pagels writes about the period after the loss of her husband and infant son. Their experiences and those of other mothers deepened my understanding of the three-pronged nature of love the minister highlighted in his meditation: serving others, being prepared to go far beyond your own limits, and ultimately discovering something of extraordinary value.

Joan Didion (1934-2021) lost her husband John Gregory Dunne (1932-2003) to cardiac arrest and wrote about this in *The Year of Magical Thinking.* I read it after the summer of 2006, in which I lost my own partner to cardiac arrest while hiking in the Picos mountains in Spain. Didion's raw, no-holds-barred descriptions of her loss felt strangely like a balm for my wounds. She didn't want to get rid of his shoes, because then what would he have to walk on when he returned? My lover's blue and white shirt hung in my closet for years, though it has long since disappeared. After more than fifteen years, I still sometimes dream about him at night and feel a deep loss the next day.

That summer of 2019, investigating "What is love?" I came across Didion again in Matthew McLennan's book *Philosophy and Vulnerability*. McLennan defines philosophy as a militant way of thinking provoked by radically new, unforeseeable, and irreconcilable events. Philosophy is the activity of "self-conscious mastery of being mastered."[21]

Normally, McLennan says, philosophy takes place in the realm of argument and thought experimentation. The activity he refers to, relating to being mastered or overwhelmed, plays out mostly in poetry, film, painting, musical improvisation, physical exercises, prayer and psychoanalysis. "Being

mastered" is not about the ordinary transitions in life. Some life changes are exceptional because they are abrupt, bottomless and lacerating. The world ceases to exist.

Reading through his introduction, I quickly entered familiar territory: disruptive experiences break you open and throw you into an in-between place. He consults three writers to learn more about what philosophy in this in-between place might look like in practice. One of them is Joan Didion.

In *Blue Nights*, Didion recounts the tragic death of her adopted daughter, Quintana. She died in August 2005, twenty months after the sudden death of her husband John Dunne, Quintana's father. This heartrending book revolves around three main themes: *the passage of time, being together* in the sense of being fundamentally caring and focused on the other, and *the responsibility of remembering* – keeping the other alive. The first theme, *the passage of time*, is expressed at the beginning of the book in the description of the phenomenon of *blue nights*:

> *In certain latitudes there comes a span of time approaching and following the summer solstice, some weeks in all, when the twilights turn long and blue [...] You notice it first as April ends and May begins, a change in the season, not exactly a warming – in fact not at all a warming – yet suddenly summer seems near, a possibility, even a promise. You pass a window, you walk to Central Park, you find yourself swimming in the color blue: the actual light is blue, and over the course of an hour or so this blue deepens, becomes more intense even as it darkens and fades, approximates finally the blue of the glass on a clear day at Chartres ... The French called this time of day "l'heure bleue." To the English it was "the gloaming." The very word "gloaming" reverberates, echoes – the gloaming, the darkening .... During the blue nights you think the end of day will never come. As the blue nights draw to a close (and they will, and they do) you experience an actual chill, an apprehension of illness, at the moment you first notice: the blue light is going, the days are already shortening, the summer is gone [...] Blue nights are the opposite of the dying of the brightness, but they are also its warning.*[22]

With this description of blue nights, we come to the heart of the book. Time passes, but not for me. Time is passing. Could it be that I never believed that? Did I believe that the blue nights could last forever?

In the book, Didion wanders through her memories. Time passes, husband and child, all gone. She has reached 75, but there seems to be an error in counting the years. Yesterday she was still in her fifties, in her forties. She remembers like yesterday when she was thirty-one and Quintana, her daughter, was born. She remembers like yesterday when they took Quintana home from the maternity ward, wrapped in a silk-lined cashmere shawl.

Time passes. Regret, remorse, fear that she didn't adequately appreciate the everyday moments, the "ordinary blessings."

Her husband's diary entries from long ago. In those days, he took Quintana to school because she was too busy with a book. In the mornings, he fetched wood to light the stove, then got the child out of bed, prepared her breakfast, filled a lunch box with sandwiches.

> *So I'd take Q to school, and she'd walk down this steep hill. All the kids were in uniform – Quintana wore a plaid jumper and a white sweater, and her hair – she was a towhead in that Malibu sun – her hair was in a ponytail. I would watch her disappear down that hill, the Pacific a great big blue background, and I thought it was as beautiful as anything I'd ever seen. So I said to Joan, "You got to see this, babe." The next morning Joan came with us, and when she saw Q disappear down that hill she began to cry.*[23]

The everyday togetherness, caring for each other, being focused on the other… Had she appreciated it enough? Did she take the precious things too much for granted?

The third theme in Didion's book is *remembering*. She struggles with the fear that something will happen to her. She is not afraid of death, but she does fear the loss of her memories. If she disappears, who will be left to remember Quintana's first steps? Who will still hear her singing along with the cassette recorder? Who will still see her dancing?

> *Seasons in New York – the relentless dropping of the leaves, the steady darkening of the days, the blue nights themselves – suggest only death. For my having a child there was a season. That season passed. I have not yet located the season in which I do not hear her crooning back to the eight-track. I still hear her crooning back to the eight-track. I wanna dance.*[24]

In the final pages of her book, she writes about the responsibility to keep the past alive.

> *I know I can no longer reach her. I know that [...] she will fade from my touch. Vanish. Fade as the blue nights fade, go as the brightness goes. Go back into the blue. I myself placed her ashes in the wall. I myself saw the cathedral doors locked at six. I know what I am now experiencing. I know what the fragility is, I know what the fear is [...] What is lost is already in the wall. What is lost is already behind the locked doors. The fear is fear for what is still to be lost. You may see nothing still to be lost. Yet there is no day in her life on which I do not see her.*[25]

In my lecture "What is Love?" which I gave in September 2019 for the closing symposium of the Remonstrants' 400th anniversary, I related the *passage of time* to the Remonstrants. "We too are passing, our togetherness, our care for each other, our care for the world. In an instant, we fall away, or the other falls away from us. We fall out of each other and out of time. Have we adequately appreciated the everyday? The long meetings of the Council and Board, the Sunday services, the involvement of so many participants, the arguments that sometimes arise – can we see all this as exceptionally precious?" I also talked about the importance of remembrance: "By remembering, we Remonstrants can keep alive what has passed. This year, we have accepted our responsibility, calling our forefathers and foremothers, our elder sisters and brothers, back to life."

Neatly in line, as befits the first female professor of the Remonstrants. I did not want to cause another uproar as I did in the spring and spoil this party, too. The symposium had taken place in the Rode Hoed in Amsterdam, now a cultural and debate center, but originally a clandestine Remonstrant church.

Everyday treasures and challenges

Almost two years after the closing symposium celebrating the Remonstrants' 400th year, on a beautiful June evening in 2021 – close to the solstice – I waited on my balcony for the blue light. At every turn, I saw McTaggart's dancing circle of children, alternating with images of my two grandchildren, romping in the mountains, splashing in the pool. In the evenings, dancing in our mountain home Zwirgi to the song "Teddy Bear." The youngest, only

one and a half years old, copied the movements of his big brother. We have a video of it. Endearing to see how he spins around each time with a slight delay, touching the ground, showing his foot and raising his folded hands.

Teddy bear, Teddy bear turn around
Teddy bear, Teddy bear touch the ground
Teddy bear, Teddy bear show your shoes
Teddy bear, Teddy bear that will do
Teddy bear, Teddy bear go upstairs
Teddy bear, Teddy bear say your prayers
Teddy bear, Teddy bear switch off the light
Teddy bear, Teddy bear say good night

Time passes. The summer that seemed endless was followed by an even longer summer, full of everyday togetherness, caring for each other, focusing on the other, playing and enjoying.

That evening, two weeks before the solstice of 2021, while waiting, I meditated on the blue light. The light with the promise that everything remains, time does not pass, summer and life endless. Joseph was to have surgery the next day. In the afternoons, he was here after half a day of school. A whole day was too tiring. At one o'clock, I picked him up so his mother could finish her own classes at her school. Past the supermarket to get mini pizzas and chips. He hadn't eaten for weeks and we took anything he could get down, even if it was unhealthy. Back home, he put on the movie *Over the Moon*. Together we watched Fei Fei's adventures that her late mother missed. We played guitar and played checkers. Simple togetherness, focusing on each other. Did I value it enough? Was I taking the precious things too much for granted?

In the spring of 2020, the world ground to a halt. Because of Covid-19, work took place at home. The annual Liberal Lecture scheduled for Friday, March 13, where I was to speak on "the courage to be vulnerable," was canceled at the last minute and postponed until October. University lectures and a post-graduate course were suspended. Meetings of the Remonstrants took place online, arguments and all. In the months before summer, several highly dedicated board members resigned their positions. This was much

easier than before Covid-19. If they had had enough of the heated discussions, they only had to say they were quitting and then turn off their computers.

The last lecture I gave before the first lockdown took place on Sunday morning before spring break in Bennekom. A storm was raging, the wind was howling around the little church building, and rain was lashing against the windows. "No one is venturing out in this awful weather," the host gloomily predicted. He had had to slog through it to open the door for the harpist and me. More and more wet people were nearly blown inside. Chairs had to be added and, eventually, the hot, steamy little room bulged. I spoke about the four building blocks of the dialogue game *Between Sun and Moon*: disruptive experiences, being present for each other, playing, and creating something new together. Afterwards, the games I had with me sold out in no time. Someone offered to make a list of names and addresses so I could send the games. One woman told me she was disappointed with the lecture. She had read *For Joseph and His Brother* and had hoped to hear something about suicide, but it had only been about games.

"Have you had to deal with suicide?" I asked gently. She told me that, some time ago, she had narrowly survived an attempt and now felt so guilty toward her children. I gave her my phone number and told her she was welcome to call if she wanted to talk further. She called the next day, and we agreed to meet on Tuesday after spring break.

That Tuesday, the woman from the lecture in Bennekom told her story. I listened to her for a few hours. She started at the beginning, her childhood, her father, the difficulties, the responsibilities she had to bear at a young age – the opportunities she had missed and how she later found a way. Job, husband, two children, a big house, until slowly but surely, everything began to get stuck. Leaving her husband, coming back out of homesickness for the children who had stayed with him, leaving again…

One lonely Christmas Eve, she drove to a high bridge over the Rhine, parked her car and jumped off the bridge into the water.

"What bridge?" I asked.

"The bridge at Rhenen."

I knew that bridge; I had often cycled over it on trips from Utrecht to Nijmegen and was amazed at her desperation and guts.

Badly injured and hypothermic, she washed ashore to breathe her last. A cyclist crossing the bridge high above the water saw her lying there and called 911. An ambulance took her to the hospital. She was discharged the day before New Year's Eve; the hospital psychiatrist advised her to spend New Year's Eve in a private clinic. She was also welcome in the hospital psychiatric ward, but this would be unnecessarily confrontational for her. She didn't have the money herself and her soon-to-be ex-husband refused to pay, so she spent New Year's Eve alone at home, staring blankly into a new year.

Fortunately, she was doing much better now, even enjoying life again. However, she did struggle with a deep sense of guilt toward her children. She wanted to talk to them about it. To tell them that she hadn't wanted to abandon them, that it just couldn't go on anymore. They never brought it up themselves, and she didn't want to burden them with her needs.

Elaine Pagels

Another mother who helped me in my search for an answer to the question "What is love?" is American religious scholar Elaine Pagels (b. 1943). Her work helped me build a bridge to the future. Time slips by, precious connections pass. How can we reach out to the future?

Pagels was involved in the translation and study of the Nag Hammadi writings that were found in Egypt in 1945. In *The Gnostic Gospels,* she shows that the Christian Church goes back to a community with very different, often opposing viewpoints and religious practices.[26] In the early centuries, many of these were condemned and therefore hidden. The discovery and study of the Nag Hammadi writings made these views and practices accessible again. The contours of the censored forms of Christianity show remarkable differences from what has been passed down for centuries. In the New Testament, the role of women is minimized and women are excluded from leadership and power. But the hidden texts are full of female images, even for God.

"Who decided which books were included in the New Testament, and why? Who belongs and who doesn't – and who has the right to say so?" These were Pagels' questions. It did not make her popular. She received enormous criticism from renowned professors. Above all, it helped her find her own voice, she soberly observes nearly forty years later. In her book *Why*

Religion: A Personal Story, she talks about her work during those years, but especially about the profound events in her life during that same period.[27] She and her husband Heinz Pagels, a physicist and her anchor in the storm of her academic work, have a son, Mark. He dies at the age of six.
When he dies, she has an extraordinary experience that completely shakes up her view of life and death. She sees her child passing into a joyful other mode of existence. It does not change the feeling of total desolation.

> *We don't know, of course, what happened. I had the clear impression that he'd heard us and had gone back into his body, but found that it couldn't sustain his life, since oxygen could not circulate through his spent lungs. Strangely, I also sensed that he'd felt a burst of joy and relief to leave his exhausted body. Before that moment I'd taken for granted what I'd learned, that death was the end, any thought of surviving death only fantasy. Although that may be true, what I experienced that day challenged that assumption. I was astonished, seeming to sense that Mark was all right, wherever he was, and that he was somewhere. But that didn't change what we felt: utter desolation.*[28]

After her son's death, she is furious at people who suggest that his death might teach them a "spiritual lesson." Maybe something good can come from this? She is furious, speechless. "Could there be anything good that is worth a child's life? Could she find meaning in this?" she infuriatedly asks herself. The most we can do is *create* meaning, she observes. She draws inspiration from the Russian Orthodox Saint Mary of Paris. After the death of her six-year-old daughter, she wrote how all meaning disappeared like snow in the sun. She felt that her "whole natural existence [...] had fallen apart [...] Desires have disappeared [...] meaning has lost its meaning."[29] Yet instead of sinking into passivity, she saves the lives of other people's children in Paris during the Nazi occupation.

Pagels, like Mary of Paris, wants to *create* new meaning. She suggests to her husband that they adopt a second child. They had earlier adopted Sarah, whose playing helped them in the first months after the loss of their son. They realize that the passionate love for their deceased child requires them to love other children. A year after Mark's death, their infant son David joins their family.

That summer, during their vacation in the Colorado Rockies, when their youngest child is three months old, her husband Heinz is killed while

descending Pyramid Peak. Their world shattered as his body crashed into the rocks.

> *Any sense of safety that I'd ever had shattered with him. I was overwhelmed to realize that the man whose enormous competence and care I'd counted on could have been, himself, so shockingly vulnerable.*[30]

Three days after the accident, she visits a nearby Trappist monastery. Brother Theophanes walks with her to the chapel and lights the candle for prayers for the dead. They sit together in silence. His presence, sitting motionless in prayer, opened a deep well of peace. In this silence, she is confronted with her anger. Left with two small children …

A year later, she returns to their favorite vacation spot in the mountains. The vast forests and surrounding mountains put her situation in a more expansive perspective. She visits the monastery and meditates. "How to go on?" is the question that rises up from the depths.

Her thoughts turn to Viktor Frankl, the Viennese psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor. In a situation far more cruel than hers, he wrote that when our lives go differently than we expected, we must do what life expects of us.

How can she do what life expects of her? Acknowledging what has happened is necessary, she writes, even if it takes decades, as it did for her. Facing up to life's No. She searches and reads, including the following lines of poetry by Wallace Stevens:

> *After the final no, there comes a yes. And on that yes, the future world depends.* No *was the night. Yes is the present sun.*[31]

Pagels could not force her *Yes*. "Only when I began to wake up in the morning and see the sunlight, grateful for its warmth, could I dive back into the secret gospels." What was it about these texts that she loved so much?

In the final section of her book, she writes about the comfort, deepening and hope she found in these texts. The poem "Thunder" speaks especially to her, the divine presence, resounding everywhere, often in unsuspected places. In the poem, Thunder is personified as a feminine power. The divine presence shines everywhere, in all people, rich, poor, young, old. She encom-

passes everything; you can see her in wisdom and holiness, but also in foolishness, shame and fear.

I am the first and the last.
I am the one who is honored, and the one
scorned;
I am the whore and the holy one…
I am the incomprehensible silence,
and … the voice of many sounds, the word in
many forms;
I am the utterance of my name …
Do not cast anyone out, or turn anyone away…
I am the one who remains, and the one who
dissolves;
I am she who exists in all fear,
And strength in trembling.
I am she who cries out…
I am cast forth on the face of the earth…
I am the sister of my husband,
and he is my offspring…
but he is the one who gave birth to me…
I am the incomprehensible silence
and the thought that is often remembered…
I am the one who has been hated everywhere,
and who has been loved everywhere.
I am the one they call Life, and you have called
Death.
I am the one whose image is great in Egypt,
and the one who has no image among the barbarians…
I prepare the bread and my mind within;
I am the knowing of my name.[32]

What these sources show, Pagels says, is that many people in ancient times spent an enormous amount of time and energy looking for ways to "heal the heart."

Somehow, she managed to get through the "real test" of life. How? She has no clear answer. Two children were left to raise, and she was still there herself, as were the invisible ties that connect her to countless others and to the world and what transcends it. She closes with an ancient Jewish prayer, "Blessed art Thou, Lord God of the Universe, that you have brought us alive to see this day."

Three-pronged love

What does *Motherland*, the area of mothers, fathers, children, teach us about the three-pronged nature of love that the minister preached about at Evensong? He drew on three moments in Jesus' life: the foot-washing, the crucifixion and the resurrection. They stood for serving others, being willing to go far beyond your own limits, and ultimately discovering something of exceptional value.

Serving others consists in the everyday messiness we often live with. Caring for children, making dinner, taking them to school, watching them, playing with them. Only when it's over do we realize how rich we were.

Serving others has great challenges, getting completely outside yourself when the other person breaks and you break with them. Continuing to reach out to others and remembering them. Even if the precious memories cause unbearable pain. While remembering, we serve the other and keep her alive.

Reaching out beyond ourselves, our surroundings, nature, new children for whom we need to care … They place us and life in a broader perspective.

Setbacks, everything turned upside down, fear, darkness, doubt, silence, love and happiness: they are all part of the journey. Examples of others who maintained courage under harsh circumstances inspire us, Mary of Paris and Viktor Frankl. When life turns out differently than we expect, we have to do what life expects of us. "After the final *no,* there comes a *yes.*" Pagels' No after profound disruption also eventually turns to *Yes*. She could not force this. Eventually, you wake up and see the sunlight. One day, you are grateful that you were able to go the way you did.

In the poem "Thunder," it is striking that not only sunlight, life and *Yes* are attributed to the divine. The No, night, pain, fear and death also belong to her. She embraces everything we can experience, feel and think. Everything is endlessly meaningful.

Exploring the three-pronged nature of love in more detail through the experiences of mothers in the midst of overwhelming vulnerability revealed several building blocks for communities with a heart, such as appreciating everyday treasures, remembering, reaching out to children you need to care for, being inspired by exemplary figures, being inspired by texts that express a deep awareness that No, night, darkness, suffering and pain are fundamentally part of life.

PART 2

Theological Reversal[1]

5 Fieldwork

In the spring of 2020, Covid-19 disrupted the world. Many people, both old and young, became seriously ill and died. Schools, universities, offices and most stores closed. People were shut in their homes. A new reality presented itself: hardly any cars on the road or planes in the sky, no theater, no concerts. Even the playgrounds were empty. Life in this unknown territory was marked by uncertainty, fear, suffering, sadness and loneliness, but also by solidarity and resourcefulness.

The world seemed to be brought to a standstill by Covid-19, but I was busier than ever. My daughter had been sick for months, and her recovery was difficult. A cough quickly grew into severe coughing fits and pneumonia. At night, she set an alarm clock to keep herself from being awakened by shortness of breath. This had happened a few times, causing her to panic. When the alarm woke her up, she walked through the house to check that the children were sleeping peacefully. She then did some breathing exercises and went back to sleep. My own anxiety prompted me to go to their house every day. I did the shopping, played with the children, quickly biked home again to work a few more hours. All kinds of work went on even though the campus was closed: assisting students with theses and dissertations, interviews, online meetings, online church services. One of the most enjoyable projects that spring was the online Pentecost service I prepared with students. The broadcast took place from the Hoorneboeg estate, long owned by the Remonstrants but transformed into a hip spiritual center by a new owner.

Earth and clay

Early in the morning, I drove to Hilversum, my oldest grandson beside me. We parked in the dark and made our way to the little house with an open lawn where the Pentecost service was to be recorded. Students were bustling about. One of them had his little daughter with him. The two children would bring oil lamps to the center of the circle. A van arrived with ten dancers from the Dutch Don't Dance Division and their two artistic direc-

tors. The camera crew was busy setting up equipment. We wanted to film the blue-hour skies just before dawn. The promise of the day to come, the time that is still far from passing, the new that is yet to be born. The close-up shots of the children's serious young faces, the wispy violin music, a dancer half buried in the ground. Later, the wind and light through the white gowns of the other dancers. The images spoke for themselves and made my Pentecost epistle to the viewer unnecessary. Giving voice to dust. Someone is blowing us to a new beginning, let's get moving!

After the children had placed their lanterns in the center, I read Paul Celan's poem "Psalm." The German-speaking Jewish poet was born in 1920 in a town in Ukraine. He experienced World War II as a child and lost both parents. In 1970, he jumped into the Seine, ending his life.

PSALM

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
no one conjures our dust.
No one.
Praised be your name, no one.
For your sake
we shall flower.
Towards
you.
A nothing
we were, are, shall
remain, flowering:
the nothing-, the
no one's rose.
With
our pistil soul-bright,
with our stamen heaven-ravaged,
our corolla red
with the crimson word which we sang
over, O over
the thorn.[2]

A student read from Genesis:

> *In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no vegetation of the field had yet sprung up – for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground, but a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground – then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.* [Gen. 2:5–8, NRSV]

The first rays of the sun dispelled the darkness, dancing around the trunks of the trees at the edge of the garden. For my Bachelor of Theology, I translated forty chapters from Hebrew. Much of that knowledge has vanished into oblivion, but two words have stayed with me: *nefesh*, breath of life, and *lev*, heart. Breath that makes our hearts beat. Breath that spurs us on and awakens us to life. These words came to me now.

The dancer danced half-buried in the ground. We stood in a circle out of camera range watching, Joseph extremely fascinated. The dancer seemed to want to break free from the earth, the dust, but he could not. Wild movements, desperation, finally surrender…

Resign ourselves to our fate? Dust we are and will remain. No one molds us again. Or do they?

A year later, in June 2021, the days just before the solstice were hectic. Homesick, I thought back to that online Pentecost service and how students, children and dancers had given voice to dust. Joseph's leg was still uninjured. Since then, following the bicycle accident later that summer, he has undergone several surgeries. For ten months, he wore an iron frame around and in his leg. Just before the longest day of the year, he started coughing and had a fever. We took him to the exhibition center for a Covid-19 test, after which he had to be quarantined until the results were known. At the end of that week, he went to school for two days but came home on Friday tired and exhausted. During the evening, the fever rose to over 40 degrees (104 f). Dangerous, especially because of the bacteria in his leg. Emergency room, hospitalized with my daughter. I stayed overnight with the youngest.

"Are you Mommy?" he asked the next morning in surprise when he woke up. I shook my head. "Are you Grandma?" Later in the car he concluded that "Mommy turned into Grandma."

During the day, leg x-rays and blood values were studied, and Joseph was allowed to go home. A flu virus was the culprit. He recovered slowly from the flu, not eating for days, tired and listless. Consultation with the orthopedist at Children's Hospital, who decided that the frame should come off.

By the end of the week, the fever was gone and he went to school for half a day. At the weekend they were partly with me. Playing in the garden, water in an inflatable pool. The youngest played tirelessly. Joseph was mostly relaxing in the sun and listening to tunes on my phone. Monday half a day to school, Tuesday two hours. Field day. Of course, he couldn't participate with his injured leg, but in the past year he had learned that watching can also be fun. At least better than waiting at home until it was time to go to the hospital.

"Do you know what happens when you take the shell off an ant?" he asked me that Sunday. "It collapses like a pudding and dies. It's its outer skeleton. I have an outer skeleton on my leg, too."

"Are you afraid your leg will collapse like a pudding?" He nodded and looked at me with his dark eyes.

I picked him up from school that field day. "You're a tough kid," his teacher said. "Hang in there, we're going to light candles for you and send all the positive energy your way. Bye, honey!"

"Would they really light candles for me?" he asked in the car.

Scientists in borderlands

I studied several texts to prepare for a meeting of my research group. This group, "Transformations of Religiosity" at the Amsterdam Free University, is looking into the question of how religiosity changes. My colleagues and I are looking for new concepts to put the changes into words. So far, all the terms have been derived from the existing situation. We talk, for example, about nonbelievers, about those who are not spiritually connected and the nonreligious. These words mainly indicate what a person is not. We are looking for language that goes further and indicates more clearly what moves and inspires people.

This time, we were going to examine the "ontological turn" in anthropology, a methodology that can also be applied to the field of religious studies. In philosophy, ontology is concerned with the nature of being. This branch of philosophy attempts to use reason to map the structure of reality. After reading the texts, I still didn't quite understand what this meant. It roughly came down to the fact that we cannot know what *is* but need to be open to what *might be.* Familiar concepts prevent us from seeing *what could be.* The authors' proposal is to abandon concepts we normally use to approach and interpret reality. It is the concepts that determine what we see and not the reality itself that speaks to us. I would hear from my colleagues the next day if I had understood correctly. Perhaps they could explain to me how this *ontological turn* can be relevant to everyday life and our religious aspirations.

Our research group was engaged in a complex conversation. I picked up the chapters I had read and underlined a few key passages. The authors of the book *The Ontological Turn* pose the following questions: How can I enable my research material to reveal itself to me? How can I see things that I did not expect, or could not even imagine would be there? What is my body telling me here? How am I changed by what I encounter? And how can I learn to use this as a primary source of knowledge and insight?[3]

The anthropological field worker uses her own body and mind as a means of inquiry and as an object of research. Anthropologists use themselves not only as instruments to collect data. How they are changed by the encounter with their field of research also becomes a primary source. It is a kind of self-experiment that is later reported on.[4]

This method has implications for the search for communities with a heart. This search is triggered by disruptive experiences that plunge us into uncharted territory. How can we relate to the fundamental fragility and uncertainty of life and coexistence?

The ontological turn comprises my desire, as a fieldworker, to enable a strange reality to reveal itself to me. Learning to see things I had not suspected. Feeling my body in this and allowing it to speak. Changing through encounters with strangers and the unknown, and seeing all this as a source of knowledge.

Since Joseph's accident my fieldwork takes place partly in my daughter's family, school, the children's hospital and daycare. Two religious communi-

ties, the Remonstrants and the Grail Movement, are other important areas of my field research. And beyond that, of course, everywhere I go. What do I see, feel, smell, hear and taste? What perspectives open up and what building blocks do I find for communities with a heart? How am I changed through what I encounter?

The ontological turn consists in us, as pioneers, taking our fieldwork extremely seriously. The advantage of radical disruption is that much of what we thought we knew is ripped out of our hands. We have to learn to see with new eyes. To touch and feel what the unknown reality does to us.

6 Places of promise

During the years that I worked as a lecturer in spiritual counseling at the University for Humanistics, I regularly had students doing internships with the spiritual counselor of the Wilhelmina Children's Hospital in Utrecht. My duties included visiting the hospital to learn on site how the internships were going. Those conversations were always pleasant. The spiritual counselor worked heart and soul for sick children and their parents. She passionately guided my students in their introduction to this vulnerable field. I had never tended to seriously ill children or their parents in the children's hospital. This changed with my grandson's accident. A world opened up for me.

The accident happened on the last Saturday of summer vacation. We wanted to make one last trip to the Railway Museum before school started again on Monday. I had reserved a timeslot for a quarter to twelve. My daughter and her sons would come on their bikes and we would then continue together to the museum, less than five minutes away.

They are late, I thought to myself, as I stood at the window to see if they were coming. My phone rang. My daughter, crying.

"Mommy, we had an accident. It's very bad. The ambulance is coming. I have to hang up now." A moment later there was another call. I answered, a strange voice on the line. "We are taking care of the youngest child. Can you come and get him?"

After arranging care for my youngest grandson, I rushed with my sister to the emergency room to be with my daughter and grandson. Because of Covid-19, we were stopped by someone at the front desk; additional persons were not allowed in. A nurse who had seen how upset my daughter was cleared the way. Inside, child specialists called from their weekend off and hurried back and forth, busily discussing the situation. My grandson was wheeled on his bed through the underground corridors of the university hospital to the operating room in the children's hospital. Here, a team of pediatricians spent hours concentrating on the complex medical problem.

His mother was allowed to stay with my grandson day and night in the children's hospital. The Parrot ward housed parents and children who were

total strangers but who, within a few days, became deeply involved with each other. One night, the mother of the boy who shared Joseph's room gently woke my daughter, who was sleeping deeply from exhaustion. "He needs you," she whispered softly. "He's been moaning in pain for a while." Clinic clowns provided laughter through tears. Covid-19 regulations permitted only one visitor a day per child, but this did not apply to siblings and animals. On Wednesday afternoons, they had an animal circus: chickens, rabbits, rats, mice and guinea pigs sat on the children's laps and let themselves be petted and cuddled. There was deep shock and concern at school and the after-school care. Teachers, parents and friends sent cards and brought home-made presents.

As an internship teacher, I experienced this site primarily as a gathering place of illness, pain and loss. A very different reality now came into view. A community with a heart emerged before my eyes.

That year, my oldest grandson and his mother stayed several times at the children's hospital. Because my daughter was alone with her children, her youngest stayed with me. The first nights, he slept in bed with me. While he was asleep, he wormed his way toward the nearest source of warmth and basked in physical touch against me, feet in my face, head on my stomach. I barely slept a wink. After two nights, I was exhausted and suggested we set up the camp bed that was still here. He was immediately up for this adventure: a real cot, just for him, with a zipper that lets you open the back and crawl in by yourself! He slept like a log all night and woke up the next morning rested and happy. I gave him cereal, a slice of bread and butter and juice, dressed him and took him to daycare. In the car, he sang the song from the night before.

"Sleep Chrissy sleep. It was a long day… Grandma, keep singing," he cried. So I sang it through with him one more time.

Sleep Chrissy sleep,
It was a long day.
You played with the cubs,
And we went to the hospital.
Mama was there,
You missed her very much.

Sleep Chrissy sleep,
It was a long day.
You went home with Grandma,
And had a nice meal.
Sleep Chrissy sleep,
It was a long day.

Sometimes he would sing along with the endless row of verses, and when I stopped he would make up a new verse himself. In this way, I got to hear all kinds of things that happened during the hours I wasn't with him. We crossed Kees Boeke Street, and I parked the car at the *Werkplaats*. My grandchildren work at the children's community started by Kees Boeke in Bilthoven almost a hundred years ago, "practically by accident."[5] In the weeks and months that followed, I discovered a community with a heart in this place too, where it is good to be alive even in the midst of disruption.

Werkplaats

Kees Boeke (1884–1966), peace activist and world reformer, refused to pay taxes because they financed weapons and wars. The wealth he acquired through his marriage to Betty Cadbury (1884–1976) caused problems for him. Betty was the daughter of chocolate manufacturer Richard Cadbury (1835–1899) who had founded the Quaker village of Bourneville with his brother George Cadbury (1839–1922).

> *Located just outside Birmingham, it consisted of a chocolate factory surrounded by green meadows and fairy-tale workers' cottages with vegetable gardens. The factory's owners ran their business like a family. Its purpose was not only to generate profits, but also to be the driving force behind a "pure" society. Here the seemingly irreconcilable came together: industry with fresh air and nature, capitalism with social care, and personal freedom with faith in God.*[6]

With the success of the Cadbury factory, Betty's bank account grew ever larger. Her husband Kees refused to contribute a penny to the government budget that was used in part to maintain a machinery of violence. As a tax refuser, he was regularly held in the Utrecht House of Detention. Eventually, they renounced their possessions. This solved some problems but also

caused others. So, in 1926, they decided to live in tents at camp De Pan, now the site of the golf course in Bilthoven. The summer weeks were idyllic, but the darkness and cold of fall and winter made the children exhausted and sick. Eventually, they moved back into a simple house. That fall, a new rule went into effect, and school fees would now be collected through the tax authorities. This prompted Boeke to take his children out of the Montessori school. They received private lessons from their former Montessori teacher Mies van der Es. In the spring of 1927, word came that "a party that did not want to be named" was willing to build a classroom. The classroom became a *Werkplaats* for a world where weapons and war were banished. The light in every child was to be nurtured and kindled. In this way, the whole world would slowly but surely become lighter. Outdoors, wind, sea, sand, woods, plants, animals, dancing and music – all were important in growing the light in children.

Ninety-six years later, I walked with my grandson across the schoolyard of the now expanded school complex. Children ages zero to eighteen are welcome here to learn, play, tend animals and build cabins at the edge of the woods. Joseph, the oldest, was completely fascinated when I told him I was reading a thick book about the life of Kees Boeke. In his high-pitched voice, he sang the *Werkplaats* song Kees wrote for the workers, which he knew by heart.

Do you like the outdoors, water and meadow?
Wandering in forests, in dunes and in heather?
Luminous skies and flowers and fruits,
Then join in the Werkplaats! Then join in the Werkplaats!
Our Werk-plaats!

Do you like swimming, sun and play?
Running and jumping, nimble and fast?
Say, will you try to learn of all things?
Then join in the Werkplaats! Then join in the Werkplaats!
Our Werk-plaats!

Do you like to work, with lust and with power?
To make things that another waits for?
Carpentry and sewing, digging and sowing?
Then join in the Werkplaats! Then join in the Werkplaats!
Our Werk-plaats!

Do you like to read, intently and long?
Rhythm and dancing, music and song?
Say, will you join us in striving for better living?
Then join in the Werkplaats! Then join in the Werkplaats!
Our Werk-plaats!

The Cubs daycare center is located at the back of the property. From the parking lot, you have to cross the entire schoolyard with the slide and swings, past Joseph's classroom, past the nursery where the youngest always want to look out the windows, past chickens, sheep, and the vegetable garden, past the little building with rabbits, rats and guinea pigs. Just before the preschool building, my grandson started running. "Friends," he called. "I'm coming!"

His two best friends were already waiting for him, hands against the window and lips forming kisses. The teacher opened the door. "Hi honey," she greeted him. "Come on in."

I strolled across the schoolyard back to the parking lot and enjoyed this moment of peace. The late summer sunlight fell on a colorful display of flowers.

"That's Chris's grandmother," said a girl to her father, who looked to be at least in his mid-fifties.

"Grandma or mom?" he asked.

"Grandma," she replied firmly.

When I picked up my youngest grandson at the end of the afternoon, I was besieged by three toddlers. "We want to stay with you, too. And sleep in the camp bed and eat pancakes for breakfast."

Every day, the teachers asked how things were going, and parents of friends offered help. The *Werkplaats* director stood at the gate every morning to greet the children. I considered speaking to her and telling her about my project on communities with a heart and what I had seen of this in the

schoolyard, and that I was wondering how I could help strengthen this community.

Meanwhile, work went on. One Saturday morning, I had an itchy cough and took a Covid-19 test. The results were negative, so I got in the car and drove to Arnhem. Three students from the Remonstrant seminary were doing ordination exams, after which I would endorse them as candidates for ordination. On this occasion, too, I discovered places of promise.

Domestic happiness and unhappiness

One of the candidates wrote a thesis on Peter Augustus de Génestet (1829-1861), who was once called the most beloved poet of the nineteenth century. Every village in the Netherlands has a De Génestet street. When I was a child, I knew we lived in a poet's neighborhood. We lived on Tollens street, one of my friends lived on De Génestet street. I didn't know that besides being a poet, Génestet was also a Remonstrant minister. I didn't even know what Remonstrant was.

As a professor, I was happy to supervise the student with her thesis on De Génestet. She previously studied literary theory, and this helped her work. She introduced De Génestet during the exam as follows:

> *This year marks 160 years since poet-minister Peter de Génestet died at the age of thirty-one. He lived an eventful life and was orphaned early. He grew up with his uncle in Amsterdam, where he also studied theology. He was never bookish; he was more interested in poetry and literary evenings.*
>
> *Shortly after graduation, he accepts a call to Delft, where a happy period begins. He builds a family, is busy in the church, but does not pay enough attention to his weak health. His wife's health also leaves much to be desired. She does not recover from the delivery of her infant son and dies.*

De Génestet was a talented writer and theologian, but above all, a very warm and friendly person. The student regretted that he had fallen into obscurity. There was still much research to do and much to learn from him. She examined poems, letters, sermons and songs and sketched a moving and rich portrait of a caring and devoted man.

Knowing that his wife was dying, he discussed his future and that of the children with her. After her death he will resign his post and devote himself entirely to the care of his children. The loss of his wife, on top of all the tragedies in his life, weighs heavily on him. He has devoted himself with heart and soul to his congregation all these years, demanding too much of himself. In this tragic year his grief and adversity begin increasingly to clash with his faith and his sense of God. He seeks peace to come to terms with himself, with life and with God.[7]

Unfortunately, his misfortune was not yet over. His infant son Peter, only eight months old, did not survive the effects of his mother's death and was buried on January 14, 1860, next to his mother in Overveen. De Génestet added a final verse to the birth poem:

A lie became the song of May,
A dream – the plea of poetry.
The dunes' wind, lamenting o'er
Your mother's grave, through barren flora,
Sang to you, o child of spring,
Afraid and sad, a different song …
Then you flew to better places
And did not stay a second May –
You might well have from this cruel start!
And yet what flowers the earth can give,
He has no month of May in life,
Who motherlove untimely lost.[8]

Despite the intense grief, he moved forward with unprecedented resilience. He resumed editing the *Christelijke Volks Almanak* [Christian People's Almanac], was part of a committee to erect a statue to Joost van den Vondel, and made plans to marry his sister-in-law Catharina Jeanne. He also produced many poems, resulting in the collection *Leekedichtjes* [Lay Poems] in December 1860.

A year later, in 1861, De Génestet fell ill with a throat disease accompanied by fever. He moved to his mother-in-law's country house in Rozendaal to convalesce in the fresh air. He was probably already suffering from tuberculosis, the disease he had long feared. On the eve of his death, lying on his bed, he said he was so tired, so incredibly tired. The next day, July 2, 1861,

he died at the age of thirty-one. He was buried in the cemetery of Rosendael Castle in Rozendaal. His tombstone is inscribed with the words FIAT VOLUNTAS, Thy will be done!

My favorite poem by De Génestet, which the student did not include in her thesis, was "A Cross with Roses." Yes and no, pain and joy are inseparable. One day you are grateful to have lived through it all. That's not how De Génestet writes it, but I listened between the lines.

A CROSS WITH ROSES

A cross with roses
Is man's lot,
A rich life is
Your gift, O God!
Not just roses!
No cross alone;
Love unites them
Faithfully.

A cross with roses!
Devout and good,
O learn to bear it
With joyful heart.

I know the roses,
They fall off!
The cross you lay
Down at the grave.

Though your garden withers
And your house laments –
Note the flower
That stays on the cross.

Yet cultivate gratefully
The smallest bud,
And with love take up
Your burden again!

The flower laughs at you,
O laugh back at her!
And curse not the cross
Though weary of life.

Should every flower
Pass from the earth,
The fruit of Life
Yet ripens on it

Oct. 1859.[9]

A Remonstrants ordination exam has several rituals. The examiners begin by asking students questions about their thesis. One asked a question about De Génestet's letters from his time in Delft. They give an intimate glimpse into his family life and his struggles around resigning the ministry. The examiner was disappointed; he thought the letters had little theological content. They went on endlessly about requests to take over preaching duties and the trivialities of domestic happiness and unhappiness. Wouldn't it have been better to analyze correspondence from De Génestet's student days? Surely, they would have addressed more substantive theological topics.

In her answer to this question, the student reflected too little, I thought, on how experiences of happiness and unhappiness, delight and doubt, desire and division, being lifted up and falling to pieces, and making promises to others, are the sources of any theological content. De Génestet's poetry is infused with a theology informed by his life. Without life, there is no theology. This is precisely what is so wonderfully visible in the life and work of Peter Augustus De Génestet, poet, theologian and captivating human being.

A second ritual of the ordination exam is the deliberation on whether students will be admitted to the Remonstrant ministry, followed by liturgical confirmation. Two of the three new candidates had participated in the online Pentecost service and had chosen several songs and texts from that same service for their confirmation. I chose as my blessing "The Pilgrim's Blessing," also from the previous year's Pentecost service. And from the funeral service of my lover who died fifteen years earlier in July, but of course no one knew this.

At the end of the online Pentecost service, students and children took turns speaking a line. We had added a few extra lines. Joseph, with his beautiful dark eyes looking straight into the camera, wished everyone, "May the light always be with you!" Then I, his grandmother and the first female professor at the Remonstrant seminary, pronounced the final prayer: "And until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of Her hand!"

May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind always be at your back.
May the sun will shine warmly on your face.
May the rain fall softly upon your fields.
May the stars illuminate your nights.
May the storm not break your house.
May the light always be with you.

And until we meet again
May God hold you in the palm of Her hand.

Over a year later, at the confirmation of these three candidates, I was unable at first to repeat this prayer. I stood with my hands raised, my voice cracked and tears welled up in my eyes. A deep sigh, I started over and stammered as I uttered the prayer.

One of the newly confirmed ministers came up to me and, completely against the Covid-19 rules, hugged me.

In a situation of disruption, after the accident of my oldest grandson, communities with a heart appeared spontaneously in different places. I am open to what I did not see before. A children's hospital turns out to be a place of

mutual attention, commitment and care for complete strangers. A children's workshop reveals itself to be a place full of love and affection for young lives, where children and adults do their best day every day to grow the light in the world. A house of happiness and misfortune of a hundred years ago turns out to be a house of faithful promises: if you are no longer here, I will take care of our children. An ordination exam with a request for more theological content makes me realize that life itself offers the necessary theological content. A prayer that I stumbled over and a student's embrace make me feel a comforting physical closeness. I take these places and their treasures with me on the remainder of my quest.

7 Living and thinking

The Liberal Theology Lecture is an annual event that highlights the liberal perspective in theology. I had been invited to give this lecture in the spring of 2000. Receiving this invitation is an honor. I had prepared a talk entitled "The Courage to Be Vulnerable." It was intended to be a playful yet critical take on the book *The Courage to Be* (1952) by noted German American theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich (1886–1965). A few days before I was to give the lecture, it was suddenly called off because of the emerging Covid-19 crisis. I reworked the canceled lecture into an article for the *International Journal for Philosophy and Theology*. Scholarly journals send submitted articles to referees, in this case, to two Tillich experts. I gratefully used their thoughtful suggestions to more accurately reflect Tillich's "courage to be."[10]

The courage to be vulnerable

Tillich worked in the borderlands, between Germany and America, between theology and philosophy, culture and art, despair and trust, conjugal love and free love. He begins his book on the courage to be with an etymology of the word courage. The Greek word for courage is *andreia*, or manliness. The Latin word *fortitudo* means strength. Both reflect the military connotation of courage. Courage is about bravery, the brave soldier. Only later did courage take on a broader meaning. Tillich refers to the German language, which has two words for courageous: *tapfer* and Mut. *Mut* refers to the movement of the soul or heart, indicated by the Dutch word *moed* and the English word *mood*. Heavy-hearted (Dutch: *zwaarmoedig*), haughty (*hoogmoedig*), humble (*deemoedig*), generous (*edelmoedig*) – courage is a matter of the heart. It is no accident that the French-English word *courage* is derived from the French word *coeur*: heart. *Lev* in Hebrew – courage to be.

Tillich connects *courage* with *being*. Here, he follows the existentialists Heidegger and Sartre, who put *non-being* at the center of their thinking. Being is both *being* and *non-being*. Non-being is the abyss into which everything disappears, including myself. Anxiety is caused not simply by our awareness of universal impermanence or the experience of other people's

deaths but rather by the impression these events make on the always latent knowledge that we ourselves must die.[11]

This primal anxiety cannot be eliminated. The groundlessness of being is part of existence itself. Tillich distinguishes three types of this existential anxiety: the anxiety of fate and death, the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, and the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness. These open an abyss in which everything threatens to fall to pieces and disappear.

Tillich sets the *courage to be* against this yawning abyss. This requires a strength that rises above non-being. We cannot do this ourselves. The courage that can overcome the threefold anxiety of existence is rooted in a power greater than ourselves and greater than the power of the world. Tillich calls this the "God-beyond-God." "The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt."[12] For Tillich, it doesn't matter if you call this power God, or Buddha or the depth of life, or anything else, as long as you take it seriously and entrust yourself to it. It is not a believing in the existence of God, but an unconditional entrusting of yourself. Faith is not an opinion but the state of being grasped by the power of being.

In the article, I explain in a biographical interlude how, as a student of theology in the 1980s, I grew up with existentialist philosophers and theologians such as Heidegger, Sartre, Camus and Tillich. For a long time, I treated their interpretations of existence, with their heavy emphasis on non-being and their own finitude and absence of foundations, as inevitable. Feelings of finitude and impermanence, guilt and meaninglessness were fueled by my own profound experiences of loss. Death, nothingness and groundlessness were the common threads of my living and thinking.

The Buddhist Kyoto School philosophers I read for my dissertation also knew this well. They build on the existentialist philosophers and speak about Absolute Nothingness, Great Doubt and Great Death as conditions for Great Life. Great Life is characterized by a profound depth that cannot be disturbed by the cares and joys of existence. My favorite poem at that time was a haiku by Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida (1875-1945):

In my heart
is a profound depth
that the waves
of joys and sorrows
do not stir.

I shared their perspective on existence: doubt, emptiness and meaninglessness, but the solutions they proposed were much more complicated.

For me, the roots of the courage to be, which for Tillich were located in the "God-beyond-God," seemed to get bogged down by one obstacle or another. I didn't have the courage to get through the anxiety and the abyss of non-being. I was not grasped, and I did not find the ground of being or unfathomable depth. Desires remained unfulfilled.

In my daily life, I chose a different solution: I escaped the despair of emptiness, loss and meaninglessness, as well as my lack of courage, by choosing to have a child. My meaningless existence was filled not by leaping into the abyss but by committing myself to the care of a small, new human life and all the fuss that went with it. I remained convinced that there was no deeper meaning. Sometimes, I found it difficult to reach a small new life within a meaningless existence, but I was mostly able to repress this thought, and we just played. We acted as if existence was wonderful.

My philosophical conversion away from death, meaninglessness, nothingness, emptiness and anxiety happened later. My eyes were opened by an encounter with a philosopher who begins not with death, but with *life*: Hannah Arendt (1906–1975). In Arendt's work, joy over the miracle of being born is central, the radical affirmation of a fragile new beginning. Her thinking about human existence is characterized by appearing, not by disappearing. There is no place for an abyss of non-being, or evil or meaninglessness. Only the good has depth.[13]

Of course, this is not an *analysis* of existence but an *interpretation*, a *choice*. Arendt opts for fresh life, the new and vulnerable, and thus for hope.

I myself was not heroic or faithful enough for the courage to be. Following in Arendt's footsteps, even though I didn't realize it at the time, I turned it into the courage to be vulnerable. You cannot find this kind of courage by yourself; you need others. Giving yourself over to the vulnerability of exist-

ence is possible only with the support of others whom you also support. I call these supportive communities *communities-with-coeur,* courage. Two or more hearts beating in one body.

In the article I turned to the work of several women philosophers to develop this theme, drawing not only on Hannah Arendt, but also on Alison Stone, Susan Brison and Ariane Cavarero. I had not yet read *From Time to Time* by Hannah Tillich (1896–1988), although I had managed to pick up a used copy. The referees said nothing about either my biographical interlude or the women philosophers I was discussing. They were interested primarily in whether I had accurately represented Tillich's thought.

Tillich: theologian and/or playboy?

I delved into the marriage of the promiscuous Paul and the jealous Hannah. I read Hannah's book in one day, aided by the previous owner's bright pink highlighting. I wondered despairingly about the implications of my new knowledge for my interpretation of Tillich.

In 1993, at a session of the prestigious American Academy of Religion (AAR), Tracy Fessenden presented a paper on "'Woman' and the 'Primitive' in Paul Tillich's Life and Thought." In her paper, she relied in part on biographical sources. She soon discovered the tacit consensus among Tillich-adepts to omit the shocking details of his secret sexual life when discussing his theology. She argued that Tillich, the connoisseur of pornography and prostitutes, and Tillich, the systematic theologian, do indeed come together, as, for example, in the image of "the ground of Being as life-giving and life-taking womb." One listener at the session remarked that she found Hannah Tillich's stories of Paul's sexual excesses quite believable. Another asked what all this has to do with his theology. Still another asked, "What's the point?" "What exactly is bothering you?"[14]

Fessenden taught Religious Studies and Women's Studies at a large state university. She did not consider herself a theologian, nor was she trained as one. She did not write on theological topics, so why would she care about Tillich's sexual biography? What is so problematic about this? She addresses these questions in a new article in 1998. Simply stated, she argues that the stuff of lived experience is also the stuff of theology. The corpus of Tillich the thinker is the product of Tillich the man.

Rumors of Tillich's sexual escapades began shortly after his service as an army chaplain during World War I and subsequent divorce from Grethi Wever after a short marriage. According to his biographers Wilhelm and Marion Pauck, without these erotic experiences, he was unable to write.[15] His theology was fueled by sex. He was not only unfaithful to his second wife Hannah but boundlessly and obsessively promiscuous. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) once sent a female student to him during office hours. He welcomed her warmly, closed the door and began to grope her. The student told Niebuhr what had happened; he never forgave Tillich.[16]

Years later, in the summer of 1960, Tillich and his wife were invited to make a trip to Japan. He spoke with Buddhist thinkers such as Zen philosophers Daisetse Teitarō Suzuki (1870–1966), Shin'ichi Hisamatsu (1889–1980), Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990) and Masao Abe (1915–2006). More than 50 years later, in 2013, a scholarly account of this trip was published. The book, the fourth volume of the *Tillich Research* series, contains the lectures Tillich gave and a record of dialogues with the Kyoto Buddhists. The first part contains a minute day-by-day account of Paul and Hannah Tillich's stay in Japan and their expenses. The International House in Tokyo, where the Tillichs stayed, carefully preserved all bills and receipts. All travel and lodging expenses were paid for them. They were invited to numerous exclusive dinners, tours of temple complexes, theatrical performances and other cultural or sporting events. In addition to the honorarium for his lectures, Tillich received a daily allowance of thirty dollars. That doesn't seem like much today, but the writer Tomoaki Fukai explains that, at that time, the average income of a Japanese person was the equivalent of sixty dollars a month. The total amount Tillich received during his two-month stay in Japan was twice the average annual income of Japanese workers.[17]

After the official day program ended, Tillich went by cab to Ginza. Here, Tillich visited bars and nightclubs and even brothels, where he met women and drank expensive imported wines. He had the high bills sent to the International House of Japan. Employees there were concerned that the inebriated seventy-three-year-old renowned theologian would no longer be able to tell cab drivers where to drop him off in the early morning. They put a note in his pocket that read, in Japanese, "Please go to the I-House." Members of the Japanese Commission for Intellectual Exchange, who had invited

him, and the International House staff marveled at the contrast between Tillich the theologian and Tillich the man.[18]

Women occupied a central place in Tillich's life. Yet in his public writings, with a few exceptions, there is only a deafening silence. The women in his life are simply not mentioned. Tillich demanded secrecy from his mistresses. They could not speak to anyone about their relationship with him. They thought they were respected in the eyes of an important theologian – some helped him type out his manuscripts – but they simply became part of a nameless mass. Tillich wanted to be remembered as a systematic theologian, not as a womanizer.

Fessenden notes that the silence Tillich demanded, his own denial of these relationships, and his lack of sustained reflections on women, gender and sexuality, is reflected in the silence that most theologians seem to have tacitly accepted regarding this topic.[19]

She criticizes Tillich's "God-beyond-God." Everything concrete we can say about God is not God. At the same time, everything concrete: sex, brokenness, betrayal, ecstasy, beauty, is relegated to the abyss of being. This abyss is intolerable if we cannot give ourselves over to the ground of being that we cannot name.

Unknowable, unnamable, of another order

That night, I lay awake pondering what exactly the theological objection could be. Tillich's "God-beyond-God" eludes systematizing, rationalizing and symbolizing. "The Real" eludes every account of reality. I had grown up with this theological distinction. In my dissertation, I discuss John Hick's theory of religion. The major world religions all embody different human perceptions of and responses to "The Real." The "Real" itself cannot be named. You can recognize the "Real" by the changes in people's experience.[20]

Even in my latest book, *For Joseph and His Brother*, I draw on the theological and philosophical distinction between what we can say about ultimate reality, the Good or the Higher, and what it, therefore, is *not*, including references to Tillich. God is unknowable. We cannot, with our limited intellect, know who He or She is. All we can do is entrust ourselves to the Ground of Being. It escaped me at the time that Tillich sought refuge not only in the infinite depths of Being, but also in more earthly places.

Iris Murdoch, who took courses from Tillich, continues on this old classical track. She did not believe in a God, but thought it was important to hold onto the Good, which, for her, takes the place of God. The Good exists independently of us. We can, however, direct ourselves toward it. We know intuitively about the Good and about Perfection. We sometimes experience something of this creative power, but we also sense its remoteness from our daily existence. As a result, we place our idea of the Good outside the world, as something unique and of a different order. It's like the sun. It is real but at a great distance. Like flowers, we turn toward its light. The sun gives light, warmth and energy and enables us to see the right relationship of things in the world. But the great distance between our fragile, impermanent and changeable lives and the perfection of the Good means that we cannot know what exactly this Good is.[21]

As I was writing and pondering these questions, I tried to clarify why I do not feel at home with forms of theology and philosophy that have a lofty, abstract and detached concept of God. I picked up once more the books of Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (1957), and Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) and *The Sovereignty of Good* (1971). I could have taken nearly my entire classic theology bookshelf were it not for the fact that, over the years, I have gotten rid of most of them. Slowly, it dawned on me. The ordinary, real, tarnished life is disconnected from God and the Good. The "ultimate" and the "infinite" and "the ground of being" are aloof from concrete lived reality. Faith, in the sense of trust, entrusting yourself, becomes surrender to the abstract unknown. Away from the difficult, the pain, the joy, the temporary, far away from snot, pee, sweat, semen and other bodily fluids. Far above earthly existence. In life's vale of tears, we remain at the mercy of ourselves and each other.

Theological reversal

For years I have followed a different, double-sided track. The good and bad, beautiful and disgusting, breathtaking and bewildering, joyful and tragic intersect each other. I cannot help but relate to this ambiguity, the fragility of living and dying. Accepting this ambiguity in my reflecting, speaking, stammering, even if I want to talk about God or the Good.

For my theological reflections, therefore, following anthropologists Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, I opt for an ontological reversal.

I distance myself from familiar abstract concepts such as God, the Infinite, the Good, the Ground of Being. They obstruct my view and prevent me from seeing *what could be*. I want to be open to what I did not expect and could not even imagine would be there. I want to let everything I encounter speak to me. What does my body feel? What do I hear, see, smell and taste? How am I changed by these encounters?

My own perspective is limited and finite, tied to time and place and specific experiences and power relations. Here, I have to agree with Tillich and Murdoch. This is precisely why I need others. My limitations and finitude drive me to others and their perspectives. These perspectives complement mine and illuminate other experiences and insights. By sharing with each other, a multitude of shadows and sparkles beyond my own perspective becomes visible. We need each other to discover what is of value, and every exchange produces tentative new meaning. We are interdependent through and through; together, we are creative.

Tillich shortchanged himself and his theology. Not in his passion for women, but by silencing them and being silent about them in his theology.

Communities seeking beneficial coexistence, communities with a heart. They need a multitude of voices, including those of women and children, animals and trees, plants, rivers and skies. Everything yearns to be born and to be seen and heard!

I want to connect my theological reflections with earthly existence. Reflections about a child, of ultimate importance to me, who broke his leg and still could not walk after six surgeries. About my daughter who overnight became deathly ill from an abdominal infection and about the fear I felt on the eighth day of high fever coursing through my body. What if she succumbs? What about her two children?

How can I reflect theologically or philosophically on vulnerable life? Fortunately, I am not alone in my quest. More and more women are advocating a theology or philosophy from the bottom up, from ordinary life. Giving voice to experiences that constrict or perhaps expand our view, that silence our ordinary conversation. I can simply join them.

PART 3

Beckoning Vistas[1]

8 Women's Voices

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) shifted my theological gaze away from death, nothingness, doubt, guilt and chasms of meaninglessness, toward beginning anew. Just before World War II, Arendt fled from Germany to Paris and from there to New York. She lived in extremely uncertain times. Yet the focus of her work is not darkness, injustice, inequality, evil and death, but joy for the miracle of being born, *natality*. She had no children. Would this lead her to de-emphasize the precarious uncertainty of physical birth? Or does she speak instead of *the miracle* of being born? Being born cannot be taken for granted; during birth, mother and child enter a vulnerable in-between place. Blood, amniotic fluid, mucus, feces, sweat, tears, pain and exhaustion – if all goes well, this turns to joy. But when something goes wrong, the joy gives way to sorrow. Fortunately, there are almost always helpers in this in-between place, others who stand by mother and child during the vulnerable birth process.

For Arendt, being born is not only about physical birth. We can start something new in the world, make a difference. By showing up for each other, by telling each other what moves us, what upsets us or worries us, we are born for the other and also for ourselves. She calls this the miracle of the second birth: through each other, we discover who we can become. We can make a difference in the world by *acting*. Acting, being there for each other with words and deeds, is characterized by plurality; people rely on the "together" and not simply on themselves. We are not sovereign beings but deeply dependent on each other for what she calls "revelation."[2]

This revelation of "who" as opposed to "what" a person is – one's qualities, gifts, virtues and shortcomings, which can be shown or hidden – is unconsciously contained in everything one says and does. The revelatory quality of speaking and acting is most evident where people are together with others and neither for nor against them – that is, in pure human solidarity. Telling the story of our lives helps us give it meaning. The telling allows us to become who we are.

> *Whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched. It is indeed as though everything that is alive – in addition to the fact that its surface is made for appearance, fit to be seen and meant to appear to others – has an urge to appear, to fit itself into the world of appearances by displaying and showing, not its "inner self" but itself as an individual.*[3]

We are not the authors of our life story; we experience our life. Thinking, for Arendt, is the dialogical and active investigation and articulation of meaning. The urge to speak is a search for meaning. We need others for this.

Being carried

Alison Stone (b. 1972) criticizes Hannah Arendt. She begins too late! Before we are born, we are carried for nine months under our mother's heart. It matters a lot who carries you. Which body? What time? What place? A chic canal house in Amsterdam or a refugee camp on Lesbos? What skin color does she have? What social and economic circumstances? Does she want you, does she look forward to you? Are there others who share her longing? Or does your anticipated arrival create problems for her?

Being born is a gift, with everything that comes with it. The world is given to me, a father, a mother, two mothers, two fathers, a house, a language, a faith. A horizon of meaning and values is given to me. We do not choose ourselves or our place in the world. We will have to find our way in life with this reality and the legacy that others pass on to us.

Stone works out a phenomenology of vulnerability based on being carried and born. We are vulnerable because we are physical and have material needs: food, drink, warmth, clothing, a home. Our bodies can get injured or sick, someone can hurt us. As inhabitants of this world, we are constantly exposed to others and dependent on each other. Others can nourish us, love us, neglect us, ignore us, abuse us. Love, tenderness, loss, grief and violence make tangible how physically permeable and precarious we are. Unequal power relations and social inequality increase our vulnerability. Some women and children, and men, are exploited, oppressed, manipulated, enslaved, abused. Much more can be said about this, says Stone, but vulnerability comes primarily from physicality, being exposed to others (relationality) and unequal distribution of power.

Fragility and vulnerability are not deviations or distortions of the human condition; they *are* the human condition. The ethical ideal is not to eliminate vulnerability. It is precisely the recognition of our all-encompassing vulnerability and fragility that awakens the realization that we are responsible for each other and should surround all living things with care. We cannot do without each other.[4]

The broken self

Susan Brison writes about *second persons*. If we have been dependent long enough on others who carried us and cared for us, we can acquire the essential art of being a person *second-hand*. The self is formed by and in relationships with others.[5] However, this self can also be broken again, or broken by others. This is what her work is about. How that happened to her and what it took for her self not to disappear forever.

During a walk on the morning of July 4, 1990, at 10:30 a.m. in southern France, a beautiful day, she is mugged, raped, beaten, strangled and left for dead by her attacker. She survives the attack, but in a way she does not. The person she was no longer exists.[6]

In an article many years later, she condemns the ideal of abstract and universal knowledge advanced by many philosophers. She criticizes Western philosophical traditions in which, until recently, mainly white men were concerned with theories of the self. Their main questions were: What makes a person the same unique individual through time? What distinguishes humans from nonhuman animals? The answer to the last question was sought mainly in the use of language or the possession of an immortal soul. Philosophers paid little attention to the question of how we become persons, let alone how we can break down. Women and people of color historically did not participate in philosophical debates. They were seen as "other," deviating from the (white, male) norm. These "others" have now entered the scene and, as a result, philosophy has changed, Brison argues. Women, traditionally seen as those who care for children and other dependents, are acutely aware of how deeply people depend on others to survive.

According to Brison, there is no such thing as universal knowledge, even when it comes to "the self." We all theorize from particular positions and diverse perspectives. Attention to first-person narratives is essential to philosophy and to understanding anything about the self. Stories are embodied

and thus, by definition, different. They take place in changing contexts. You can never speak for everyone.

The brutal overpowering on a sunny summer day in southern France left her "self" broken. Nothing has meaning anymore. She questions whether she may have suffered brain damage. Or did the heightened clarity she experienced during the attack make her view of the world sharper but also completely uprooted?[7]

A quest begins: she wanted and needed to know what a "self" was, to find out what had happened to her old self and if she could get a new one. The old one had been broken into pieces and could not be repaired. She didn't even know if she wanted a self back.

She seeks out stories of other rape survivors. She finds very few and then goes on to read testimonials from Holocaust survivors. She is also interested in publications by psychotherapists who treated survivors of trauma. She discovers that she is not alone. Many survivors note that they are no longer the same people. Who they were no longer exists.

For her, this contrasts sharply with what many philosophers have written about the self. They write rather contentedly about their "self," the main concern seems to be: how long can this good thing last?[8]

Brison's experience is that meaning is relational and physical. Trauma shows that meaning is constructed through bodily involvement with others and the world. The body and involvement with others form the basis and the limits of who we can be and how we can act. This is precisely where our weakness lies: others can break our bodies and thus our selves. Absorbing the experiences of others and recounting her own trauma is the beginning of a change. Working through the traumatic memory allows her to become a subject again instead of an object of the violence and words of her attacker.

She sets the perspective; she is the narrator. Others listen to her and she to others, and so she becomes part of a community. Connections, so essential for a person to be a self, are re-formed. The relational working-through allows a traumatic event to be transformed into a new sense of "self" and a vision of the world.[9]

Being witness

Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero (b. 1947) emphasizes another aspect of telling, listening and being heard: telling back. We long for someone who

can retell our story and so give us back to ourselves. Each individual life can be told as a story, and each life leaves a story behind. For Cavarero, people appear to each other as narrators and as listeners through acting, thereby opening their mutual uniqueness to each other. No one knows who he or she is. In the midst of acting and doing, you know even less. The other can see and hear you; you reveal to the other who you are. The other can give you back to yourself by telling your story back to you.

Even after we die, our uniqueness need not be lost. Another can tell our story and bring to light the meaning of the life we lived. Cavarero writes about *being witness.* Listening and passing on the other's story. Being remembered and thus giving the other her life back, depriving death of the final erasure of a person.

She refers to Hannah Arendt to underscore the redemptive power of storytelling. Precisely because we are irreplaceable and unrepeatable, our disappearance from the world would be final unless a witness brings us to life.[10]

Drawing on the writer W.G. Sebald, Cavarero makes clear what *being witness* and the *redemptive power of stories* can mean. In his book *The Emigrants,* Sebald reconstructs the lives of four Holocaust survivors. They were able to escape the mass killings by fleeing their homeland, but their lives became so incoherent that they eventually chose death. These are not big names like Jean Améry, Primo Levi or Paul Celan, but ordinary people unknown to the general public. Through interviews and archival work, he gathers fragments of their lives, arranges them into a story, and thus makes visible a unique life that otherwise would have remained unseen and fallen into oblivion. In this way, he saves lives against the backdrop of the annihilation of the Holocaust. Caravero calls it an act of *rehumanization.* Giving people back their faces, calling them back to life. An act of rebellion, an indictment of annihilation. Tortured, broken people become visible, immersed in immeasurable grief and sorrow.[11]

Being witness means allowing yourself to be disrupted. Being willing to face and feel everything people go through and do to each other. Not averting your gaze, allowing yourself to be pulled between reality and delusion, between normal and utterly absurd. To look without flinching into the deep abysses into which others lost their lives. Inexplicable and indelible scandals are exposed, vulnerable lives destroyed. The stories of their lives force a radical ethical and political rethinking of human life.[12]

Hannah Arendt celebrates the miracle of being born. Not only the physical birth of a unique being but also the many new initiatives a person can bring about in the world by virtue of her or his uniqueness. Women thinkers following in her footsteps emphasize physicality, relationality and unequal power relations as the source of the fundamental vulnerability of our existence. Others carry us and care for us and help us become a "second person," someone who is able to make her way in the world through acting. Others can also break us by causing us harm and violence.

Stories and telling them, appearing and making them appear, then prove to be powerful forces, according to Brison and Cavarero. We re-enter communities. Even if we are no longer alive, illuminating and disturbing stories can be passed on and heard. Testimonies as indictment and resurrection, as protest and call for radical ethical and political reflection.

Differences between people matter. Each has their own specific experiences, insights, perspectives and courses of action. Everyone can contribute something unique. At the same time, it is important to see the underlying unity: together, we make the world.

Being born, being physical, being dependent, carrying each other, caring for each other, practicing social equality, appearing to each other, telling stories, bearing witness, learning to see the uniqueness of the other, appreciating differences, bearing responsibility for the world together – these are the building blocks I take with me as my quest continues.

9 Religion inside and outside of us

The philosophical search for what it takes to have the courage to embrace vulnerability is beginning to bear fruit. Women's voices quietly urge us to take being carried, being born and starting over as the starting point of our reflections. Physicality, relationality and (unequal) social relations are part of being born. They are a source of disruptive experiences.

Women's voices point to the importance of storytelling. Experiences are physical, attached to concrete places and embedded in social power relations. Sharing our stories connects us to each other and creates community. This gives rise to multifaceted perspectives and a shared world. We need to care for each other and take responsibility for the shared world.

If this beautiful but often bewildering earthly life and shared world are our starting points, where do we end up theologically? The *theological reversal* I have chosen, following the lead of anthropologists, means that I do not want to approach reality through familiar concepts such as "God" or "the Good." What does theology look like if we take the encounter with life itself as the source of theological reflection? What do I hear, see, feel, smell and taste? How am I changed by what I encounter? And how can I give this theological meaning?

Religion and life

I was fascinated by Tracy Fessenden's critique of the gap between lived life and an abstract God, such as with Tillich. I wanted to know more about how she writes about the relationship between religion and life, so I read a recent book of hers, *Religion Around Billie Holiday*. It describes the life of American jazz singer Billie Holiday (1915-1959) and the way in which religion is intertwined with her person and her work. Fessenden makes an intriguing comparison between sound and religion. She talks about recorded sound clips of persons who are no longer alive, in this case Billie Holiday.

> *Its [the recorded voice of a dead person] mobile, ambient, unevenly negotiable, occasionally ghostly or vestigial quality makes sound like religion, or like religion around: less what's believed or affirmed in bounded institutional settings than what's in the air, who's dialed*

into it or answers to its pitch, where it's coming from, how it moves and what it carries, what it muffles or lifts or drowns, what time it keeps, what story it tells, and what it registers of your own voice or hearing or indifference.[13]

In this difficult passage, she seems to say that the recorded voice of a dead person is active, pervading the whole atmosphere, undeniable, haunting and elemental. It is precisely these qualities that make a dead voice seem like religion, or *religion around. Religion around* is not so much about what is believed or professed; it is not contained in institutions. It floats in the air and calls to you, inviting you to respond. Religion around is about where it comes from, what it carries, and what it brings about. What it mutes, what it illuminates, or submerges, what story it tells and what it registers of your own voice or what you heard, or what hardly seemed to matter.

Billie Holiday's life took place in a raw world full of meanness, cruelty and indifference. Black artists expressed their longing for another world with bewitching voices. Beginning in the 1830s, train tracks ran like snakes through the landscape of the American southern states, with separate carriages to keep people apart. Yet the train represented freedom, choosing your own destination rather than being tied down to a particular place. Escaping pain and other difficulties by train.

Journeyin' over Jordan don't have no fear,
Jesus gonna be my engineer...
Train is comin' round and it's passin' the curve.
Think I'm leavin' this distressful world.[14]

Despite her fame as an artist, Billie Holiday had to endure daily humiliations. In 1938, she performed at New York's Lincoln Hotel in "Spirituals to Swing." She was not allowed to join her white band for a drink at the bar. She had to enter and leave through the kitchen door. Between songs, she sat waiting by herself in a small dark room. The train north never seems to reach its destination. Longing remains unfulfilled.

Gonna go up north
Gonna ease my pain
Yessuh, Lord, gonna catch that train.[15]

Recorded voices of the dead singing about pain and longing. Apart from the biblical references in the songs, I was in the dark about the comparison between dead voices and religion. In the first weeks after my lover Peter died of cardiac arrest, I called his cell phone several times to hear his voice on voicemail one more time. An aching yearning for something past. Is religion a voice from the past? Something I can hear, almost ghostly, elemental? A voice that muffles all kinds of noise, awakening my longing? That I am surprised by, that carries me away, enraptures me? A voice that tells stories, that makes me tell stories? Immersing me and others in a movement that can never reach its destination because the voice is no longer alive? A dream from the past? What dead and living voices resound in each of us? How do they stir our lives and faith? Is this what Fessenden means by (religious) voices defining our lives?

Billie Holiday's relationships were violent. Her lovers beat her. In the tragic last period of her life, she starved herself while she cooked lavish meals for all sorts of guests, having no regard for money. Billie Holiday grew up as a teenager at the House of the Good Shepherd in Baltimore. Voluntary suffering, injuring yourself, starving yourself and suffering humiliation were seen as virtues for women and girls. It brought you close to the suffering of Jesus. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897) was glorified by young Catholic girls. Not for her heroic acts of faith, but for her humility and self-mortification. Self-torture was popular among religiously inspired girls, encouraged by examples from the past. "Beatings are 'perfect happiness,'" St. Francis was already telling his disciples. Nettles in your bed, stones in your pillow, iron chains under your clothes, endless fasting on bread and water. Cultivating humility and obedience with self-inflicted pain. "*Beat as being to mean beatific.*" The tortured and broken body as the way to salvation. Billie's later life, Fessenden claims, was in many ways defined by the religious voices she had heard in her youth.

Religiously inspired penance and self-sacrifice seem to be behind us now, at least in Western culture, but not yet that far behind. Less than a century ago, Jacques van Ginneken encouraged his grail women to discipline, sacrifice and penance. That was not the only thing; they had to be both lamb and lioness. To expand the Kingdom of God you had to have hair on your teeth, grow your mane, be able to roar and have claws. Of course, in a feminine

way, following the Christian women of the first centuries; they had been lionesses.

Without being aware of it, we are defined by a "horizon of values" passed on to us and modeled for us by others. Voices from the past and present bind us, take away our freedom, determine our choices, our behavior, our lives. Religion around us results in religion inside us.

Religious studies or theology?

Fessenden emphatically characterizes herself as a scholar of religion. In her article on Tillich, she emphasizes that she is not a theologian and does not want to engage with theological concepts. So why would she care about his sexual biography? "The lived life is also the material of theology," was her reply.

As a scholar of religion, she wants to show how life and religion are intertwined, as in her biography of Billie Holiday. Religion is embodied and cannot be separated from lived lives. This connection is sometimes hard to see. Religion is movable, pervasive, undeniable, haunting and elemental.

How can I reflect on this as a theologian? What theological concepts emerge when we take vulnerable, scarred, lust-filled, pain-inducing and mutually annihilating lives as the starting point? Abandoning such traditional words as "God," "the Infinite," "Eternal," "the Good," and "Ground of Being" sounds simpler than it is. How does reality speak to me, and how does this change me? What words can I use when I try to say something about this as a theologian? Browsing back through my texts so far, I notice in particular persons, indications of transitional places, and verbs.

Persons

Pioneers, "tricksters," pastor, grandmothers, mothers, fathers, children, teachers, world reformer, minister, candidates, victims, second persons, witnesses, Francesca, Remonstrants, Grail women, dancers, theologians, philosophers, singers, poets.

Places and time designations

Open landscape, the valley, mountains, mountain villages, dunes, rivers, rocks, avalanches, borderlands, the blue light, the thunder, present turning into past, schoolyard, outdoors, children's hospital, Werkplaats, New York's Lincoln Hotel, House of the Good Shepherd.

Verbs

Disrupt, overwhelm, attack, destroy, suffer, cry, depend, care, care for, touch, bewilder, mourn, remember, be carried, be born, expose, share, tell, tell back, acknowledge, witness, meet, say no, say yes, break, desire, connect, give voice to, dance, reach out, pay attention, play outside, dream, construct, transform, become subject, explore, dream, fantasize, collaborate, embody, appear to each other, rape, intimidate, become, be carried, listen, act, collaborate, play, fantasize, choose, commemorate, celebrate, create meaning, be silent, support.

How can I construct theology from this? Religious studies describes and analyzes. Theology points toward the valuable, the vulnerable, the courage to be vulnerable, the source of being born, sharing experiences, sharing the world, taking responsibility, starting over, hope, light, love, trust and gratitude. How can I formulate something coherent about this? Where do I begin?

Core stories

In her book *Call it Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World*, Serene Jones (b. 1959) also distinguishes between religion and theology. Religion is about official organizations, institutions, rituals, articles of faith and dogmas. Religion is concerned primarily with order, control, obedience and guarding the boundaries of the system. Theology, on the other hand, seeks to rise above the rules and religious structures to ask the age-old questions about the meaning of all life and of the cosmos. It seeks to know the whole truth about God insofar as we can understand it and insofar as it grasps us. What captivated me about Jones and what made me want to explore her work further is that she begins her theological inquiry not with abstract concepts but with concrete stories. Finding your core stories and reflecting on them – that, for Jones, is theology.[16]

Theology begins with a concrete place and story: in her case, the southern United States, Oklahoma. Places and stories are defined by many factors, including culture, language, gender and class. In Serene Jones's life, these are her racist and sexist grandfather, her gentle, activist father who was a theologian and rector of a seminary, and her mother, whose life was full of frustrations and misfortunes. Her stories about them, set against the backdrop of the reddish-yellow prairie landscape under the clear blue sky, form the

beginning of her reflections. She refers to this as "prairie theology." Other stories follow in the course of her book. We can also hear echoes of the dead theologians she studied as a student and with whom she reflects on her own life experiences.

Serene Jones is president of Union Theological Seminary in New York. It is the seminary where Paul Tillich taught in the 1930s, as well as numerous other famous theologians. Serene Jones's appointment as president of Union Theological Seminary should probably be seen as a mistake. She does not say this but notes that her theological scholar friends consider her an academic lightweight. Her accessible theological language is intellectually weak and far too experiential. Evangelical friends find the heretical blending of Eastern and Western traditions an abomination, and her secular friends do not understand her talk of "Divine Love." They want to see more evidence to support her religious fantasies.[17]

I had to smile at the invective "theological lightweight." I recognized the suspicion I often felt as the first female professor of the Remonstrants, reinforced by discomfort with experiential theology. It felt good to recognize this misunderstanding and the choices she nevertheless made.

It is characteristic of thinkers like Paul Tillich, John Hick and Iris Murdoch to conceive of the Ultimate, or Infinite, or the Good, True and Beautiful, and God-beyond-God as unknowable. We can turn toward it, like flowers turn their heads toward the sun, or entrust ourselves to it, but we cannot articulate or grasp what the Ultimate, Infinite, Good, True or Beautiful is. Our limitedness and finiteness prevent that. Faith is a risky surrender to an unknowable reality. The sun's rays warm the flower and make it grow. We can nourish ourselves and perhaps grow toward God or the Good. However, we cannot know the ultimate. Everything we think it is, it is not.

Religion inside and outside of us is concrete and physical. How do the people around me live? What do their voices whisper to me? What rituals and practices have I learned from them? How do the voices of dead persons, whether recorded or not, echo in them, and in me? What experiences do we have in this world, and how can we reflect on the larger meaning of all life and of the cosmos?

More importantly, what experiences am I helping others to have? What voice do I want to be in others? What experiences would I like to pass on to

my students, to people who attend my lectures, my daughter, my grandchildren? How can I help them discover the greater meaning of all life and the cosmos? What will they discover?

Publicity stunt

A few years ago, the Remonstrants organized an advertising campaign with a range of statements about God: my God began with the big bang, my God created animals first, my God lets women lead, my God does not let himself be known, my God believes in me, my God can take a joke. Posters adorned the platforms of national rail stations, and spots on the national public radio news and classical music stations announced the sermon of the week, which was always about one of these statements. In an unguarded moment, I said that I wanted to participate. I chose the saying that most appealed to me: "My God does not let himself be known." That week, my radio commercial was played countless times:

> *Hello, I am Christa Anbeek of the Remonstrants, and my God does not let himself be known. My sermon is about a God who does not hear me or see me. You must, therefore, show who you are yourself. Come to the Geertekerk on Sunday and join a conversation about this.*

It was a cold Sunday in January, long before Covid-19. The old fourteenth-century Geertekerk, with its high arched vaults, stained glass windows, empty white oval chancel with Celtic cross and dark marble tombs in the floor, was packed. Many people had been attracted by the radio spot. I wasn't sure whether to wear my robe, but I decided an extra layer wouldn't hurt. My robe is black and old-fashioned. The minister Johanna Wilhelmina Herfst (1906–2004) had given it to me. I met her when I interned at the Remonstrant congregation in Haarlem almost thirty years ago; she was then already in her nineties. I visited her at her home and she showed me her robe, which had not been used for years. I tried it on, it fit like a glove.

The voice of the person whose black and solemn robe I wear echoes within me. She received her doctorate in 1938 and was one the first female Remonstrant ministers. But because of her marriage to Egbert Jan Vinke in 1958, she had to resign her church ministry. That allowed her to make appearances on the liberal VPRO public radio network, with, of course, a

much wider audience than she ever would have had in a church. In an interview in the Remonstrant monthly magazine *AdRem* in July 1991, she talks about the great exodus in Remonstrant churches.

> *Things can change. Haarlem had 1100 members in the 1950s, now about 300. But it could be much worse – she puts these figures in perspective – because in 1813 there were only 30. Sometimes she feels sorry for her colleagues who have only white heads in their congregations. She then thinks, "Did we get it right? Who among my confirmation candidates still comes to church?" Perhaps the God image is the problem. Is it too abstract or too broad? Doesn't the intimate connection with God lie closer to ourselves, in the mystery of "being there"? This is where the [Remonstrant] Brotherhood has an opportunity, precisely because of the recognition that there are things you don't know. "By asking the right questions, we may be able to open a new face on the gospel for people today who are searching," Ms. Vinke says. It is one of the reasons she has remained so attached to the Brotherhood. Belonging to this community has been supportive for her.*[18]

I stood uncomfortably at the front of the church. Silence. An elder lit the paschal candle and the Light was welcomed with singing. *"Come to us! Bless us with your light!"*[19]

After the song, people gave each other peace greetings, happily shaking hands as they walked through the church. We sang the response song *Come, Holy Spirit,* which always brings tears to my eyes, including that morning in the full church. Why, I don't know. It can't have to do with dead voices inside me, my parents didn't go to this church. They were apostolic, songs like this were not sung there. Or could dead voices speak from further away? Before my parents' families switched to the Apostolic Church at the end of the nineteenth century, they were simply Reformed. The melody of this song was composed for Psalm 134 in Geneva in 1551. Who knows how it was ingrained in my DNA and what ancient voices sang my hopes awake?

Come, Holy Spirit, God-sent dove,
Descend where Thou art awaited,
Appear angel of light in the night
Of our minds, confused and proud.

Where Thou art not is existence,
Is all thinking, all doing
As empty and desolate, as dead, as then,
Thou, Spirit not yet gone forth.

There is no light but where Thou art,
Spreading your wings, stretching your wings
No life but where Thou awaken it
In an absence that cries out to you.

The emptiness, desolation and barrenness, the thirst and absence touch me. The wings of the holy spirit spreading out, catching me and letting me fly along to light and life, arouse a deep homesickness that makes me uncertain. Fortunately, my sermon went in a very different direction, towards a God who will not let herself be known, let alone carry me.

When gods are silent, the people must speak truth

Immediately before the sermon, the chamber choir that graced the service sang *Beati pauperes spiritu,* a song composed in 1559 by the Flemish composer Adrian Willaert. It was based on the "Sermon on the Mount" from Matthew 5.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy,
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Unlike the meek in the song, I set out intellectually and combatively with the last series of lectures by the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984), which were about *parrèsia,* speaking truth.

The motto of those lectures is: If the gods are silent and the truth is no longer revealed by the gods to men, the truth must be revealed by men to

men, by *parrèsia*, speaking truth. Foucault is talking here about the Greek gods, specifically Apollo the Oracle of Delphi, who is silent about his own misdeeds toward a woman, Creusa. Against her will, he rapes and impregnates her. As the time nears for her to give birth, she returns to the place where she was taken by Apollo, a cave under the Acropolis of Athens. Here, she hides until, all alone, she gives birth to a son. To prevent her father, Eurechtheus, from learning about the child, she leaves it behind, prey to the wild animals. Apollo sends his brother Hermes to bring the baby with basket and swaddling clothes to the temple at Delphi. The boy is raised in the temple as a servant of the god. He is regarded as a foundling because no one in Delphi (except Apollo himself) knows who he is or where he came from. Far away in Athens, Creusa does not know what happened to her child; she wonders if it is dead or alive. She later marries Xuthus; but they are unable to have children. They travel to Delphi to ask the god Apollo if they will ever have children. Creusa and Xuthus, of course, do not have exactly the same question. Xuthus' question is simple: "I have never had any children. Will I have one with Creusa?"

Creusa has a different question. She needs to know if she will ever have children with Xuthus. But she must also ask: "With you, Apollo, I had a child. And I need to know now whether he is still living or not. What have you done with my son, who is your son, what have you done with our son?" Apollo knows that the child is nearby, but he remains silent. Then Creusa speaks truth, *parrèsia*, airing a bitter complaint. She does not hesitate to denounce Apollo, who is much more powerful than she is.

For Foucault, truth is not something that is discovered but rather something that is new. Truth is not the truth about the child but rather Creusa's indictment of Apollo. Truth happens by speaking openly and candidly, boldly denouncing abuses, even if, by doing so, you put your own life at risk. Creusa speaks truth when she says:

> *My eyes run with tears, and my soul is pained by the evil machinations of men and gods. I shall reveal that they are ungrateful betrayers of my bed! [...] You came to me with your hair gold-gleaming as into the folds of my gown I was plucking flowers of saffron hue reflecting the golden light. Seizing me by my pale white wrists as I cried out "Mother!" into the cave that was your bed you took me, divine ravisher, without pity, doing what gladdens Cypris' heart. I, the unblest, bore to you a son whom, in fear of my mother, I cast*

upon your couch where in sorrow upon a bed of sorrow you yoked my wretched self. Ah me! And now he is gone, seized by creatures of the air for their feast, my son – and yours, hard-hearted one! Yet you forever with your lyre go on playing.[20]

An old servant hears Creusa's complaint and asks her about what happened. She tells him about her own faults and weaknesses. She left the child behind. *Parrèsia* is a truthful indictment of another more powerful than herself, and a confession of the truth about herself.[21]

The Remonstrant Church is not about the Greek gods and philosophy but about the Jewish and Christian God who can be seen and heard in the Bible and in people's experiences. Unfortunately, even this God makes himself known only with difficulty, so much so that others can easily mock him.

According to Swiss-English philosopher Alain de Botton, the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is the symbol of a God who neither hears nor sees, nor does he make himself known through liberating acts. Since the second half of the sixteenth century, Jews have gathered at this wall to open their hearts and ask the Creator for help. They write their grievances on pieces of paper in the hope that God will be moved to mercy by their suffering. De Botton sees only the cries of anguished people appealing in vain to an empty sky. This is tragic, but the afflicted people grieve together. "The wall forms a place where we are shown that the suffering we otherwise bear in silence is, in fact, a drop of sorrow in an ocean of suffering."[22] In the midst of life and death, suffering and injustice, the god who does not let himself be known throws us back on ourselves and each other.

Even in the Bible, God remains the great unknown. Moses is allowed to see only God's back. Elijah finds God in a whispering silence.

Job speaks boldly

In the week before the sermon, I happened to read a column by biochemist Martijn Katan. In a journey to rediscover his Jewish roots, he reread the book of Job with old friends. In this book, God does give an answer, but it is an absurdist answer, according to Katan. An answer that is not an answer.[23] The story of Job has two acts. In the first, God assembles his angels. Satan enters, and God talks about how God-fearing Job is. "No big deal," says

Satan, "when you have ten healthy children and 3,000 camels." If things turn bad for Job, he will curse God.

In the second act, Job is covered in sores, his children are dead and his possessions stolen. His wife says, "Curse God and die!" But Job wants to know what he has done to deserve this punishment. He wants justice! This provokes a strong reaction from his friends, who claim that God is just. He rewards good and punishes evil. Job must have done something bad; his suffering proves this. Several chapters of discussion follow. Job cannot accept that his suffering is in any proportion to what he has done. He denounces God and challenges God to answer for himself.

Then God speaks to Job in a whirlwind and takes him on a "little tour of his universe." The answer does not point toward a rational solution; it carries a totally different tone. A poem that takes us by surprise, as a piece of music can do, a journey through the imagination beyond our understanding. It is an art to allow ourselves to be touched and even comforted by this, says Katan.

At this point, I interrupted my argument. One of the students from the Remonstrant seminary, who had also studied theater, recited part of God's answer to Job.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, "Thus far shall you come and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped"?

Have you commanded the morning since your days began and caused the dawn to know its place, so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? It is changed like clay under the seal, and it is dyed like a garment. Light is withheld from the wicked, and their uplifted arm is broken.

Have you entered into the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this.

Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness, that you may take it to its territory and that you may discern the paths to its home? Surely you know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great!

Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or have you seen the storehouses of the hail, which I have reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war? What is the way to the place where the light is distributed or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?

Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life, to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass?

Has the rain a father, or who has fathered the drops of dew? From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven? The waters become hard like stone, and the face of the deep is frozen. [Job 38:1–30, NRSV]

God's answer to Job brought my thoughts back to the valley, the beloved place where my soul was refreshed during the summer by the rugged beauty. Was the answer from the whirlwind really as absurd as Katan claimed? Katan marvels that the Book of Job was even included in the official Jewish Bible. God does not come across very well. "It is true that Job never literally curses God, but his description of the supreme being comes close to a heavenly Assad who kills at his pleasure." Still, Katan values the grandeur and absurdity of the cosmos as seen by Job; it helps him accept the meaninglessness of existence.[24]

I wondered whether God's answer is indeed about the meaninglessness of existence, as Katan concludes. Or is the poet trying to make something else clear to us about the big questions of life? The capricious beauty of creation teaches Job to look at his own capricious existence with different eyes. Realizing that he is only a small part of an immeasurable and incomprehensible universe, he withdraws his complaint. The mysteries of life and death, happiness and suffering cannot be fathomed. He asks too much, he wants answers to questions for which there are no answers. What do we really know about life? How can we let ourselves be carried beyond ourselves, and through our tear-filled eyes be touched by immeasurable beauty?

In the last part of my sermon, I juxtaposed Creusa, the believers at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, and Job. Creusa let her tears flow and voiced a bitter indictment of the one who wronged her. At the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, people hope to be heard as they express their fear, loneliness, joy and sorrow. Job does not shy away from going to extremes in his desire to be seen as he is: someone who has done no wrong and yet suffers. His friends refuse to listen to him.

I concluded that when God does not let himself be known, does not see us or hear us, it is especially important that we see and hear, and that we are not left standing alone at the wall. We can become each other's witnesses. Creusa's complaint is also heard by a fellow human being who asks her about her own part in her suffering. Even Job receives an answer; he is made aware of nature's many mysteries.

If God does not let himself be known, we can show ourselves to others – in our vulnerability and sorrow and humanity. We can show ourselves as hungry and thirsty for justice, as seeking peace and happiness in a world full of injustice, discord and unhappiness. And so also meet the other. Then a new story begins, with new responsibilities and a plot all its own. If God does not let himself be known, we are responsible for each other. Not leaving the other alone, neither in joy nor in sorrow.

I wish us a beautiful Sunday.

The service ended with an offertory and prayers. As a closing song a lullaby, to cherish our desire not to let each other be left alone. Straight through the visible and the tangible to see something new.

God to enfold you,
Christ to uphold you,
Spirit to keep you in heaven's sight;
So may God grace you, heal and embrace you,
lead you through darkness into the light.

My grandson Joseph, just turned three, attended this publicity stunt and loved it. He was super proud of his grandmother, he had never seen her like

this before! At the exit where I shook hands with everyone and wished them a good week, he stood beside me until the very last churchgoer had left.

Christ

Not everyone was happy. On Monday morning, I received a letter from an elderly fellow Remonstrant minister. He thought it was a poor and inadequate sermon. He admonished me that God does, in fact, make himself known and comes humanly close to us in Christ. I should have spoken about that! He wrote:

> *I read your sermon this week on the subject of "My God does not allow himself to be known" with amazement and astonishment. I would expect that, in your sermon, you would account for the fact that, as Christians, we trust that God does know us and that we may take for granted that God has, in fact, made himself known and continues to make himself known. Psalm 139 is an intensely religious prayer of someone who knows and experiences that God knows him. You are a professor of the Remonstrant Brotherhood that makes itself known through its statement of principles: "The Remonstrant Brotherhood is a community of faith, rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ and true to its principle of liberty and tolerance, that seeks to honor and serve God." And in your entire sermon the name of Jesus is not mentioned even once! Every Sunday, we celebrate the mystery of Christ's resurrection from the dead. If the Brotherhood says in its advertisements "My God does not allow himself to be known," among other things, you would expect in a sermon by its professor, at the very least, a reference to the center of our faith, Christ, in whom God has come humanly close to us. In his first chapter, Matthew calls him Immanuel, God with us.*

The letter writer touched a nerve. Remonstrant critics had often circulated letters to me and many others with the veiled suggestion that a humanist had run off with their chair. This continued during the years following the publicity stunt. Was I really a believer, and in what? "Do you ever pray?" a woman asked me publicly after a lecture at the Remonstrant church in The Hague. And after *For Joseph and His Brother* appeared, I was again reproached for omitting Jesus.

I checked. Jesus is mentioned twice in *For Joseph and His Brother*, both times where I describe the brief period in my teenage years when I was a member of a Bible club. The word Christ is completely absent. I had written previously about Christ. In my dissertation, I discuss Lutheran theologian Wolfhart

Pannenberg's view of Christ in detail. Through Christ, we can reconnect with God, we can even share in his resurrection. The theological formulas left me cold, I could not manage to translate them to my life. Christ also comes up in *Mountain of the Soul*. I followed Schleiermacher's approach, Jesus as an inspiring example, but at the same time more than that. He evokes a latent ideal in ourselves that allows us to follow in his footsteps. Was it not he who, also according to Matthew, once said:

> *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him, saying Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And he will answer them, Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.*

Matthew shows us how we can make Christ present in everyday life. Even in the liberal religious tradition, Christ is seen as an inspiration, an example for a good and true life. Calling us – as I did in my sermon – to show ourselves as hungry and thirsty for justice, as seekers of peace has deep roots. Christ meets us in the other for whom we take responsibility and whom we do not abandon in his or her joys and sorrows. Old verbs can again become living realities.

In my search for building blocks for communities with a heart, following the lead of anthropologists, I decided to abandon familiar theological concepts and make fieldwork the priority. In doing so, I had maneuvered myself into a quandary. How can I reflect on the deeper meaning of what I encounter and how I change as a result? What words do I have at my disposal?

Fessenden points to the intertwining of religion and life. They have everything to do with each other, and this should be true for theology as well. Theology should be about lived life. Serene Jones, like me, explores significant life experiences. For her, finding your core stories and reflecting on them is theology. In the midst of vulnerability, I am looking for building blocks that bring us closer to desire, love, indignation, responsibility, and

caring for each other and the world. Words that emerge around concrete persons, places and verbs. In the sermon on a "God who does not allow himself to be known," persons, places, and verbs again became apparent: Creusa, Job, a cave under the Acropolis, the Wailing Wall, a whirlwind, speaking truth, denouncing, bearing, seeing one another, allowing ourselves to be touched by the nature around us to which we belong.

Remonstrant critics become alarmed. What happens to the familiar and beloved words? To the letter writer critic, I replied only briefly that I would think about his comments. I would have done better to remind him that the sermon, which he had read on the website, was only a part of the service. A liturgical service includes much more: rituals, music, sensory experiences, colors, smells, decor, atmosphere, space, sounds, gestures.[25] One student wrote about vulnerability and liturgy in her thesis:

> *The liturgy acts as a safe space where stories of vulnerability can be told and where there is the opportunity for healing and reconciliation. This time of disruption invites us to make time and space for sharing the brokenness of existence, and from there to discover how that which is of ultimate value can be unearthed and articulated.*[26]

In uncertain times, liturgy offers a safe haven to catch our breath. We hear stories of vulnerability through which we recognize our own vulnerability. We speak boldly about our lives, the joys and setbacks, the gratitude and indignation. We do not shy away from denouncing injustice and calling powerful people to account. At the same time, liturgy offers a kind of play space where we enter a world beyond the ordinary. Lighting a candle, singing, wishing each other peace, being silent and praying together evoke another reality where we gain new experiences. We are taken away, away from our own powerlessness and imperfection. Liturgy is a place of promise where we can hope and dream of desires being fulfilled. Reborn, we enter a new week to reflect our dreams in our daily lives.

10 Rainbow Experiences

Late summer turned into a stormy autumn with endless rain showers. Meetings and lectures occupied my time. I was tired, easily irritated, and wondered if, at sixty, I wasn't getting too old. One weekend, I walked from Nijmegen to Ubbergen and Beek with three colleagues from the Remonstrant seminary, after which we had dinner together. It was a beautiful day, and I enjoyed the relaxed togetherness. While eating, the colleague who had been interim rector of the seminary in recent years told me that he had had a conversation with one of the Catholic bishops. Seven years ago, this colleague switched from the Catholics to the Remonstrants. As a professor at the Remonstrant seminary, I had been privileged to confirm him as a ministry candidate. In recent years, he felt less and less at home in his new religious community. "Do you ever consider returning?" I asked him. "In fact, this conversation was to talk through how I can return," he replied. Tears sprang to my eyes.

Later that week, we had a farewell dinner with the entire board of trustees of the seminary. This dinner had already been postponed three times because of Covid-19, but now four former trustees could be properly sent off. A few days before the dinner, the new treasurer strongly objected to the choice of the upscale restaurant, upon which I called the president. He assured me that things were not as bad as they seemed. "Don't worry!" While he had me on the line, he wanted to let me know that, for personal reasons, he was unable to attend and asked if I wanted to make a short speech to the outgoing interim rector. Of course, I wanted to address my colleague.

For a few minutes, I debated whether these had been seven good years or seven bad years. A steady stream of students, committed to the future of the Remonstrant faith. At the same time, swelling criticism from supporters. Who are all these people? What are they actually teaching at the seminary? Is the education any good?

Meanwhile, students continued to study, and one candidate exam after another followed. Seven good years, seven bad years? In any case, seven turbulent years. I closed with a haiku befitting autumn and farewell.

AUTUMN TEARS

In the sky,
Flocks of departing geese;
In the weeds,
Murmuring insects
Tears like dew well up in my eyes.[27]

My days filled themselves with looking back and looking forward. Homesickness and at the same time scanning a horizon for new hope. Up early one Sunday morning for an exam service by one of Remonstrant seminary students. Students conclude their congregational internships with a service evaluated by staff members and trustees. The president again excused himself. Reluctantly, I drove through the rain and parked next to the beautiful Waalse Church in Arnhem, where the Mennonites hold their services. Sometimes, our students do internships at friendly liberal faith communities. Inside, I encountered a handful of elderly people, our student, a fellow student who was nearly seventy, and a seminary colleague who had brought her twenty-four-year-old daughter. She was by far the youngest participant. In the Rainbow Service on this International Coming Out Day, the courageous seminary student recounted her own search and "coming out." It was an odd fit for the last group of castaways gathered on this gray Sunday morning, clinging to something long gone. Unfortunately, the dove holding a fresh green twig in its beak did not appear. The ark was still bobbing rudderless and directionless on the endless waves. Weary and disillusioned, I got back in the car a few hours later and drove home through the still-pouring rain. How long before, even here, the last churchgoer would close the door behind her?

Ermelo

Twenty-five years ago, in January 1998, I took my ordination exam in Leiden and then spent ten years living in Ermelo and working at the Ermelo Center for Psychotherapy as a spiritual caregiver with a Remonstrant mission.

During those years I also had an appointment at the Catholic Theological University in Utrecht as an associate professor of comparative religious studies. This allowed my intellectual quest to continue alongside my practical work.

Peter, my lover, had persuaded me to apply to Ermelo. He was a psychiatrist and director of the hospital. I got to know him at the Tiltenberg, the center of the Grail Movement where I worked as the director of the Zen programs. He regularly came to the center for a Zen weekend or for study programs we organized. I spoke to him for the first time during a weekend about death in Zen Buddhism. My dissertation was almost finished and my beloved Zen teacher Mimi was still alive. Together, we explained "life-*sive*-death" in Japanese thought. "*Sive*" is the Japanese word for "is equal to," or "life = death." My supervisor and professor of Buddhism in Leiden, Tilmann Vetter, had explained this to me many times and written articles about it, all of which I had studied. A year later, after I received my doctorate in theology, Mimi died. Suddenly, I no longer understood anything about all the scholarship I had previously been so enthusiastic about. The huge difference between her presence and her absence was unbearable.

A few years later, during preparations for a conference on "Buddhism and Compassion" that was to take place in the summer of 1997, Peter and I got into another conversation about life and death. He was to replace the intended keynote speaker, Polly Young Eisendrath, who was to give a talk on her book *The Gifts of Suffering* but had to stay home due to her mother's illness.[28] Because of his work as a psychiatrist, Peter seemed a good replacement. I was sure he would be able to talk about the gifts of suffering.

Over a week after that conference, a *sesshin,* or Zen retreat, took place. One of my tasks was to prepare the *zendō*, the meditation room. On ordinary days, the Tiltenberg's chapel was either a Christian prayer room or a feminist ritual space. For the Zen programs, the space was emptied, mats laid out, cushions and benches in the vestibule, Buddha statue and incense burner on the altar, incense sticks next to it. I had reserved two mats side by side, one for Peter and one for myself. When he arrived that evening, I took him into the *zendō* and showed him his place. Over coffee, I explained the many rules to the participants. The most important thing was silence. Not a word was allowed to be spoken. After the explanation, everyone had to change into black, loose-fitting clothes. The first meditation followed. Last to enter the

zendō, I bowed and sat on the only empty spot. In the silence, I felt the air shimmer.

It was the beginning of a ten-year love affair. He died suddenly over fifteen years ago. I continued to work in the institution for two more years, then left for the University of Humanistics.

Recently, for the first time since my departure, I found myself back in Ermelo. I had been invited to supervise a team day in a new ward for the elderly. After a short introduction, I set the team members to work with the game *Between Sun and Moon*. Meanwhile, I strolled through the pouring rain into the village. I walked into a coffee shop and ordered a cappuccino.

After a second cup of cappuccino, I walked through the still-pouring rain back to the elders' building. That day in Ermelo was alienating for me. I had been asked by a psychologist to lead that workshop. Almost twenty-five years before, we had roomed next to each other. She still worked in the same institution but in different wards. When they were thinking about a facilitator for their team day, a nurse who had good memories of the groups we gave together back then mentioned my name. She was no longer there; she had retired a month ago. Just as most of the others I worked with at that time had since left. A whole new team, most of them newly employed, some a little longer. A new building, too. And a new program, which had been delayed by Covid-19 and had yet to get underway. Everything and everyone was new and different in a place that was familiar to me: the spacious pavilion of the psychiatric institution with old, familiar buildings and trees that were over a hundred years old. Strange that I was suddenly walking there again. For ten years, it was my workplace. I lived then in the first street adjacent to the grounds of the psychiatric institution.

To prepare myself physically and mentally, and also to have something to do, I drove to Ermelo with my grandchildren the Saturday before. First to the McDonald's near Horst beach. The youngest had never been to a McDonald's, but as he got out of the car, he said he thought it was fantastic. He didn't eat a bite of his chicken nuggets and fries, but he did drink the apple juice and read the booklet that came with the Happy Meal with interest. His brother ate a hamburger, his brother's chicken nuggets, lots of extra fries and a second hamburger that I ordered in the vain hope that his little brother would eat something anyway.

"Funny," said the eldest, "I eat a lot but don't feel full." I ate some fries and drank soda water and became filled with a vague dark feeling I recognized from the times I was here with my daughter when she was a child. Once in a while, we rode our bikes from Ermelo to the McDonald's near Horst beach. Sandwiched between the highway and the lake, cars racing by, gray asphalt, gray water, tasteless salty fries. It was still as sad as it was then, but the boys liked it.

Afterwards, Joseph wanted to see the house where I had lived with my daughter, his mother. So I drove along the winding green-lined Horsterweg to Ermelo and turned right onto the grounds of the psychiatric institution. A large arrow pointed toward the garden market.

"Let's go take a look," I said. I parked the car. Joseph grabbed a large wheelbarrow and we walked to the nursery of the institution.

"Hey, Revren," a man called out to me.

"What did he say?" my grandson asked.

"He said 'Hi minister.' He recognizes me from before."

"Did you work here?" asked Joseph in surprise.

"Yes, I was a minister. There's a church here, too." We walked around the garden plants and bought two ice cream-shaped seed balls for birds at a stall. Joseph paid with the money I gave him. Behind the stall stood two men, one patiently showing the other how to operate the cash register and how much money Joseph got back.

"Are you an intern?" asked Joseph.

"No, I'm the boss," laughed the man. We walked with the wheelbarrow and ice creams back to the car and I drove to the other side of the grounds. Joseph couldn't walk very far yet, the crutches were at home and they wanted to see the deer park and my house.

"Was this Mom's house?" asked Chris. The roofs and window frames had been renewed; there were even solar panels on the roof. Many of the garden plants I had planted long ago were still there. The old neighbor had apparently moved out. Two big ugly cars stood in front of the door in what had once been her beautiful little garden. Inside, two dogs were barking.

"Come on, let's walk back," I urged the children. "I want to go home." Inside me, I heard the voice of the Japanese poet Basho:

In Kyoto,
hearing the cuckoo,
I long for Kyoto.

An alienating experience: back for a while from the past, memories of people who are no longer there, old and new buildings mixed together; familiar, but unfamiliar. In Ermelo, I longed for Ermelo.

Breath

In early November, I discussed with students the first half of the book *Call it Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World* by Serene Jones. Until then, I had only read the introduction, where she introduces her experiential theology. The meeting compelled me to study the entire book. Jones describes how disruptive experiences are the source of theology. Disruptive experiences overturn all she had previously learned and cause her to search for new theological insights. This aligns with my own theological perspective on dislocating experiences that take you into uncharted territory. In her work, I discovered an important building block for communities with heart. She writes about the relationship between breathing and the life that is given to you. She calls this grace.

True to her definition of theology, she relates and reflects on the core stories of her life, searching for the larger meaning. In her childhood in Oklahoma, the backdrop she took for granted was formed by her very different grandfather and grandmother, and by the presence of God who would never abandon them. As a teenager, Jones's childhood friend, who came from a completely different social environment, was killed in an accident. She felt lost. During a study trip to India, she became deathly ill. She was helped by the very people from whom she least expected it. The bombing of a government building in Oklahoma City provoked a deep fear for her loved ones who lived there. She felt an intense hatred toward ex-soldier Timothy McVeigh, who committed the attack. Her difficult relationship with her mother is also the subject of many pages in the book. Jones connects everyday and not-so-everyday events and experiences with theological concepts: original sin, hatred, forgiveness, breath, justice, mercy and love. She draws inspiration from theologians who have accompanied her over the years, such as Calvin, Kierkegaard, Barth, Niebuhr, and her father, who was a theolo-

gian, and comes across as a rather moralistic activist, or perhaps just clumsy in expressing his love. She calls breath, justice, mercy and love the pillars on which her prudent and hard-won certainty of divine grace rests.

The most profound changes in her life were not the result of intellectual study or special liturgical celebrations. Profound physical experiences sparked new insights. Jones recounts how her infant daughter's breathing stopped. An allergic reaction to eating peanuts was treated just in time. Having a child, whatever form it takes, whether one or four, whether born to you or adopted, or whether you devote yourself to an entire community of nieces and nephews or neighbor children, displaces forever the sense that you are the center of the world. The central figure in your life is no longer you but your child. Her life matters more than yours, says Jones.

Another traumatic experience left her own life suddenly at risk. When she visited a doctor for a knee injury, cervical cancer was accidentally discovered.

These two experiences exceeded her ability to make sense of them. What matters most feels very different from anything she has learned before, not only about God but also about humanity and the cosmos. The experiences force her to search for new meaning.[29]

The philosopher who helped her understand the profound reversal of her thinking was Luce Irigaray. She asks simple questions in her work, such as: What if we try not to think dualistically? What if we reject hierarchies? What if we open ourselves to new patterns of being? What if we let go of our old ways of knowing and learn to reimagine them? In her book *The Way of Love,* Irigaray explored the freedom that comes when we use *breath* to designate our relationships with each other and with God. God is not an object, separate from us, but air, flow, breath, life force. Breath, the life force that moves between us and through us.

For Jones, becoming still and listening to your breath – our breath – is the most radical path we can take to reimagine the divine. With every breath, life comes to you. Love comes to you. Not from above, but from between and through the time and space in which we breathe. We need a path that leads us away from wanting to measure everything by the criteria of productivity, utility and dominant power and makes us dwell on the precious fact that we live by grace. One day, we will no longer live, but the breath of grace will continue.[30]

After-thought

One beautiful morning, I was running my usual course. One day, when I was still running laps in Ermelo, I started counting. One hundred and thirty breaths was exactly three minutes. I was then still running with a sports watch. I no longer have the watch, but I still count my breaths. Twelve times 130, or a total of 1560 breaths. I don't count the few minutes in between that I just walk. While walking I thought about breathing as an imagination of the divine.

Restless from working so much from home, after my run I spent a few hours in my office at the national headquarters of the Remonstrants. I thought I had put Jones's book in my bag, I wanted to finish reading it, but apparently it was at home. So I read her article "Feminist Theology and Global Imagination," which was still on my computer. She wrote this article eight years before her book, and it provided additional information I could use in my class presentations and in my search for communities with heart.[31]

According to Jones, feminist theology is, first and foremost, the effort women undertake to understand themselves as part of a broad social movement and their commitment to improving the position of women everywhere. It aims to create a world where women can flourish and where they can be part of political, economic, social and religious decision-making processes. A world where their bodies are valued and respected and free from exploitation, abuse and violence. Where women's work – especially caring for children, the elderly and the sick – is shared and taken seriously as economic and social capital. Where education is accessible to all and the natural environment is treated with respect and reverence. It is also about beauty and spirituality and all the other positive things that make women's lives happy and fulfilled.

Intellectual reflection goes hand in hand with working for social change in local and everyday ways: how we cook, how we dress, how we raise our children, how we want our homes to look, our jobs, if we have them, and of course "how we worship and practice our faith."[32] Feminist theology and its activist practices are both intimately personal and broadly political. She argues for a revised practice of imagination. Imagination is not about dreams and fantasies but rather the infinite inner landscape of thought where our experiences are processed and given meaning.

The vast landscape of thought is broadly conceived by Jones. It includes collections of beliefs, attitudes, images, stories and memories that make up our collective and individual mental universe and frame our ongoing activities of meaning-making.[33]

I found it fascinating to see how the common thread of Jones's thinking remained the same in the 2011 text and her 2019 book, even though the genre is very different. Reflecting on the events of one's life, ordering them, discovering their meaning and connecting actions to them: that is theology according to her. Here, Jones comes close to Hannah Arendt, even though she does not refer to her. Arendt also points to the relationship between experience and reflection in the search for meaning. Not sense perception, which lets us experience things directly and close at hand, but the imagination and thinking that follow and give our experiences possible direction and meaning.

> *Not sense perception, in which we experience things directly and close at hand, but imagination, coming after it, prepares the objects of our thought. Before we raise such questions as What is happiness, What is justice, What is knowledge, and so on, we must have seen happy and unhappy people, witnessed just and unjust deeds, experienced the desire to know and its fulfillment or frustration. Furthermore, we must repeat the direct experience in our minds after leaving the scene where it took place. To say it again, every thought is an after-thought. [...] To vary this for our purposes: All thought arises out of experience, but no experience yields any meaning or even coherence without undergoing the operations of imagining and thinking.*[34]

After-thinking about important experiences provides direction and meaning. Direct experiences come first, but what determines the thinking that follows? How can we review the operations of the imagination? As we reflect, how do we find a path from our disruptive and disordered experiences to new meaning and direction? What frameworks determine our thinking and our actions?

Jones reflects on the most important concepts of several theological traveling companions from the perspective of her own central experiences. This intrigued me. For her, Calvin, Kierkegaard, Barth, Niebuhr, Gutiérrez and Irigaray, among others, offered helpful guidance. Which theologians and

philosophers accompanied me on my journey, and who is currently inspiring me? In the more than forty years I have devoted to philosophy and theology, I have been inspired by numerous thinkers, literati, poets and (life) artists. Their names appear in the indexes of my books.

For a time, my doctoral supervisor Henk Vroom was an important figure, if only because I took a position in opposition to his. But that was not the only thing. His book *Religions and the Truth*, which was the starting point for my dissertation, takes an experiential approach to comparative philosophy of religion. The core insights of religions are rooted in basic human experiences. Vroom names experiences of finitude, responsibility, failure, goodness, beauty and evil and suffering as examples.[35]

The Japanese philosophers of the Kyoto School, such as Nishida and Nishitani, were also sources of inspiration, soon supplemented by the practical insights of Mimi Maréchal, my Zen teacher.[36] Her silent breathing body sitting upright in the *zendō* helped calm my breathing.

Numerous others, often women in recent years, accompanied me along the way. I have notebooks full of handwritten summaries of their reflections.

Wandering between past, present and future, Jones's theological traveling companions inspired me to search for a text on Nishitani. Last year, I ordered the just-released *Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*. I had not yet allowed myself time to really browse through it, but I did find a nice recent article by Graham Parkes on "Nishistani Keiji: Practicing Philosophy as a Matter of Life and Death."[37]

Bridge Builders

The philosophers of the Kyoto School were bridge builders between East and West, Buddhism and Christianity. They wanted to bring attention to the special perspective of Eastern views and did so by looking for connections with Western philosophers and Christian thinkers, especially mystics. I spent years exploring Eastern views in a variety of ways, not only through philosophy and meditation but also by reading Japanese novels and watching Japanese films. Over the years, my philosophical and theological focus shifted, but my attraction to Japanese philosophy, life wisdom and aesthetics remained.

The reassuring thing about a dead philosopher is that his views no longer change. Of course, new facts about his or her personal life may come to light, such as Paul Tillich's penchant for polyamory or Heidegger's sympathies for National Socialism. Sometimes new contextual interpretations are given to old insights, but I discovered none of this in Graham Parkes's article on Nishitani.

Nishitani's philosophical birth occurred at the age of fourteen when his father died of tuberculosis. Shortly thereafter, he became ill himself and realized that he, too, could die. He was desperate, despondent and full of doubt. Until he decided to study philosophy, where he found new clarity and new perspectives.

For Nishitani, philosophy was about the big questions of life and death, including the crisis during his adolescence. Normally, people live as if death does not exist. They are wrapped up in commonplace day-to-day matters until they are faced with the death of a loved one or the possibility of their own death. Then suddenly death, or nothingness, looms behind everything. Nishitani calls this the perspective of Nothingness, or the domain of nihilism. His philosophy dovetailed perfectly with my own experiences. I discovered his work through a footnote in Han de Wit's book *Contemplative Psychology*. I read the book in Switzerland, it was spring and I was preparing for an exam. Together with my daughter, who was a few months old, and her father, we stayed in the house in the mountains. In the morning, I studied for a few hours, then we went walking and I talked about what I had read. It was less than two years after the death of my father, mother and brother. "Life-*sive*-death"; life and death were totally intertwined. This was not only an intellectual reality, it was also my life, which I hardly knew how to deal with.

According to Nishitani, nihilism must be left behind, nothingness and death cannot be seen as independently real. Life and death, being and non-being, form an inseparable unity. Becoming and passing on, appearing and disappearing, the coming and going of thoughts, inhaling and exhaling, day and night, being born and dying, such is the endless perpetual cadence of… well, of what really?

Of Buddha nature, all of reality, birth and death itself, is "*nirvana,*" writes Nishitani. Here he stands on the shoulders of giants such as Zen master Dogen (1200–1253) and Zen master Hakuin (1686–1769).

The article following the article on Nishitani in the *Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy* was about Ueda Shizuteru (1926–2019), whom I met several times. He was a student of Nishitani. I traveled to Japan to speak with him about Nishitani's philosophy. Two memories are very dear to me. He invited me to a seminar at the former house of Nishitani, who had died a few years before. He showed me the whole house, including the study room where Nishitani wrote his books and had long discussions with his students. Another day he took me for lunch at a sushi restaurant. I could barely concentrate on our conversation because I was worried about how I would be able to eat the large pieces of sushi properly with chopsticks. I don't remember anything about the conversation we had that day, though I can still recall his attentive and kind face.[38]

In recent years, I sat on review committees for dissertations on Japanese philosophy several times. I am still overwhelmed by doubt over whether it is about a language game, dialectics, or about a profound experience of reality. Something similar happens when I read about God. Despite more than forty years of study, I suffer from theological dyslexia, a fundamental inability to connect reality as described with reality as lived. I have begun to shift my starting point to lived reality, even though I increasingly realize that this shift has not suddenly solved my theological problem.

Dance of living and dead

Graham Parkes, the author of the article on Nishitani, quotes a passage by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) about the busy Italian port city of Genoa, where Nietzsche liked to stay. The joyful liveliness reflects the sadness of parting. A dark shadow travels next to every person thirsting for life. It is like the last moment before the departure of an emigrant ship: there is more to say than ever before, the hour is at hand, and the ocean, with its desolate silence, is waiting impatiently behind all this noise, so covetous and certain of its prey.[39]

Parkes juxtaposes this quote with Nishitani's narrative of Ginza, Tokyo's busy, lively and upscale shopping district. Another hundred years and no one who walks here now, neither the old nor the young, neither men nor women, will walk again. If you look closely at the living, you see a double perspective: life and death. That is the true vision of reality.[40]

The lively and noisy bustle will soon turn into desolate silence. This quote by Nishitani was also somewhere in my dissertation, so I went looking for it. My eyes fell on one statement after another about the fundamental sameness of life and death. This dual perspective of life and death is the true vision of reality. Liberation consists in letting go of yourself and living *Ohne Warum!* [Without a why]. A selfless surrender to existence as it is. My thoughts wandered to Ikkyu's *Skeletons,* a medieval text by a Buddhist monk interspersed with vivid illustrations of dancing skeletons. Memories of a stained-glass window in the Münster Church in Bern titled "*Totentanz,*" death dance, also surfaced. These ancient Eastern and Western works of art, full of dancing dead, chillingly depict the inextricable entanglement of life and death.

Dancing with the living

In a way, my life is itself a dance with the dead. Few nights go by that I don't dream about my parents, or my brother, or my beloved Peter. In my dreams, they are still alive. Sometimes, I feel guilty for not visiting them for a long time. Sometimes they are unreachable. I search but cannot find them. Peter is back with his wife, or too busy with his work. Mimi, my Zen teacher, also appears regularly, just risen from the dead, with a deathly pale face. The Tiltenberg, the estate where I lived with her but which was sold years ago, is also still there. Sometimes completely converted into a beautiful center, where the old treasures are still housed. Valuable books in the library, porcelain tea sets from Grail ladies of noble birth in the attic. Sometimes it is a ruin, where everything nevertheless still takes place: Zen retreats in the chapel with the Indian Zen teacher Ama Samy, who still wears his salmon-colored kimono. I Googled him briefly; it seems that he is still alive. Born in Burma in 1936, so he must be well into his eighties now.

Homesickness for people and places from the past plays tricks on me, not only at night. Strangely enough, I still have the idea that I can yet find something of the past in old places. My most recent visit to Ermelo made me realize that this is an illusion. Everything the same and yet everything different. The past lives inside me. In the real world I cannot go back to it.

The only option I have is to start over. As long as I live, breathe and can reflect, I can entrust myself to new people. By loving them and showing myself to them, I am reborn every day. I want to dance with the living; the dead will dance by themselves in me. Hannah Arendt writes:

> *The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.*[41]

I was not born to die but to begin. To be born anew every day. Contrary to Nishitani's double perspective of life-*sive*-death and the motto *memento mori*, remember you must die, often depicted in Christianity, I decide to turn toward the living. Those who breathe; breath. As long as I live, I can begin again and each time entrust myself to new others. Being reborn together, including the dead in me. I can tell about them, bring them to life. Giving them a face for my loved ones who have not known my previous loved ones. Together becoming and being part of a ceaseless flow of life. Breathing and turning toward the living, being willing to start over again and again, is an important building block for communities with a heart.

PART 4

Breathing Space[1]

11 Being silent and speaking

Profound physical experiences bring disruption, but they also point to what really matters. As long as we breathe, we can turn toward other living beings. We can also give new life to others who have passed on. Our voices can make their voices heard again. Breathing, intimate and close, yet also like a soft whispering wind or a roaring storm, surrounding everything, takes the place of an infinite God far above the earth.

For me, running is prayer, a ritual of breathing. I put on special clothes, a band around my head so my hair doesn't blow into my eyes. In my old, worn-out running shoes, I just run, breathing in and out. After three-quarters of an hour, I am reborn.

Breath and its rituals brought me back to my Zen Buddhist guides and traveling companions. Mimi, my Zen teacher, and my years with her at the Tiltenberg. Her quiet, seated posture during a Zen retreat was like a rock in the turbulent waves of my still raw wounds and grief in those years.

Breath also brought me back to the philosophers of the Kyoto School. Their understanding of abstract philosophical concepts is certainly the equal of Western philosophers, but the foundation is physical, the breathing body. The journal *The Eastern Buddhist* devoted an entire issue in the spring of 1992 to "In Memoriam Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990)." The first article, by Ueda Shizuteru (1926–2019), was entitled "My teacher." It affected me deeply at the time.

Nishitani, Ueda says, was deeply rooted in the philosophical and religious traditions of the East but also a well-informed student of Western thought, from the early Greek philosophers to contemporary thinkers in Europe and America. His philosophical quest was personal and existential, leading him on a path where nihilism can be overcome by fathoming its depths.[2]

According to Ueda, there is much more to say about Nishitani than what can be read in the collected works he left behind. Those who were fortunate enough to study with him have been profoundly affected by the unforgettable impact of their encounters with him. "The words of wisdom he imparted to us, the expressions on his face, the silences, the piercing illumination of

his insights, the force of his personality, all of it arising ultimately from the wellsprings of life itself."[3]

Nearly thirty years after the death of his own teacher Nishida Kitaro (1875–1945), Nishitani said, "Even now I tremble when I think of him." He has always remained in a face-to-face encounter with his teacher. Now, a similar encounter with him begins for us, his students, Ueda writes. There are many experiences to remember, but one stands out. He was still a young student when he accompanied Nishitani on a trip to Mount Koya. They stayed at a Shingon temple. One evening, it was already getting dark but he saw no light on in Nishitani's room. Yet it did not appear that he had left. Ueda wondered what he was doing and walked to his room to ask him something. In a transparent darkness, the air seemed filled with electricity, and he saw the still, upright silhouette of his teacher sitting in Zen meditation. Nishitani stood up and turned on the light. As soon as Ueda saw his familiar face, he felt at ease again. It was the first time Ueda had been exposed to the phenomenon of *zazen*, sitting Zen meditation.[4]

In the remainder of the article, Ueda sketches his teacher's impressive intellectual achievements, but concludes that his thinking is only part of the story. An American theologian told him that he paid Nishitani a visit. As a gift, he brought a book of landscape photographs. He was most impressed by the deep intention with which Nishitani studied the book. It opened up another time, another place, a deep reality that was renewed from moment to moment.[5]

A year and a half have passed since he died. Both his presence and his absence reach out ever further. Ueda concludes his "In Memoriam" with a koan from the "Hekiganroku."

Verdant mountains
In the distance
Unfold endlessly,
One behind another.

Verdant mountains unfold in the distance, row after row. Many people who have gone before us have given voice to their passion and desire. Breathing space is far more expansive than our individual breath. Yet our breath and voice remain a crucial part of the great flow of life. We are called to add something unique to the magnificent riches of life.

Learning to speak

Jacques van Ginneken, a contemporary of Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro and founder of the Grail Movement, was also a well-known linguist who held a prominent position in the Dutch linguistic world. Among his favorite subjects of study was the teaching of the native language, especially sentence analysis. In 1917, he wrote an original language book for secondary education and teacher training, entitled *The Story of a Toddler.* In it, he describes Keesje's language development, emphasizing the growth of his syntax.[6]

In an addendum to the Internet edition of *The Story of a Toddler,* I read that Keesje's identity was discovered in 1996. Keesje was based on Jan de Josselin de Jong (1913–1986) from Voorschoten. His parents meticulously chronicled their son's language development in several notebooks. These were later found in the home of Jan de Josselin de Jong's widow.

Little Keesje/Jan and his parents moved me. One hundred years after Keesje, my oldest grandson was born. A century ago, parents and perhaps grandparents rejoiced as they do today over the first laugh, the first sounds, babbling, bursts of laughter, and tongue, lip and throat sounds. Fascinated by the wonder of new life entrusted to them, Keesje's parents lovingly wrote down every miracle their newborn produced. Their notebooks formed the basis for a study of language development by Van Ginneken. In the introduction, Van Ginneken writes:

> *I have come to tell you a very peculiar story about a little toddler named Keesje. It is the story of the first three years of his life, and everything actually happened exactly in the way I am going to tell it. Only the names are changed. So who knows, maybe you know Keesje. It might even be you yourself. Because without Keesje noticing, his mother wrote everything down for me. And I have now reworked his mother's notebooks into a coherent story. This story is very important in itself because you can learn from it: what wonderful creatures little children really are, what mysterious scenes take place in their little heads, what discoveries they make, one after the other, and how funny their whole view of the world is.*

The joyous delight over the first cries, laughs, words, and phrases, along with Keesje and his parents, have long since been swallowed up in the ocean of desolate silence into which, according to Nietzsche, all living things must fall. Nishitani's double perspective of life and death also applies here: "A hundred years hence, not one of these people now walking in the Ginza will

be alive." Yet the joy of the miracle of a fresh beginning springs forth from every page of *The Story of a Toddler*. The unique and new that entered the world with Keesje is enthusiastically welcomed, greeted and studied.

What is remarkable about a small child is that it cannot talk. In the first chapter, "The speechless child," Van Ginneken explains why this is. The child has no consciousness yet. Also, its lungs, which supply the air for the voice like a bellows for an organ, cannot yet breathe deeply and regularly enough to supply the air as gradually as it is needed for speech. The complicated machinery of muscle and cartilage in the throat is still weak and slimy, and so the vocal cords, which are in the middle of it, cannot yet be adequately stretched. Also, the uvula, tongue and lips are not yet nimble enough for articulation movements. The teeth, against which the tongue must rest or strike for most sounds, have yet to appear. But there are two things a child can do right away: cry and suck. For both, *breathing* is essential.

After three months, the child begins to laugh. At first only with the corners of its mouth raised and eyes shining, but bursts of laughter soon follow, the very beginning of speaking.

> *At first the laughter was nothing but a twist of the mouth and the glow of happy eyes, as we already heard from the mother's own account. Soon it becomes a chattering or a series of hiccupping sounds like a string of beads coming out of the throat, and the whole child shakes up and down with those plosives of laughter. The cry was always a long-held vowel or diphthong, continually drawn out; with the burst of laughter the child begins to break up or articulate its sounds in the original sense of the Latin word articulus, meaning part or member. Think for example of the three parts of our fingers. The syllable is born.*[7]

Soon, the child begins to babble, a game with the throat, mouth and lips. And don't think it's monotonous. The child's concert has numerous sounds: əvə, awa, wə, wa, wawa, əmə məmə, brrr, pdè, biwè, mba, bèbè, bob, brra, mi, wi, ja, jamja, nènè, na, nja, jè, eldè, edi, diethè, pia, pia, ià, bià, biéja. We cannot write down all the sounds because our script does not have letters for them, but we can compare them with whispering and blowing, humming and cackling, screaming and buzzing, slogging and mumbling, snorting and growling, whistling and chirping, spitting and hissing. However, these gibberish sounds have no meaning at all, according to Van Ginneken.

Van Ginneken not only writes about Keesje's language development but also interposes "pieces of verse and prose" by others. One such piece is from *The Story of My Life* by the American Helen Keller, which appeared in a Dutch edition in 1908. Helen Keller was born healthy in 1880.

> *They tell me I walked the day I was a year old. My mother had just taken me out of the bath-tub and was holding me in her lap, when I was suddenly attracted by the flickering shadows of leaves that danced in the sunlight on the smooth floor. I slipped from my mother's lap and almost ran toward them. The impulse gone, I fell down and cried for her to take me up in her arms.*[8]

These happy days were not to last. "One brief spring, musical with the song of robin and mockingbird, one summer rich in fruit and roses, one autumn of gold and crimson sped by and left their gifts at the feet of an eager delighted child." When Helen was nineteen months old, she contracted meningitis, which left her deaf and blind. Slowly, she became accustomed to the silence and darkness that surrounded her and forgot that things had ever been different, "until she came – my teacher – who would free my mind." It was three months before she would turn seven. She and her mother had already developed a form of sign communication, but her teacher was teaching her a "finger-letter language." They have been practicing words for a while. For example, she can write the words d-o-l-l and *cup* and *water*, but she does not understand what she is writing. In anger and frustration, she throws her porcelain doll on the floor and breaks it. Her teacher takes her for a walk in the garden.

> *We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled the word water into the other, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as if of something forgotten – a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! I left the well-house, eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new*

> *thought. As we returned to the house, every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me.*[9]

Entering the house, Helen remembered the broken doll. She felt her way to the fireplace, picked up the pieces, and tried in vain to put them back together. Her eyes filled with tears as she realized what she had done; for the first time she felt regret and remorse. That same day, she learned several new words: mother, father, sister, teacher – "words that were to make the world blossom for me," like Aaron's rod. She went to sleep that night a happy child, rethinking everything the day had brought her and "for the first time longed for a new day to come."[10]

Speaking and meaning

Helen Keller's story forms the introduction to the chapter "Children's First Words." Here, Van Ginneken argues that making sounds, as animals also do, is not yet speech. When children are about six months old they begin to show signs of fright, amazement and surprise "in high-pitched squeals; and that gee, sh, ha, always indicate exuberant fun; while oo, nene, on the other hand, are connected to horror or bad temper, and ma ma ma ma with whining." However, this is not yet language! Animals also make these sounds. And animals produce very different sounds when they are in pain than when they are excited. Dogs howl in pain, bark and growl out of fear and anger, yelp with desire, as when the master brings them food, but this is not talking. Real talking is saying something purposefully, conveying a meaningful message.

> *Real speaking only begins when the words are spoken with a clear and conscious intention, i.e., when the spoken sounds are no longer mere play or music or vaguely conscious signals, but become the intended expression of human consciousness; and animals never get there, but the child, after all the aforementioned training and preparation, gets there very quickly.*[11]

Don't little children, animals, trees, plants, rivers, seas and mountains speak? Is language what makes us human? Hannah Arendt also emphasizes that *narrativity* is uniquely human. All living things share the sense that they are different from each other. Only humans can express these differences and distinguish themselves from others. Speaking and acting reveal this

remarkable variety. Humans cannot only communicate *something*, such as hunger or thirst, affection or enmity or fear; they can also communicate *themselves*. No human being can relinquish this and at the same time remain human.[12] A life without speaking and acting is literally dead to the world; it is not a human life because it is no longer lived among human beings. Here, too, Arendt distinguishes between animal and human sounds, and the urge to *speak*. The language of animals – sounds, signs, gestures, would also be sufficient to serve all the human needs of self and species preservation. It would also suffice to communicate the moods and emotions of the soul. However, it is not enough to find meaning.

The urge to speak is implicitly a search for meaning, which is not the same as a search for truth. Arendt distinguishes between truth and meaning, knowing and thinking. *Truth* is about knowledge, knowing the world. The questions raised by the desire for knowledge can, in principle, all be answerable through common sense. *Thinking* seeks meaning. The questions raised by thinking, questions of meaning, are all unanswerable through common sense or through its refinement that we call science.[13]

By asking unanswerable questions of meaning, humans become questioning beings. It is not the thirst for knowledge but the hunger for meaning that drives thinking. If people ever lost this hunger and stopped asking all those unanswerable questions on which every civilization is built, they would not be able to create works of art. "The business of thinking is like Penelope's web; it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before. For the need to think can never be stilled by 'wise men'; it can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts I had yesterday will satisfy this need only to the extent that I want and am able to think them anew."[14]

Speaking and meaning are closely related. "The sheer naming of things, the creation of words, is the human way of *appropriating* and, as it were, disalienating the world into which, after all, each of us is born as a newcomer and stranger."[15] Speaking enables us to act, to create a human world together.

Silence and meaning

The Eastern philosophers I studied for my dissertation saw a different connection between language, speech and meaning. They were taken with breathing rituals other than those of tongue, lip and throat sounds: sitting quietly, inhaling and exhaling, being still, walking, looking at the beauty of

a flower, listening to the gurgling waters of a river. Immediate physical experiences dissolve the distinction between ourselves and the surrounding reality; we are part of a greater whole. Anything we try to say about these experiences only alienates us. Words only distance you from what matters. There is a reason the Zen tradition has very different tools for awakening students. Of course, these philosophers used many words, entire books full of them, to explain what they were referring to. At the same time, they put their work into perspective; words can only point in a direction. At most, they are a finger pointing to the moon.

Speech and silence, language and wordlessness, create tension when juxtaposed. Van Ginneken follows a toddler in his language development. Breath against the uvula and making noises form the beginning of sounds, but that is not yet talking. Talking begins when words are said with a conscious intention.

For Hannah Arendt, the urge to speak and act has to do with our search for meaning in life. Our breath and voice point beyond ourselves, to the other and to the shared world. This dialogical search never ends; meaning is never fixed. We have to start fresh every day. For both Van Ginneken and Arendt, speaking is crucial to making us inhabitants of a shared world. Purposefully saying something to others enables us to act.

Eastern philosophers claim the opposite: they point to the inadequacy of words. Real meaning cannot be captured in words; words alienate us from immediate experience.

What can be said and what can be heard? What speaking gives birth to meaning and what silence opens new meaning? Who listens to whom? Who may speak and who must be silent? What is hidden under a blanket of silence? What voices do not sound? How can we learn to understand the voices on the margins, of women, children, animals, plants, water? What riches do they bring us?

In my search for building blocks for communities with a heart, I decide to include silence and speaking. Silence is important for descending into the depths of our disruptive experiences and exploring the unfamiliar territory we have entered. Multi-voiced speaking and listening opens other perspectives and provides a basis for new direction and possibilities for action.

12 Dark and light

A busy year was drawing to a close. In the weeks before Christmas, another total lockdown was declared, just like the year before. The festive weeks at the end of the year would again be without Christmas celebrations and outings. Everyone just staying home, walking, running, playing, eating and sleeping. As a consolation, I went looking for a Christmas tree with the oldest. In the preceding years,we had decorated a small wooden tree. Super responsible and also quite cozy, but the kids wanted a real Christmas tree. The lights are on in the afternoon when it gets dark, and also in the morning when it is still dark.

On the shortest day of the year 2021, I went for a run in the sunny freezing cold and then spent the rest of the day reading a book titled *Modernity and Transcendence.*[16] Staf Hellemans, my former colleague, is one of the editors; the volume was presented a month before. Themes from his farewell address *The Great Transformation of Religion* recur here. I read it with an eye to the Remonstrants. The number of members and friends is declining so rapidly, and the average age of those who remain is so high, that the Remonstrant ship is in danger of sailing off the ocean into infinity. In our society, many people hunger for meaning, depth and connection. The offerings in today's churches do not reach these people. What difference can my students make here?

Three questions

The book revisits a discussion that began in 1996 with an essay by noted Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?"[17] In this essay, Taylor posed the question of how one could live a Catholic life in contemporary society. Twenty-five years later, this question was presented to six philosophers, theologians, sociologists and anthropologists from different religious backgrounds. They were asked to answer three questions: "How do you see modernity?" "What is the relationship between religion and the transcendent?" And "What role can faith play in modernity?"

In the volume, the editors clarify their questions to the authors. By "modernity" they mean the type of society that emerged around 1800 from

industrial, political and cultural revolutions. Today, the sense that there is a crisis of modernity is widespread. It is, therefore, important to gather visions of what is happening in modernity, where it will take us, and what we can do about it.

For the second question, the editors take Taylor's view of religion as a starting point. Taylor argued twenty-five years ago that human flourishing – *exclusive humanism* – is insufficient as the only orientation for our lives. We need religious visions and practices that point beyond the human. He refers to this "beyond the human" as the transcendent. How do the authors of this volume see the transcendent? And how can religion transform its intuition for the transcendent into social change, and what are the limits, if any? How can we imagine the critical and mutual cooperation between religion and secular traditions?[18]

The third question is an extension of the second. How can Christian faith and modernity mutually enrich each other? Taylor compared the exchange between Christian faith and modernity to the challenge faced by seventeenth-century Jesuit Matteo Ricci as he sought to spread the gospel in China. We are challenged now, like Ricci was then in China, to ask ourselves what in modern culture encourages the promotion of faith and where, on the contrary, the rejection of the transcendent is apparent.

The three questions seemed to me relevant to Remonstrants as well. I rendered them as follows: In what world do we live? If we humans cannot find direction, meaning and fulfillment in and from ourselves, where and how can we find them? And: how can we, as long-standing communities in dialogue with secular traditions, be relevant to our present world?

The reflections of the thinkers took up more than a hundred pages of the volume. I flipped through the contributions and then focused on Charles Taylor's response to the six thinkers.

Analyses of times past

Taylor takes the opportunity to outline his earlier analyses of the great religious changes in the West in recent centuries. Faith has become a *choice* and no longer a matter of course. Even if you have been religious from childhood and your whole family is religious and you attend a religious school, you know other people, equally or even more intelligent, who have made a different choice.

In addition, there is a *twofold disenchantment*. Our ancestors in 1500 lived in a world filled with spirits and moral forces. Some were evil and brought bad luck; others could protect you and bring prosperity. Most of us no longer experience the world this way. We have become desensitized to the magic of the world and things.

The universe consisted of numerous spheres, all with higher or lower status: planets far removed from the earth, stars, moon and sun, god, angels, a devil. The hierarchical order was reflected in the social order: clergy distinct from laity, emperor, king and nobles over against the common people.

This picture of the world around us as a place of spiritual and magical forces has evaporated. Hierarchical spheres and orders have also fallen away. We no longer understand these experiences and have become locked inside ourselves in a world ruled by impersonal laws of cause and effect.

Churches provided cohesion in society. You belonged to a family but also to a church. An extraordinary variety of spiritual and other activities defined life: daily liturgy for Catholics, the celebration of seasonal festivals, rites of passage at birth, marriage and death. You went on pilgrimages, did works of charity, or prayed to Mary. Not everyone participated in everything, but it was all seen as part of the life of the Church.

In place of this, the *ethic of authenticity* has emerged. As a human being, you want to find and realize your own ideal way of being human. Detached from religious communities, you step into the world and discover your own path.[19]

With the disentanglement of Church and society, more and more people are searching for meaning, and many of them are seeking to connect with forms of transcendence. They are trying to find a faith that speaks to them. However, according to Taylor, the Church is failing to play a significant role here.

Gap

On one side we see young people looking for meaning and connection, on the other side warehouses full of spiritual riches. They do not meet; it seems impossible to quench the thirst at the source. Seekers feel neither welcome nor invited to talk about what they are looking for. They encounter only the defense of old truths and moral positions that often do not match their experiences.[20]

Taylor writes with an eye to the Roman Catholic Church, but it is not unique. Remonstrants also struggle with a gigantic contradiction between the established order – "this is our way" – and young people searching for meaning. They may be less dogmatic, but they nevertheless cling to many old-fashioned forms and customs. Remonstrants have two additional handicaps. They are not a large worldwide people's church but an elite Dutch church of the upper middle class. And they rely heavily on an individualist, intellectual way of believing while neglecting experience and rituals. For many seekers, this makes the gap even larger.

Ecumenism of friendship

How can we learn to believe anew rather than still believe? Faith is like a journey, an adventure, a point of departure, not a point of arrival. The journey also brings difficulties, darkness and doubt. Taylor advocates an "ecumenism of friendship," a deep and patient conversation between the Church and seekers of different traditions, old and not so old, rich and poor, believers and non-believers, an attempt at mutual understanding. Such a conversation goes beyond simply agreeing not to attack or mock one another. It is the expression of a profound desire to understand one another. In the midst of differences, such a dialogue can lead to friendships and solidarity.[21]

The perspective of the transcendent can be helpful here. Transcendence has several meanings. It points to something "beyond the human world, or the cosmos," but also to the discovery of a whole new standpoint from which the existing order or society can be criticized or repudiated. These two meanings can be linked. The place or being beyond the cosmos can be the new place from which critique of the present becomes possible.[22]

What I read from Taylor connected to the classes I had been teaching for years on the many philosophers and sociologists who were shedding light on the ecclesiastical darkness of the past century. For some reason, the message didn't seem to get through, even to the Remonstrants. We realize that we no longer connect with new generations; the numbers don't lie. Yet, as Remonstrants, we see ourselves as rich with "the gold we have in our hands" and put our main efforts into a smarter marketing strategy for the old ways. How can we learn to listen better to what is going on in our world? Could the transcendent offer a perspective that challenges us as a Church?

Christmas

Restricted to our homes, we tried to make the best of it. The children's Christmas game took place online. Strangely enough, it was fun, not as fun as in real life, but still … The glimpses into the various living rooms and the expectant faces of the children created a sense of connection. Joseph played Joseph. He didn't have to say anything, just hammer on a piece of wood.

I also watched the Christmas Eve service online. The next morning, halfway through the second online Christmas service, fatigue struck. I turned off the computer, made dinner and fetched the grandchildren.

In the evening we all ate together; a theologian friend joined us. With this we reached the maximum number of guests allowed. Before dinner, the friend played hide-and-seek in the house with the youngest. The oldest, normally glued to a computer screen, asked, "Can I join in?" The littlest one found it super exciting and wanted to be found as quickly as possible each time.

After dinner, we worked on a Christmas jigsaw puzzle and, during the *grand dessert,* I asked the children what we celebrate at Christmas.

"Jesus is born, and Mary is his mother and Joseph played Joseph," was the youngest's reply.

"Why is his birth celebrated all over the world?" I asked.

"Jesus is God," Joseph replied.

"Who is God?"

"God is God."

"What do the theologians sitting here at the table say? You've spent years studying this," my daughter asked. "Tell me: Who is God?"

"I agree with Joseph, God is God and beyond that it's a mystery," said our family friend.

"If it's a secret, you can't say anything else about it," said four-year-old Chris, and with that the conversation about what we celebrate at Christmas was at an end.

The candles that you can blow out and relight were more interesting. The oldest demonstrated to the youngest how a candle catches fire again by holding a lit match about fifteen centimeters above it. They played with fire, breath and light until it was time to go home through the dark.

A Christmas Eve in 1805

The next day I became engrossed in a Christmas celebration from over two hundred years ago.

In 1805, the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) celebrated Christmas with friends and family. He was thirty-seven years old and had had a difficult autumn. His seven-year relationship with the married Eleonore Grunow had ended in October. By the end of the year, he had worked through the heartbreak. The storm had not broken him but had strengthened his religiosity and moral will. Friendship had been healing and invigorating for him. It was mostly women to whom he opened his inner self, according to D. Carl Schwarz, who wrote the introduction to the 1869 edition of *Die Weihnachtsfeier – ein Gespräch*, "Christmas Eve Celebration – a Dialogue." The first edition appeared in 1806. Schleiermacher wrote it in a few weeks. The German text was difficult to read; I had only been able to obtain the 1869 edition in Gothic script. Schwarz's introduction helped.[23]

The Christmas celebration in 1805 transports the reader into a circle of friendship, domesticity, merriment, jest, music and gifts. A world of conciliatory harmony is revealed. The small book is reminiscent of Plato's dialogues, which Schleiermacher translated at that time. A group of lively personalities is having a meaningful conversation; it is about something. Men, women and a child have gathered to celebrate Christmas Eve. The room is beautifully decorated. The curtains have been left open so that the bright snow reminds them of the season.

The women introduce everything gracefully. They provide the music, and when the conversations get a little sharp in tone, they make conciliatory remarks. The conversations are about all sorts of things. About the child Sophie and how she will develop. As long as she does not enter the convent where she would have to wear an unattractive habit and be torn away from the beauty and joy of happy family life. They also talk about religion and art, the rigidity of the Church, true joy, and much more.[24]

The women begin to tell stories about previous Christmas celebrations. The introduction does not say what the women's stories are about. The main content of the book comes only afterwards, when the men speak in contrast to the women's stories, not "Erzählungen," stories, but "Reden," speeches. Schwarz writes that the basic ideas of Schleiermacher's later Christology become visible in these speeches.

With the help of Schwarz's introduction, I read the beginning of the *Weihnachtsfeier* and flipped through to the speeches. I skipped the dialogues and the women's stories for now. Four men, Leonhardt, Ernst, Eduard and Joseph have conversations with each other about the meaning of Christmas. I found it interesting to see how Schleiermacher unfolded the contours of a liberal Christian faith. A reasonable faith nourished by scientific understanding. Morality, existence or ethics, with Christ as more than an example. And a lived piety grounded in a deep awareness of the ineffable mystery of life.

According to the critical, nonbelieving Leonhardt, Christmas celebrations cannot be about the historical birth of Christ. The historical foundations of the life of Jesus are far too uncertain. Especially the birth narratives are full of contradictions, so that cannot be the essence of Christmas. The power of Christianity, he claims, should not be linked too closely to the earthly life of Jesus. He wants to interpret Christmas mainly symbolically: the child, the night and the light that is lit are images of spiritual life and being reborn.

Ernst, speaking second, emphasizes religious feeling and the importance of a faith community in clarifying the meaning of the subjective feelings in light of Savior and redemption. A divine child was born, the Savior. He was already at birth what ordinary people become only through rebirth. The joy of regaining higher life is central to Christmas.[25]

Ernst does not refute Leonhardt's criticism but adds to it. Even if the historical traces of Jesus' life are insufficient, the celebration does not depend on them. It is about the joy of the Savior, who brings the experience of an uplifting existence to every person. The faith community is important for sharing and clarifying these experiences with one another.

Eduard, the next speaker, has a fondness for John's Gospel, which contains no birth narrative at all. For him, it is about the Incarnate Word. We celebrate ourselves; human nature seen from the perspective of the divine principle. Christ is none other than "*der Mensch an sich*," the original human being. The eternal Being in the ever-changing Becoming, the unity of the divine and the earthly. This unity is also in us, but only in the form of "becoming." It is the task of each individual to elevate human nature into eternal Being. This is possible only in a living community, the Church that is a being and a becoming.

Last to speak is Joseph. For him, all this speaking is foolish. All forms are too rigid, all words too dull and cold to express the mystery. Like a child, he

can only smile and celebrate with speechless joy. At Christmas, all people are like children, which is why he loves them so much. Jesus, too, saw children as his friends. The whole evening, with all the trifles and delights, the play and singing – it was one loving kiss from Joseph to the world. "My joy together with you will be like a greeting from my lips. Come, let's sing some more!"[26]

The women's stories

After reading the men's speeches, I went looking for a modern edition of the *Weihnachtsfeier,* hoping to be able to take in the rest a little easier. While I was searching, an article by Julia Lamm on Schleiermacher's Christmas celebration caught my eye. She argues that many writers on the *Weihnachtsfeier* comment mainly on the last part, the men's speeches. I recognized this because Schwarz's introduction, which I had followed as a guide, did exactly the same thing. Typical of the many interpretations over the centuries is the nineteenth-century view of David Schenkel that the women hardly have anything meaningful to say.[27]

According to Julia Lamm (b. 1961), this is incorrect, if only because sixty percent of the text would then not matter. She advocates viewing *Christmas Eve*, as she translated the text from German into English, as a whole consisting of five parts: the gifts, the conversations, the stories of the women Ernestine, Agnes and Karoline, the speeches of the men Leonhardt, Ernst, and Eduard, and Joseph's mystical wordlessness. The different parts reinforce each other and form a surprisingly composed whole. A much greater richness is illuminated than if only the abstract speeches of the men were taken seriously.

Aided by her insights, a very different reading experience of that Christmas Eve from two hundred years ago opened up for me. Atmosphere, feeling, contemplation, silence, jest, equality of men and women, the originality of children, concrete bodily experiences, as well as reflections on our experiences are all important to Schleiermacher.

When the *gifts* are admired, Karoline, a young woman in the party, takes her seat behind the piano. Eduard, the host and Ernestine's husband, and Frederike, who is engaged to Ernst, sing a few songs. The others listen and let their souls be touched. When they stop singing, there is a subdued, quiet moment in which the love for the higher and for each other is palpable.[28]

Joy emerges again and again out of the subsequent *conversations*. This shows that Christian piety is not lived in isolation but is communal and social. A loving community is the vehicle of joy; women and children are active members of this community. The dialogues show that the women are equal conversation partners. They feel free to express and discuss their ideas and emotions. What is striking is the trust between the friends and lovers and the respect for inner freedom.[29]

The women's stories are at the center, they are the heart of the *Weihnachtsfeier*. They are literally at the center of the text. They are concrete, deeply human and are about life itself: about love between mothers and children, but also about loss and deeply felt pain. In remembering the joy of the newborn child, the tragedy of what will happen later is also palpable.

Ernestine tells of a Christmas Eve long ago when she herself was a child. The church was sparsely lit, drab walls, a dull sermon. Suddenly, in a secluded alcove in the church, she sees a young woman with a baby on her lap. They radiate a friendly calm. The woman's eyes are lowered in loving attention to the child. The child is lively but also quiet and seems to be in a kind of half-conscious love conversation with the mother. "It was like a living image of Mary and the Christmas child."[30]

Ernestine, irresistibly drawn to the scene, asks the young mother if she can give her and the child something; she has some small treats with her. "Today, everyone gives, all for the sake of the child," the mother replies. Later in the story, it turns out that the now adult Ernestine and the mother have become friends. The child of the time later died on the battlefield as a young man.

At Leonard's request for something less tragic, Agnes' story is about a Christmas Eve at the home of her brother, who is a minister. On the spot, it was decided to baptize the newborn nephew. Following old custom, they all laid hands on the child. It felt as if streams of heavenly love and joy converged on the child's head and heart, to flow from there in all directions. They shared the feeling that they were helping new life awaken.[31] Religion is expressed in the warm circle of friends and family. It forms a strong contrast to the chilly, dark church in the first story. In Agnes' story, the mother is presented as a prophet. She already sees in the small child the man or woman who will become significant in the world. At the same time, there is an emphasis on the communal love needed for the child to become

significant. Everyone who was present at the baptism is a witness, promising to be present with the child as it grows in Christian faith.[32]

In the third story, the theme of death and mourning returns. Karoline spends Christmas Eve with her friend Charlotte. The joy is overshadowed by the critical illness of her youngest child, her favorite. It seems she will have to give him back as a divine child. As if by a miracle, the child recovers. The deepest sorrows and mourning of the *Stabat Mater* end in heavenly joy. Two children are given to her: her darling and the Christmas child. On the feast of the new birth of the world, her child is also born again. "Yes, he is alive, there is no doubt about it," Charlotte said. She bent over the child, hardly daring to touch him or press his little hand to her lips. Her child was a gift of grace, a heavenly child, she had already given him up to heaven.[33]

Now, it is the men's turn. The women are not sent away to another room. On the contrary, they drink with the men, ask questions and make critical comments. Finally, Joseph gives an anti-speech; what this celebration is about cannot be said in words. Joseph brings us back to the beginning of the story, uniting the different voices in a "mystical 'kiss'" and the invitation to sing joyfully some more.

What is special about the *Weihnachtsfeier* is that it embraces women and children, includes lively and mutual exchange and involvement, shows the intimacy of a Christian household and includes the unspoken as essential. Companionship, domesticity, jest, dialogue, stories of mothers and their children, Mary and her child, promise and tragedy and promise again: they all interlock and reinforce each other. Concrete experiences of birth, love, death and mourning are the source of more abstract reflections in the search for the meaning of it all. Ultimately, words cannot express all this. A kiss of love and singing for the joy of being together is what is left.

On the threshold of a new year

Musing on the 1805 Christmas Eve and the love of mothers for their children that is central to this narrative, I read that Joan Didion had died on Dec. 23, 2021, just before Christmas. Joan Didion (1934–2021) was the first *Stabat Mater* in this search for the courage to be vulnerable and the importance of communities with a heart. Deeply saddened that her child's heart no longer beat, she wrote about her own broken heart and the need to keep

it beating. Who else will remember her first smiles, cries, words and steps? Who else will keep her alive?

Between Christmas and New Year's Eve, we drove along an illuminated farm tour. It was one of the few "Covid-19-proof" vacation outings that could take place in your own car. Staying seated, not getting out anywhere, windows were allowed to be open. It was a route of about fifty kilometers on dark country roads through the Gelder Valley. We were not the only ones looking for something to do during the Christmas vacation. A long trail of slow cars lit up the dark farm roads. Every now and then, we saw a Christmas tree or a tractor decorated with lights standing in a meadow. The highlight was a goat farm, with campfires in the yard and at least a hundred white goats in the open stalls, shaking their heads with flapping ears. After two hours of traffic jams, we gave up. I drove into a parking lot to let the kids pee outside in the dark. The youngest cried when he was back in the car. He gets car sick easily, but fortunately he fell asleep. Back home around nine, strangely enough feeling cheerful after this inauspicious Covid-19 Christmas holiday adventure.

The long trail of cars in the dark after Christmas, with a family in each car in its own bubble, was a sharp contrast to the warm, cozy domesticity of a Christmas celebration two hundred years ago. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor urges an *ecumenism of friendship*. Have conversations with one another, even if you are very different! See faith as a journey, an adventure, a starting point. Dare to face the darkness, the doubt and the difficulties, they are part of any journey. How can we answer this call to friendship in a world where contact with others is seen as dangerous and threatening?

13 Friendships

Blue Monday, the third Monday in January, is traditionally known as the most depressing day of the year. Holidays over, the days dark and cold, long work weeks ahead. In the early hours, I set out in the dark for the Free University in Amsterdam for the promotion of one of my PhD students. I hadn't been there for a while; the university had been open only on a very limited basis for months. When I arrived, a doorman welcomed me and handed me a face mask. In the nearly deserted Coffee Corner, I ordered a cappuccino. I had supervised my doctoral student for seven years, together with the professor from the Mennonite seminary. The student had undertaken a comparative study of the experience of secular group meals and the Anabaptist communion. The Mennonite professor supervised the systematic theological sections. I supervised the phenomenological, empirical and anthropological sections. Fortunately, the student answered the examiners' questions better than she had during the test promotion a week before. Then, she had scared me and her other supervisor half to death by responding to every question with a blackout and merely sighing and stammering. Now, she responded smoothly and appropriately to the sometimes difficult questions she was asked.

For the rest, it was a bizarre event. The chairman of the promotion ceremony who had replaced the dean was a former classmate of mine from when I was a student at the Free University. He and I were the only two professors physically present. The PhD candidate had been allowed to invite ten family members and friends. Four fellow PhD students had entered the otherwise empty auditorium without permission. In my gown with beret and face mask, I felt as if I were tucked into a burka. The members of the promotion committee were all participating online. The promotion formula was spoken over the screen by the professor from the Mennonite seminary. I presented the degree certificate to my first PhD student at the Free University. In the evening, there was an online promotion party, which, like the online children's Christmas game, was quite fun. Thus, I survived Blue Monday relatively well. Still, in the following days I continued to feel bewildered by

the stark contrast between the content of the dissertation and the hybrid defense in that large, virtually empty auditorium. It made me realize even more deeply how much the world had changed for students.

The dissertation compares meals at a rowing club, Freedom Meals on May 5, Dutch Liberation Day, *Eat to Meet* meals, and the Anabaptist communion. In all these meals, form and aesthetics play an important role. Beauty matters at meals, every detail contributes something. Attention to the food is important, as is attention to those who prepare and serve the meal, attention to the diners, and attention to the conversations at the table. People come together, relax and connect with each other. Eating together enhances the atmosphere and differences are more easily bridged. Play and seriousness go hand in hand. "According to interviewees, a meal should be an occasion where you can celebrate life and have fun." A meal has something of a game. You try to make something of it. "Something essential" is exchanged, but it should counterbalance the seriousness of life at the same time. Play and celebration are essential to human existence.[34]

People come together to eat, play, celebrate, exchange thoughts and thus share life with each other. Friendships can develop, so essential for reflection on the meaning of life. Who is invited to the table and who is not? In the ecumenism of churches, believers become friends with each other, something that is extremely important, especially in light of history. Exclusion, ostracism and vilification are commonplace when it comes to faith. The Greek word *oikumene* contains the word *oikos,* home. Ecumenism originally meant the inhabited world. Who lives there and who are our friends? Do they include, in principle, all people? What about animals and plants? Not every home is equally welcoming, some are even reluctant when it comes to providing shelter. How far might Charles Taylor's cherished *ecumenism of friendship* extend?

Fellow creatures

Christine Korsgaard (b. 1952) wrote the book *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals.*[35] It caught my eye during a visit to Bern. It was in the window of a philosophy bookstore. I walked in and asked if I could look at it. The woman took the book out of the window and handed it to me. I did not know the author, but, at a first glance, I noticed that the original was pub-

lished in English. I handed the book back and explained that I wanted to read it in English. Immediately after returning home, I ordered it. I was in Bern to pick up a painting. The young artist Alex Doll painted it in the summer of 2020 on the lower balcony of our vacation home in Switzerland. The balcony where bats flutter past you at dusk and an owl calls in the distance. In the afternoon, golden eagles soar high in the sky with their wings spread. If you're lucky, you'll meet ibex, gazelle and diving birds on hikes. We have also occasionally spotted a badger at dawn waddling through our alpine meadow. The house is regularly inhabited by dormice, noisy guests who keep us awake at night.

The artist was painting on our balcony for several hours. All the while, Joseph watched breathlessly. A few days after we returned to the Netherlands that summer, he had the accident. A few months later, my daughter's father told me he wanted to sell the Swiss house. Fortunately, the sale did not go through then, but it made me decide around Christmas to buy the painting. I couldn't pick it up right away because of Covid-19, but I could in the summer. So, a double score: a painting of our beloved valley and a book about animals.

Korsgaard examines supposed differences between humans and animals, asking whether humans are more important than animals. She argues against the superiority of humans, not because humans and animals are equal, but because the comparison is flawed. Something can only be important to *someone*. Humans may very well consider their own lives more important than animals', but the other way around also seems likely. Animals' lives are probably more important to them than people's. For Korsgaard, there is no perspective-free standpoint from which to judge the importance of something or someone. *Life is a good thing*. For animals, food and drink, sexual activity, physical exercise, playing with their children, warmth and comfort are positive goods. Existence is a great good, except when it is bad, or when it is made bad by others.[36]

What is good for ourselves is *absolutely good*. It cannot be denied that what you consider good for yourself is also good for others, including other animals. Korsgaard agrees with the claim that we humans care about and value ourselves in a different way than animals do. However, that does not mean that what happens to us matters more than what happens to our fellow

creatures. The constant temptation, especially for those who are secure and privileged, is to think that those who are less fortunate are also lesser beings, for whom misfortune and tragedy matter less than if it happened to us. It makes no sense to arrange fellow creatures into a hierarchy of importance, because fellow creatures are the entities *for whom* things matter. We should treat animals in such a way that they would agree if they could.

Ultimately, Korsgaard is concerned with the practical treatment of animals: are we entitled to use animals for our own well-being? May we eat them or give them a rotten life because they are only useful for our consumption of eggs and milk or medical tests that benefit us? Drawing on insights from the philosopher Immanuel Kant, she argues that people and animals are different, but that there are well-considered arguments for treating animals as people and people as animals. Kant's ethics propose to treat every human being, every rational being, as an end in itself. Korsgaard proposes treating all living beings as ends in themselves.[37]

Animal lessons

If we treat animals as we do humans, and thus regard them as equals, we may also have something to learn from them. In her book *Wild Rituals,* Caitlin O'Connell (b. 1965) describes what we can learn about rituals from our non-human relatives. For years, she lived among elephants, monkeys, zebras, lions, whales and flamingos and observed their social behaviors. Rituals can help when we are unsure what to do. They provide us with routine in an unpredictable world and hold us together as a community. Animals have extremely rich rituals that connect them deeply to their families and communities. These are similar to our own rituals, which we, however, have often forgotten.[38]

O'Connell has a simple definition of ritual. A ritual is an action, or series of actions, performed in a precise way and repeated often. She describes numerous rituals in different animals: greeting each other, looking each other in the eye for a long time – this strengthens intimacy between lovers as well as between parents and children – rituals of giving, rituals of mourning, rituals of renewal and rituals of migration.

Rituals, whether simple or complex, connect us, strengthen bonds, create order and make us part of a community. They are the glue that binds individuals together. Lack of connection to a community can lead to loneliness and depression. Social media is a dubious blessing. It opens opportunities

for new relationships, but it also fosters isolation, self-criticism and alienation. O'Connell argues for real physical connection, touching, smelling, hearing each other's voices, being together, shouting together, singing each other to sleep, grieving together, going out, bathing, pilgrimaging. The many Covid-19 quarantines have revealed our need for human contact and contact with the world around us. Here, we can learn from the intense ceremonies in wild nature. Thus, we can find healing, self-awareness, community and a deep connection to the world around us.[39]

Student Welfare

Which seekers of meaning could become new conversation partners in *our ecumenism of friendship*? I organized a brainstorm idea with an eye toward possible new friends. Three of the participants worked with students, two as chaplains at universities, the other as a student welfare counselor at a college in Rotterdam. They alerted me to the alarming results of studies on student welfare. I had previously read the summaries of these studies in the newspaper, but that afternoon I read the studies in full. The first, a doctoral study, took place before Covid-19, in 2018.[40] The analyses, as well as the solutions, are based on the field of psychology. What could friendships with animals and the transcendent add here?

Student life, spoken of by many older people as the best time of their lives, was experienced as a difficult and stressful time in 2018. Many young people suffered from performance pressure and loneliness. The longer you study, the worse this gets. Performance pressure and loneliness increase the risk of burnout. But feeling at home within a vocational school, college or university promotes student well-being. It makes you feel safe and at ease. This sense of security allows you to achieve peak performance, but anxiety and isolation prevent this.

Personality traits such as sensitivity to anxiety, hopelessness, impulsivity and thrill-seeking are risk predictors for dropout or delay in finishing one's studies. Early screening for these personality traits can help identify at-risk students.

"Psycho-social literacy programs" constitute an important preventive area of focus. Students are not often open about their problems and do not seek help. Through these programs, they can gain knowledge about the risks they face, learn to ask for help and learn how to strengthen their resilience.

The most important factor for success, however, is a sense of belonging. The researcher recommends making this a priority. Provide a positive and supportive study environment. Organize activities that reinforce the sense of belonging and teach teachers how to support students. This sense of belonging is reinforced by ensuring good online information, as well as by face-to-face encounters.

Covid-19 crisis

In 2018, the year the doctoral student conducted her research, the worst was yet to come for students. Beginning in the spring of 2020, their education took place mainly on the screens of their laptops, alone in their rooms. If they broke out and partied at all, they were met with shame and disgrace.

In the spring of 2021, over 20,000 students filled out an online questionnaire. Half of them (51%) experienced psychological symptoms, some (12%) to a severe degree. Many students suffered from stress, performance pressure and sleep problems, loneliness (80%; 29% severe) and lack of social support, such as from family and friends, which prevented them from functioning optimally. Sixty-eight percent reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, and a quarter said they had occasionally or more often in the past four weeks wished they were dead. Problems were more common among students from immigrant backgrounds, international students, full-time students and LGBTQ+ students.[41]

Students sometimes sought help, sometimes not, sometimes inside and sometimes outside the educational institution. Outside the educational institution, they sought help or advice from someone in their social circle (53%), from a psychiatrist, psychologist or psychotherapist (43%), or from a general practitioner or mental health practitioner (26%).

No one sought help from a minister, or spiritual director, or God, or animals. Or were these choices not listed in the questionnaire? In our secular world, is it only the medical-psychological realm that counts when it comes to young people's well-being? I checked: animals, ministers and God were indeed not on the list of caregivers students could choose from.

The reports about student malaise kept me busy. The surveys took place among students at colleges and universities, but alarm bells were also going off in high schools and vocational education. The researcher stressed the

importance of preventive psychological screening, as well as positive relationships between teachers and students. "Encourage students to participate in the classroom, approach them with warmth and openness, be available for questions and other issues, and avoid negative statements such as 'four out of five of you will fail this year.'" In addition to knowledge and skill development, development of student identity is also important. What makes this difficult, says the doctoral student, is that the roots of many problems among young people lie in our *society*. Individual achievement and being successful are at the forefront. Social media, with its many pictures of perfect lives, contributes significantly to this problem. You can't afford to make mistakes. Fortunately, the Ministries of Health, Welfare and Sport and of Education, Culture and Science are also beginning to recognize the seriousness of the situation.[42]

How can we get suffering young people involved in an ecumenism of friendship and engage with them on an equal footing? The researcher suggests methods from the psychological domain: risk screening, counseling, offering preventive help and creating a "sense of belonging" in an environment where individuality is at the forefront.

What can our ancient warehouses full of spiritual riches offer? What healing rituals that strengthen connection with yourself and with others can help? How can something that points beyond the human be of service here? Not every fulfillment needs to come from and through ourselves. Breathing, breathing space – sometimes something is just given to you.

Beyond the human

Where do we find communities where not only people are your friends, but also plants, animals, water, the sky and possibly even the transcendent? What do we really mean by the transcendent? "God-bearer, opposing voice, connection, community, grace, and being accepted as you are," was how my students answered my question about what the transcendent meant to them. For Canadian philosopher Taylor, the transcendent means "beyond the human world, or the cosmos," but also the discovery of a whole new standpoint from which to critique the existing order or society. Could friendship with the transcendent offer us new insights about the flourishing of young life?

The sociologist of religion Hans Joas (b. 1948) writes extensively about experiences of the transcendent in *Die Macht des Heiligen* [*The Power of the Sacred*]. People experience the sacred and then reflect on where these experiences come from. They cite God or the transcendent as the source of these experiences. This formulation means that the transcendent – as the sacred – flows into the world and does not remain in the transcendent realm. In other words, the transcendent can be experienced in this world. The question then, of course, is: in what way?[43]

Joas' response brings us close to home. Experiences of beauty, delight, tragedy, chaos and bewilderment break us open. When we name these experiences, with words or non-verbal expressions, they point beyond ourselves to an open dimension. They point toward the sacred.

Experiencing the sacred

Experiencing the sacred is an anthropological phenomenon. Joas explains in five steps how it is that people can experience the sacred. First, human beings are organisms that explore their environment by acting, thereby acquiring experience and knowledge. All experiences gained through this exploration become ingredients for new actions. Perception and knowledge are part of acting. *Contingency*, or the mutability of the world, constantly demands creative action. The world is never simply a given outside ourselves, but repeatedly demands new responses. We respond to our environment through acting. Play and rituals provide opportunities for responding to the relentless mutability and randomness of our environment.[44]

The second step in Joas' thinking is that human selves are not simply a given, but the result of ongoing interactions with others and one's own perceptions. The formation of the self is never complete. At the end of adolescence there may be some lasting stabilization, but later challenges can subvert this.

Thus, the self is never finished. Unexpected events, both positive and negative, can break open the boundaries of the self. This is the third step. Joas uses the term "self-transcendence" for these disruptive experiences. These are experiences that make a fundamentally passive dimension visible. Here, there is no question of possibilities for action, but rather of being seized. Experiences that challenge the limits of the self are not always pleasant. Often they are experiences of fear, vulnerability, finitude, agony,

depression, meaninglessness and guilt. We do not undergo these experiences voluntarily. They happen without our having much say in them. They come over us. Re-closing the boundaries of the self may fail. In that case, the experience will be remembered permanently as a loss rather than a transition to something new.[45]

The fourth step stems from the third. The passive dimension of being seized by experiences of self-transcendence is necessarily the experience of being broken by forces beyond us. They awaken a deep awareness: something must be going on. Self-transcendence has an instinctive power that dwarfs everyday experiences. A storm surge puts everything on edge and it is not without reason that people here seize on the word "sacred," although this clearly has two faces: the delightful, good, true and beautiful, but also the demonic and diabolical.[46]

The fifth step in Joas' thinking is that these intense, new experiences can lead to a whole new self-understanding. They also open up a new perspective on the world. However, this requires that the experiences be expressed; this can also be done in non-verbal ways. Not everything can be expressed unambiguously in words, especially when it comes to experiences of self-transcendence.[47] Expression includes being heard or seen; we do not express ourselves in solitude. Others are there and can either stimulate or inhibit our expressions.

According to Joas, it therefore seems justified to speak here of the "Power of the Sacred," even though there are commentators who reject this term.[48] A deep source of life force and the realization of one's own smallness in the midst of a greater whole lie hidden in these experiences.

Bringing experiences to expression

Reading this sociologist of religion's abstract argument confused me. He writes about intense, disruptive experiences, but says nothing about how he himself was grasped by them. He never gets stuck; his philosophical, anthropological and religious analyses never turn into self-conscious narratives or other examples of the phenomena he writes about. How can we speak from these experiences?

How can we arrive at a new self-understanding from experiences that break down the self? How do you piece yourself back together? What shame do you have to overcome in order to share your strange experiences with

others? How do you prevent a random listener from turning away from your far-reaching story? Where can I find friends who will listen and tell about their experiences? How can I be open to what they experienced?

Disruptive experiences of beauty, delight, chaos, bewilderment, violence and oppression break us down. I hear, see, feel, smell and taste an unknown dimension of existence that is both impressive and unsettling. I am thrown radically outside myself and the hitherto familiar. According to religious scholars, trying to give expression to these experiences, with words or non-verbal expressions, points in the direction of the transcendent which is not only the source of the delightful, but also of the diabolical. About that transcendent itself we can say little, nay, nothing.

In the books I have written, God has come up for discussion only through theologians I discussed, whatever terms they used for it. In my latest book *For Joseph and His Brother,* I discuss the "numinous," or the holy of Rudolf Otto, which fascinates us but also makes us tremble; the universe of Schleiermacher; the void of Nishitani; the chaos of Clifford Geertz. While I was writing my dissertation, I read the systematic theological treatises on God by German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg. I could parse and understand the sentences, but not touch the deeper meaning. For myself, "chaos" comes closest: disruption, dislocation, no-man's-land. Not knowing how and where to take the next step. Heightened awareness, heightened sensitivity, yearning for contact with other living beings in this unknown territory. They always presented themselves.

Unstoppable life force

Disruptive experiences that broke my self into pieces are the starting point of my theological reflections. Even in my dissertation, although at that time, I did not dare to make my own boundary experiences explicit. Strangely enough, they never led me to God or the sacred. I did feel a turbulent life force that, over time, brought all kinds of new life and new connections, all of which were constantly at risk of breaking down again. I experienced this several times. The last time, Joseph's little leg literally burst apart after getting caught in his mother's bicycle wheel.

The disruptive experiences intensified my search for building blocks for communities with heart. Might God also be one of these? I asked myself in

despair. Perhaps even the foundation? Then how is it that upheavals keep happening? Does it make sense to keep talking about God or the transcendent, or would I rather talk about the irrepressible life force within and outside of me? Being taken and broken apart again and again. The day I applied for a job as a spiritual caregiver in psychiatry, now an eternity ago, I was given a bag full of information. Printed on that bag were an eagle and Dutch poet Hendrik Marsman's poem "Phoenix." Seven times risen from the ashes.

PHOENIX

Flame in me, flare up again;
heart in me, have patience,
redouble the faith -
bird in me, unfold again
the wings, now tired and drab;
o, fly up now from the burning branches
and do not let your courage and your course fail;
the nest is good, but the universe is wider.[49]

Was it really an eagle or rather a Phoenix portrayed on that bag? My yearning soul turned the Phoenix into an eagle, catching me on its wings and flying me through breathtaking vistas into a new existence. Others helped me rise from the ashes, again and again.

Earth Community

What do I lose if I throw God overboard? How necessary are the abstractions of Tillich, Joas, Otto and many others to be able to emerge from profound disruption into new connections, creativity and cooperation?

Heather Eaton, specializing in ecology, feminism and theology, points out the pitfalls of the Christian concept of transcendence. Earthly life is seen as inadequate. Death as the end of our existence is unacceptable. Christian ideologies emphasize transcendence over death and promise salvation from uncertain and fragile life. Without the transcendent, we are at the mercy of mortality and finitude. Christianity sets itself against the conditions of life and counters them with a different reality.[50]

The refusal to accept vulnerability, mortality and finitude results in a fleeting spirituality and in practices of oppression of land, animals and people. Eaton proposes taking the road back. If oppression is the result of our denial of the conditions of existence, then we can begin by embracing them – vulnerability, mortality and finitude.

We can greet the limits, riches and struggles of life with joy and sorrow, in solidarity with all that lives. Death belongs to life; it is not something from which we can be saved. We will die and that can be the end. Vulnerability, uncertainty and finitude can increase our awareness of life as a gift and make us sensitive to a sacred presence that surrounds us.[51]

We are part of the "Earth Community," we emerge from earthly processes. An emphasis on transcendence comes at the expense of going deeper into life and seeing the full splendor of nature. When we learn to see the fragility, ingenuity, excellence, creativity and overwhelming splendor of planetary life, reverence and restless gratitude are the appropriate spiritual response.[52]

Heather Eaton draws inspiration for her earth community from Brazilian feminist theologian Ivonne Gebara (b. 1944). Searching for recent work by her, I discovered an article on "Climate Change and God's Work of Election" by a fellow professor at the Free University, to which Gebara offers a concluding reflection.

Gijsbert van den Brink, Reformation theologian, received his PhD in the philosophy of religion. We were part of the same PhD student group, which met twice a year under the guidance of our supervisors to discuss chapters from our dissertations. We were very different. He seemed to be a rock in comparison to my troubled faith insecurities. Since then, I gather from his article, his old faith securities no longer seem so certain. He, too, points out pitfalls when it comes to Christian articles of faith.[53]

The renunciation of the earthly

Gijsbert van den Brink points out the disastrous consequences of the Christian concept of transcendence and the doctrine of "election" for climate change. Augustine (354-430) was the originator of the article of faith about being chosen. He wrestled with human sinfulness and called it "original sin." Even before we are born, we are inclined toward evil. God's grace is completely free and undeserved. God saves some and not others. Those who are saved are morally no better than the lost. Grace is a gift, not a reward. God's

predestination or election is inimitable. This doctrine of sin and grace has shaped the thinking and way of life of many believers, says Van den Brink.

The Catholic Church in the Middle Ages took a kind of collective intermediary position. It built a bridge for lost souls to come to grace. The Reformation, however, resumed God's inimitable love and hatred toward individuals: you are either lost or saved; you had no say in this. Unless you were Arminian, or Remonstrant, then you believed that everyone was predestined to grace. You only had to say "yes" of your own free will.[54] Free will remains intact even after the Fall, according to Episcopius (1583–1643), the first professor of the Remonstrant seminary. There is no such thing as an unfree will; human responsibility and God's honor require that a certain human freedom be granted within the space of God's omnipotence. For God does not work in people "as if they were wooden blocks" (*sicut lignum*).[55]

Free will or not, election, Van den Brink explains, is thoroughly anthropocentric. The salvation of human beings, away from this fallen world, is central. The human body belongs to the earthly; salvation is ultimately about the soul. How does my soul get to heaven?

In other words, I concluded: dust, snot, sweat, blood, water and even the air, impermanence, fragility, beauty and earthly brilliance, as well as suffering and pain – all these do not matter. They fall literally into nothingness by the ultimate heavenly destiny of the souls of the elect. We are disposable lives on a disposable earth.

The doctrine of election is also thoroughly individualistic, Van den Brink continues. It is about *my* being chosen. The result is a world-avoiding and an other-human-being-avoiding higher spirituality. In the end, everything is about my saved soul.

Furthermore, the doctrine has a strong theocentric focus. God determines everything and no one can question God's unfathomable actions. Humans are created in the image of God. God can easily become a role model for human behavior. Human vocation is in danger of being understood in terms of domination and manipulation, with service and submission on the other side of the divine coin.[56]

God raised high above earthly existence suggests an external relationship between God and the world. God has distanced himself from his once beautiful and good creation. He is remote from the earthly rather than intimately and caringly present.

God's grace is unconditional and undeserved. You do not have to do anything for it, nor is anything asked in return. The recipient can remain completely passive. Here, Van den Brink sees a parallel with how the relationship between autonomous humans and the earth later came to be defined. The earth is a passive object. Exploitation is not experienced as a transgression but claimed as a right.

How can the dogma of election reinvent itself? Van den Brink looks for a way out through Christ. The gift of God's grace did not come directly from heaven but through Christ, a man on this earth.

Ivonne Gebara, responding to the article, makes short work of Christ's humanity. Jesus is seen as a man, but what is a man without sin?

She makes a passionate plea for abandoning all dualistic interpretations of Christian theology. The Christian faith proclaims the victory of good over evil. All the enemies of human beings will be defeated, including death. However, good and evil, light and dark, cannot exist without each other. We can recognize light because we know darkness, and vice versa. We cannot have an awareness of good if we do not know experiences of evil. Both God and Jesus are separate from evil. The Christian tradition created a perfectly good world disconnected from the world's materiality.

Gebara argues for the need to develop a Christian tradition that does not merely repeat what we have been taught. In light of ecology and feminism, we need the courage to replace old interpretations of Christian faith with new ones. To dare to go barefoot, to take new steps on broken ground full of uncertainties.[57] [58]

I explored earlier how far Taylor's *ecumenism of friendship* could reach. Who inhabits the world, and who can be our friends? A motley procession of earth dwellers with whom we can have "deep and patient conversations" suggested itself. The parade kept expanding. Old and young, religious and non-religious, rich and poor, fellow creatures and wild animals, university students and young school children, in fact every creature living on earth is a welcome guest in this house of friendship, our earth community. We all spring from the same earthly processes and share the ingenuity, excellence, creativity and magnificent splendor of life, but also fragility, vulnerability

and finitude. A lofty guest with ancient credentials has a dubious reputation when it comes to friendship. A heavenly God far above the earthly hubbub inimitably chooses some and lets others fall. I'll just leave this heavenly guest where he is. However, I cannot ignore the irrepressible, boisterous, and breathtaking creative and destructive life forces that surpass human capabilities. Their roar and thunder and sometimes soft whispers provoked this whole quest: disruptive experiences that knock the familiar ground out from under our feet. So, how do we find a way? What role can communities with a heart play in embracing vulnerability?

Epilogue

In October 2013, by delivering the oration *Delivered unto the Heathens: How theology can survive the 21st century*, I took up the post of Extraordinary Professor of Remonstrant Theology. My assignment was to explore "the future of the Remonstrants." In my public oration, I sketched out a program aimed at the many people searching for meaning who no longer understand the language and forms of Christian faith, or who have rejected it altogether, or have simply not come into contact with it. The latter applies especially to younger generations. Many people long for meaning and connection but do not find their way to the old warehouses and their spiritual riches. Churches often look abandoned and desolate. How can they become meaningful again?[1]

I argued then for an experiential theology of vulnerable living. The shared foundation of this theology is not sacred scripture or divine revelation but experiences of disruption. "They can be called boundary experiences, basic experiences, existential experiences, experiences in which the security we take for granted falls away … In the theology of vulnerable living, we focus first on the concrete experience of loss, the rupture and abyss, or the empty land that now come into view."[2]

This experiential theology begins with conversations about vulnerable lives, open encounters in which we explore disruptions more closely. I distinguished four narratives: (1) conversation with oneself – not running away, trusting and exploring the experience; (2) conversations with each other – candid exchanges about how we were broken open and what that did to us; (3) conversations about values – what reveals itself as valuable in the midst of disruption? and (4) conversations with philosophical and religious traditions that connect us to people across times and cultures. "We connect with the value orientations of those who lived before and faced vulnerabilities both similar to and different from ours. The trails they blazed on their journeys to a meaningful life can be significant for us and bring us to a higher level."[3]

Ten years have passed since that oration. Throughout the country, and sometimes abroad, I gave lectures and guest courses in universities. Afterwards, people struck up conversations and shared their stories. Others read my books and sought contact with me. Students attended the seminary. We read, studied, discussed and formed searching and inspiring relationships. We practiced old and new rituals. Students wrote theses on vulnerability and liturgy, on collective experiences of disruption, on the difference between theater and Church when dealing with transformation in borderlands, and on many more topics related to the future of the Remonstrants.[4] We traveled together and visited different places to discover the characteristics of communities with a heart. In the meantime, more candidates for the ministry have been trained than the Remonstrant churches can accommodate and support. They will go out into the world. Designers at the Utrecht School of the Arts helped me turn the dialogue model I proposed in my oration, and which I further elaborated with students of humanistics into a game.[5] The game gave a new impetus to a shared quest full of encounters, vulnerable stories, sharing memories, digging up old treasures, making new discoveries and experimenting. The first Radboud Summer School course, "International Grail: Communities with a Heart," took place. Students and teachers from Zimbabwe, South Africa, Brazil, Portugal, Armenia, Ecuador, the United States and the Netherlands spent a week pondering the question: How can we help create inclusive and inspiring communities that give voice to the marginalized, such as children, animals, trees and water? For a week, nothing seemed impossible, and a vibrant energy bubbled up in all directions. Where did it all lead?

In this book, based on borderland experiences and philosophical and theological reflections on these experiences, I have sought out building blocks for communities with a heart. I found many such building blocks, which together form a basis for communities with a heart. Eight interconnected cornerstones can be assembled from the various building blocks. These form an octagon (Greek: *octagōnos*, eight-angled), and together they form the foundation, or heart, of communities with a heart. The cornerstones are: facing disruptions openly, being silent, speaking boldly and practicing multi-voiced listening, minimizing risks and optimizing opportunities, dreaming, setting direction, working cooperatively, and being willing to fail and start over.

I briefly explain the various cornerstones composed of the building blocks discussed in the previous essays. I conclude with a brief reflection on what these cornerstones can mean for philosophical and ideological groups, including faith communities, in transitional areas.

Facing disruptions openly

No one gets through life unscathed. Everything that lives is highly vulnerable. The survival of human beings, as well as animals and plants and even the earth, is fundamentally uncertain. Organizations and churches can also fall into disruption. What once worked no longer works, and what might work has not yet been discovered. In these in-between places, we find unpredictability, lawlessness, uncertainty, arguments and other difficulties, but we also find opportunities. Sensitivity and creativity are intensified, as is the realization that we need each other. Initially, I focused on disruptions in which many such organizations, including the Remonstrants and the Grail, have found themselves. Chaos and collapse lurk in the uncertainty of these transitional areas. Vulnerability is only increased by discussions about identity, about who we are and should remain, about who belongs and does not belong. We turn inward, and if we are not careful, we lose each other and the world. We disappear into an abyss of meaninglessness. Sociologists and anthropologists have made a variety of suggestions as to how we can relate to ourselves and each other in uncertain borderlands: take breaks, look at the nature around us, allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the beauty outside us, engage with each other and with the reality that surrounds us, avoid formulating new ideologies, cherish valuable notions from the past and discover how they can again be of value in a different reality, allow commonality to happen, chart a course.

To discover what this might look like in concrete terms, I consulted several people in borderlands and listened to personal stories of disruption. Vacationers gathered in a mountain church connected with each other by meditating on love amid the beauty of flowers and stately mountain peaks. A pessimistic artist watched his children dance and play and came to feel loved by his children and accepted by God. Several other stories of disruption passed by. Mothers who lost their children and husbands. A mother who no longer wanted to live. A father who lost his wife and infant son as well as his own life. Brutal violence, racist ostracism, an instance of rape, a

peace activist who chose to stop paying taxes and was forced to take his children out of school… Over the past decade, many people have shared their disruptions with me. A father who lost his daughter in a train accident. She made a dash to catch the train and failed to see an oncoming intercity from the opposite direction. Parents overwrought with tears who told me how their son's suicide had caught them completely off guard. A woman who lost her husband to cardiac arrest and then discovered a few weeks later that their long-held desire for children would be fulfilled. She had read my book *The Art of Survival* and emailed me when the child was six months old. Despite my own burnout, I decided to listen to her stories, if only for the sake of the child. Covid-19, the mushrooming seriousness of the climate crisis, students who are not sure they want to live in a society where achievement seems to be the highest good, a new war in Europe, surging flows of refugees, earthquakes that reduce cities to rubble… Disruptions seem everywhere to be the new order of the day and of our world. Or has this always been so?

The first cornerstone of communities with heart is to face disruptions openly, even though they come uninvited and turn our world upside down. This is not an easy task. You are driven from familiar into unfamiliar territory. Possible pathways and trusted traveling companions have yet to be found. Disruptions are accompanied by fear, uncertainty, isolation, tragedy, physical pain and heightened awareness. Senses are on edge; everything floods in. The first cornerstone of communities with a heart is not to close yourself off from the disruptions but rather to move toward them. To be in the midst of the storm.

Being Silent

Silence matters. Silence opens. In silence, overwhelming and unimaginable events in the present or from the past become palpable, often unbearable. Being silent is important for exploring the unfathomable depths of experience. We can help each other here. The silence of another, sitting upright in prayer or meditation, can bring us into silence ourselves and open us to the many sounds within us: sorrow, anger, pain, shame or guilt. Perhaps wonder or bewilderment that we are still here. Our breathing, the rustling of the wind, sounds somewhere in the distance help us listen more deeply to what is inside us. Many voices become audible in silence: disbelief,

homesickness, sadness, despondency, longing, determination, doubt, physical pain, tears, fatigue, rage, indignation, self-blame, shame, mourning – sometimes also relaxation, wonder and surrender. Silence carries everything within it.

Old places and customs can invite us into silence. A chapel of a Trappist monastery, the lighting of the candle for the prayer for the dead, the long twilights just before and after the solstice with their blue light, an old fourteenth-century church with high arched vaults, stained-glass windows, the empty white oval chancel with a Celtic cross and dark marble tombs in the floor, a Zen meditation room with only simple black mats and cushions on the floor, the red-colored peaks of high mountains, a field full of wildflowers … Special places and special times connect us to others who have gone before us. They can help us become silent and open.

When silence has become deep enough to fully descend into the abyss of disruption, we rise to let our souls speak.

Speaking boldly and practicing multi-voiced listening

Giving voice to disruptions is the third cornerstone of communities with a heart. Expressing where and how we have been broken and what this did to us. Where were we, in what place? Who was with us? What was happening? What did we notice in our bodies? What emotions overpowered us? Who did something to us? Did we somehow fail? Speaking boldly is giving voice to concrete events, in specific places, in a particular social context and at a certain time. It is speaking *from* bodily experiences. Stories about who or what we lost and how that tore us apart. Putting regret and despair into words. Did we sufficiently appreciate the preciousness of what is now in the past? Daring to feel homesick. Letting the tears flow. Daring to cry out in anger and pain. Speaking boldly and without self-censorship about the storm that swept us away, what was at stake, who was involved and whom we want to hold responsible. Not flinching when the other is more powerful than we are. Speaking truth. Creusa called Apollo to account, Job challenged God.

Speaking boldly requires listening. Telling your story to others who listen forges new connections. Telling and listening to each other creates community. We are no longer isolated in desolation, despair and confusion. Listening requires courage. You become a voluntary participant in the disruptions of others which you feel in your own body. You become a witness.

Becoming a witness means daring to ask difficult questions, descending together, being willing to face it with them, helping unravel what happened and how it could happen. A witness can give someone back her or his story by retelling it and passing it on.

Learning multi-voiced listening means we can also listen to those who were not allowed to speak, or who cannot speak, or were never heard. How do women who were forced to be silent speak to us? What stories do the eyes of children tell? How can we give voice to trees, plants, rivers and animals? What testimonies can we give on behalf of those who cannot testify themselves? Which of the departed can we bring back to life and once more see their faces? Multi-voiced listening means being willing to practice multilingualism. Opening all the senses to learn to understand one another. Speaking happens in numerous languages, gestures, sounds, noises, smells and images. Speaking boldly and learning multi-voiced listening goes far beyond mere words.

Rituals can help us in speaking boldly and learning multi-voiced listening. Animals teach us wise lessons here, but ancient warehouses full of spiritual riches also contain healing and connecting rituals. Greeting each other and holding each other's eyes. Lighting a candle. Washing each other's feet to express a desire to serve the other. Blessing our lips, and our eyes, ears and hands. Traveling together, or alone, spending time in nature, learning to see things from a different perspective. Watching how the water reflects the full moon. Reading ancient texts. Playing, relaxing, bathing and dancing. Sitting by a fire and basking in the warmth. Deeming another, or the other, more excellent than yourself. Enjoying a meal together. Silently watching the day pass into night. Greeting the light of day after a long night. All this in communion. Inviting each other to silence, and to speaking and multi-voiced listening.

Minimizing risks and optimizing opportunities

Speaking boldly and practicing multi-voiced listening to each other's disruptive experiences prepares us to explore risks and opportunities in the in-between place more deeply. This is the fourth cornerstone of communities with a heart. Borderlands are dangerous. We risk getting lost. What should we be alert to? How can we reduce the risks? Disruptive experiences overturn the old, but they also have transformative power. How can we

optimize this creative potential? What treasures do we uncover that help us move forward?

Disruptive experiences are uncomfortable and almost never come at a good time. Things that were once self-evident are brought into question or even subverted. Those who are swept away by the storm are forced to reflect on their experiences and even their entire lives. Their entire identity might be changed. The degree of change depends on which parts of one's identity are left intact. Self-loss may be partial. External frames of reference may also be partially intact. Experiencing disruption is ambivalent: tragic loss, suffering and new possibilities go hand in hand. One of the risks is denying the disruption because it is too painful and simply returning to how it was before. Pretending nothing is wrong and continuing on as it always was. Creative and innovative forces are choked off.

Another risk of disruption is permanent self-loss, disappearing forever into meaninglessness. Philosophers and anthropologists speak of "permanent liminality." The overwhelming chaos caused by forces that break us into pieces means that these experiences do not fit into old, familiar structures or concepts. In most storms, consequences beyond destruction can be felt. These, too, often do not fit with our previous worldview. Seeing your sick child die and make the freeing transition to another existence does not take away the feeling of total abandonment. Violently conflicting emotions, such as peaceful surrender and intense grief, shake the familiar world. We find ourselves in unfamiliar territory. Not everyone is swept up in the same storm. The upheaval that hits you and knocks your world over does not apply to everyone around you. For others, life has not toppled over. They do not understand you and your intense or unique experiences. Sometimes, you are afraid to speak about it because what you are going through is so different from what you always thought. You lose your community, and this creates isolation.

Scholarly opinions and the idea of control, or that everything will be all right, are dislodged. Philosophical and theological concepts lose their power of expression. They seem to be artificial constructs for putting life on the right track. They don't work when it really matters. Distinctions between self and other, body and mind, good and evil, just and unjust, life and death no longer seem to hold true. In the light of our experiences, reality looks very different. Disruptive experiences place us outside existing contexts and

frameworks. We just wander around in hostile territory and risk getting lost forever.

Another risk comes from advisers who offer unsolicited support. They often speak out of turn. They know how to pinpoint the cause of the disaster. Job must have done something wrong. After the mountain accident in which Ada lost her husband and children, accomplished mountain climbers concluded that they must have set out too late. The snow was already melting when they began the descent. They would have been better off not walking with a rope secured to each other. They couldn't help but drag each other down into the abyss. Some advisers claim that we can learn something from what happened to us. If not practical things, then perhaps a spiritual lesson. They only increase the loneliness of those in the in-between place.

Even more dangerous are the "tricksters," the imposters. They pretend to have seen the light and know the way. They appear in unexpected places. Their seducing whispers are tempting to the desperate. Be careful! The hallmark of true disruption is that you have entered uncharted territory. No one knows the way, and solutions are not readily at hand.

Borderlands contain not only risks but also opportunities. One of these is expanded awareness. Sensitivity is greatly enhanced. We hear, smell, feel and see things we did not notice before. This can be difficult. Pain, fear and abandonment are intense, but beautiful things also come more sharply into view. The intense colors of a flower, sparkling water, the affection of a child or an animal, vistas in nature. Disruption opens us up to what we were not able to see and feel before. We perceive in a different way and this increases our creativity.

Another opportunity is meeting others who share our fate. In in-between places, we are not alone. We encounter others who are also displaced. A fundamental equality connects us. No one is who he or she once was. Social positions and ranks have fallen away. Encounters can ease pain. We can comfort each other, encourage each other not to give up, carry each other, hold a light before someone's feet, point out a bright starry sky to each other, share our bread, laugh with each other, make a cup of tea or drink a glass of wine, give a hug … Small acts of compassion become immensely important.

People in borderlands become connected by moving together through unfamiliar territory. These accidental communities offer tremendous

opportunities. No one knows the way; in this, we are alike. This shared not-knowing makes us open to joining hands to find a way together. At the same time, everyone is unique. Everyone comes from different places and has their own experiences and unique backgrounds and brings different knowledge and insights. Moreover, the heightened sensitivity makes us see and feel much more. Equality, uniqueness, being open to each other and to the reality around us provide opportunities for innovation and creativity.

Homesickness and longing for the past illuminate what was once valuable. We do not come from nowhere. What was of value in the past can once more provide direction. Packing a lunchbox, taking your child to school. Watching her run down the hill with her hair flying. Taking care of new children when your own child is gone. Promising your dying wife that you will put caring for your children above your theological calling. Cherishing the light in each child and believing that this is how the world will slowly become brighter. The importance of playing outside, sea, wind and air. Concentrated study of ancient sources and discovering how others long ago sought to heal broken hearts. Singing of a holy spirit that carries us on its wings and relieves emptiness and loss. Decorating a room, setting a beautiful table, making music together, telling stories, having conversations … Treasures from the past can help us find new direction in the present.

Injustice makes what matters visible in the shadows. The good that could have made a difference is painfully missing. Billie Holiday, as a black woman in the 1930s, was not allowed to have a drink with her white band at the Lincoln Hotel bar in New York. She sat alone in a back room, waiting for her next performance. Students languishing in their rooms and even wanting to die evoke a deep sense of how life should be different for young people. They are only at the beginning. They should be able to laugh, connect with others, form an idea of what is good and worth striving for in their studies, and be willing to commit themselves to it. Reaching out to the world in order to become someone themselves. Being attentive to unjust conditions that destroy lives helps determine our direction. Injustice can help strengthen our will to devote ourselves to change.

Borderlands are ambivalent. They are dangerous, but they also offer opportunities. Alerting each other to what can happen can help minimize the risks. Sheltering and dwelling together, encouraging each other and facing injustice, can optimize opportunities. Ideas for a possible future spring

from the community that emerges while speaking, listening, playing and discovering together.

Dreaming

Dreaming is the fifth cornerstone of communities with a heart. Dreams are not just about the in-between places; they reach further and higher. They are about the whole earth as a habitable place, the whole universe. Dreams know no boundaries. Nothing is impossible. In our dreams, alternate worlds emerge. Our diverse disruptive experiences, the pain, isolation, and injustice that happened to us, as well as the treasures we discovered, make us perfect seers, dreamers and prophets. Listening and feeling in silence, the kaleidoscopic mutual conversations and inspiring examples brought us ideas. Creativity and joy bubbled up. In dreams, everyone can speak. Children, animals, plants, seas and rivers are all welcome at the friendship table. The company cannot be varied enough. Everyone gets a place in this parliament. Those who, until now, have been the least heard get the first right to speak. Everything turned upside down. Others listen until the least has spoken. Then the next person who had to remain silent until now gets the floor. Everyone can speak in their own languages and images. Poetry, painting, music, gestures, wild seething or roaring … everything is allowed. Oddly enough, deeply understanding each other is not difficult. Only at the very end do the formerly important people get to speak. Like everyone else, they have now learned that we need each other for authentic expressiveness. Power that matters means that everyone can accept their own unique responsibility for our earth community.

Dreams challenge us to create something new out of chaos. Reclaiming our moral agency. Taking responsibility for one's own life, for our life together and for the world. Being reborn together out of disruption.

On a journey alone,
At cross roads I have to choose a path
I have always felt like a spectator in my life,
Today, I am an agent, a ball of kinetic energy that has
the power to decide,
I am unbecoming to become

Along the way I met women,
Who were also searching for their stolen voices,
Fighting for their right to be. I walked alongside them,
we were all on a mission,
Unbecoming to become

Telling each other stories of adversity and triumph,
Igniting each other's souls, laughing together
Finding all of our stuff, Joy, pain, relief,
One moment leading to the next,
In the Process of Unbecoming to Become.

Nosipho Makhakhe[6]

Setting direction

The sixth cornerstone of communities with a heart is setting direction. Which dreams do we want to realize? Where can we start? What places are suitable? Who and what do we need in order to do this? What talents and resources? The transition from dreams to direction is from big to small, from ideals to concrete. Starting from broken confidence and with our feet on the ground, we devote ourselves to change.

Various models and resources designed specifically to restore vulnerable lives can help us in setting a direction. One of these is the capabilities approach of American philosopher Martha Nussbaum. It is a list of ten capabilities, ten substantive freedoms, that need to be secured to enable people to seek and create flourishing lives.[7] These are: 1) Being able to live to the end of a normal length of human life, not dying prematurely. 2) Having good health, including the ability to reproduce, being well nourished, having adequate shelter. 3) Bodily integrity: being able to move freely from place to place, to be protected from violent assault, including sexual and domestic violence, having opportunities for sexual gratification and reproductive choices. 4) Senses, imagination and thoughts: being able to use the senses to imagine, think and reason in ways cultivated by adequate education, including reading and writing, but not limited to these. Being able to use your mind and to work with imagination, with freedom of expression guaranteed. 5) Emotions: Being able to have attachments to people and

things outside of ourselves. Being able to experience loving, grieving, longing, gratitude and righteous anger. 6) Practical Reason. Being able to form a conception of the good and think critically about planning one's life. 7) Affiliation. Being able to live with and show concern for others. Knowing self-respect and self-worth. 8) Connecting with other species. Being able to establish relationships with animals, plants, the world and nature. 9) Play. Being able to laugh, play, enjoy recreational activities. 10) Control over one's environment, both politically and materially.[8]

In her most recent book, Nussbaum extends these ten capabilities to animals. Just as for humans, the ten capabilities should also be secured for animals with consciousness. The list is a kind of virtual constitution. Each region and place can create its own list with specific versions of the key capabilities. The basic goal is that all animals, including human animals, have the opportunity to live a life compatible with their dignity and aspirations, and to be guaranteed a reasonable minimum level of protection for this purpose.[9] The capabilities approach offers starting points for enabling people and animals in specific places within local communities to live flourishing lives. This gives us a reference point for setting direction, with a view toward communities with a heart.

In addition to this theory, there are other starting points for setting direction. An age-old model is the Golden Rule: Do not do to another what you would not want done to you. Short and concise, but with the limitation that it can be vague and non-committal in practice. Another useful model is the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a list of 17 goals intended to make the world a better place by 2030. They form a global compass for challenges such as poverty, education and the climate crisis. The goals are: 1) no poverty; 2) zero hunger; 3) good health and well-being; 4) quality education; 5) gender equality; 6) clean water and sanitation; 7) affordable and clean energy; 8) decent work and economic growth; 9) industry, innovation and infrastructure; 10) reduced inequalities; 11) sustainable cities and communities; 12) responsible consumption and production; 13) climate action; 14) life below water; 15) life on land; 16) peace, justice and strong institutions; and 17) partnerships for the goals. All of these goals are spelled out in more detail, and numerous NGOs and other organizations are committed to helping achieve one or more of them.[10] The goals serve as a basis for protecting our fragile earth community and helping it prosper. Like Nussbaum's capa-

bilities approach, the SDGs provide an imaginative model for working to achieve specific goals in local or regional situations.

There are other tools beyond these models. During the first Radboud Summer School of the International Grail, "Communities with a Heart," we practiced using different dialogue models. We worked with the *Tree of Life, Appreciative Inquiry* and *Between Sun and Moon.*[11] These are just a few examples of dialogue models that facilitate creativity, positivity, equality and constructive collaboration. They are important in all eight cornerstones of communities with a heart, but especially in setting direction to achieve something new together. A feature of these dialogue models is that they connect personal narratives with ideas for designing communities with a heart. The personal becomes political.

Working cooperatively

The seventh cornerstone of communities with a heart is rolling up our sleeves together and working cooperatively. How can we realize our plans? The key is searching for collaborative partners. In many in-between places, we find promising and imaginative initiatives where people are working to give each other, and other living things, a chance to develop. These include a school garden, a children's hospital, a workshop, the Remonstrant seminary, a psychiatric institution. There are many more places in borderlands where people work together to realize important values, such as libraries, theaters, movie houses, bookstores, academies, community centers, health centers, social organizations and environmental organizations. During the Summer School, we visited a housing cooperative that had succeeded not only in renovating homes in a demolition-prone neighborhood, but also in reactivating social networks. This succeeded by working with different partners, not only construction companies but also health care, social work, police, probation and the city administration. People now live in new homes, and the entire neighborhood has been revitalized. Communities with a heart are emerging where disruption is a fact of life. The trick is to take advantage of this, to make connections, join hands. We need each other.

Evolutionary scientists point out that we are perfectly capable of doing this. Sociologist and physician Nicholas Christakis, known for his research into social networks, writes about a blueprint that is embedded in our genes. From an early age, we are favorably disposed toward cooperation.

Children understand others' intentions and value honesty. All societies, no matter how different, value kindness and cooperation and have a sense of cruel actions. People are seen as good or bad. Christakis identifies a set of eight capacities, "the social suite," that enable us to cooperate. These are the ability to have and recognize an individual identity, love of partners and offspring, friendship, social networks, cooperation, preference for one's own group, mild hierarchy, and social forms of learning and teaching.[12] Other researchers point out that humans are not the only animals that have a social blueprint embedded in their genes. In fact, human social networks sometimes compare poorly with forms of cooperation seen in other living beings. When it comes to cooperation, we can learn from and work with them.[13] We need each other's experiences, perspectives and talents to build communities with a heart. By acting together and taking responsibility for the shared world, we rise from the ashes and enter a new, meaningful reality.

Being willing to fail and start over

The eighth and final cornerstone of communities with a heart is not being afraid of mistakes or failure. We remain small, vulnerable people bound to specific places and times. Even though we work with many others, our perspective is limited and finite. We must remain humble and critical. Be prepared to rethread the loom every morning. Our actions can always be better and more just. Creative winds can blow us and our communities down. The trick, then, is to face disruption openly and start from scratch.

Faith communities in transitional areas

What can this octagon mean for philosophical and ideological groups, including faith communities, in in-between places? The octagon is a popular architectural model for designers of houses of worship. The Tiltenberg, for many years the Grail's estate, had a chapel with eight columns. These formed an intimate space where you felt secure and where all kinds of things happened: prayer, singing, dancing, meditation, memorial observances, night vigils, funerals. The Grail sold Tiltenberg years ago. What could the eight pillars still mean today, not only for the Grail, but also for other faith communities that are seeing their houses of worship emptying out?

By now, you can guess the answer. Get up! Get moving. Face the borderland you have found yourself in openly. We are called to be meaningful in a

different way. As faith communities, we must summon the courage to embrace disruptions. Resist the temptation to close ourselves off and continue as before. Go out into the streets, markets and squares. When we do this, we discover that we are not the only ones in transition. The world is full of disruption and groups of displaced persons or people wandering around lost. We can connect with them. In borderlands, we are not alone.

When we take new steps on broken ground full of uncertainties, it is fitting to be silent. Barefoot and with empty hands, but with open eyes and ears, we allow ourselves to settle into the place where we have ended up. How do the surroundings affect us? What do we see, hear and feel? What memories swirl through us, and what homesickness sticks in our throat? What new possibilities do we notice? When silence has lasted long enough to descend into the depths of disruption, we engage in conversation from our experiences. Speaking boldly and learning multi-voiced listening. We connect with others in the borderland and share what is on our minds. We listen and become each other's witnesses. As we speak and listen, a *communitas* is formed, a community that cares for one another, plays, relaxes, dares to dream and scans the horizon for new meaning.

In this dialogue starting from experiences of disruption, faith communities can make their own unique contribution. We do not come from nowhere. Old spiritual treasures can once more begin to serve us. Stories of being broken and beginning again, sharing bread, fish and wine with one another, formed the beginnings of where we came from. Jesus' friends, who had spent a few years with him, realized after his violent death that their dream was over. In the weeks after his death, Jesus still appeared to them from time to time. The great emptiness followed. Disillusioned, his friends were left behind, but they stayed together. Women were also there. Together, they prayed fervently, the Book of Acts tells us, but surely they did not just pray. They probably shared memories. About what they had been through, the best moments, but also the pain and bitter betrayal. They became witnesses to each other and also kept Jesus alive. They carried each other until everything coalesced, battered and broken, into a new realization: as long as we breathe, we can be touched and start anew! We can respond to new visions. Give voice to dust! They did not shy away from moving full force. They took to the streets, squares and markets to speak and learn to listen in foreign tongues. They must have been drunk, people said scornfully.

Just as then, we can stand up and get moving. Out of the churches, into the streets and squares, speaking and listening in multiple voices about our love for our fellow creatures, our faith in each other and our hope for the community of earth. Breath blows us to new beginnings.

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Endnotes

Main philosophical themes Part 0

In this introductory part, we set the tone, many themes are touched upon. Important themes in the book and also in this introductory part are *vulnerability, disruption, power, liminality* and *communities.* Conceptual clarifications will be addressed more explicitly in the other parts of the book.

1 F. Schleiermacher, [1799], 1988, p. 104; F. Schleiermacher, [1831], 1989 *The Christian Faith* 2nd ed. [1831], eds. H.R Macintosh and J.S. Stewart. Edinburgh. T&T Clark, 1989, p. 4.
2 S. McFague, 1993, p. 86-87.
3 P. Lapote, 1994, p. xxiii-l. P. Lapote, 2013.
4 P. Lapote, 1994, p. xliii.
5 T. Adorno, 1984, p. 152.
6 C. Anbeek, 2017. C. Anbeek, 2021.
7 J. Butler, 2004, p. 31-32. See also: 'Precariousness implies living socially, that is, in fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other.' J. Butler, 2010, p. 14. C. Mackenzie, 2014. M. Fineman, 2013. A. Bieler, 2017. E. Pulcini, 2013. S. Brison, 2017. H. Arendt, 1958. A. Stone, 2019. A. Cavarero, 2015.
8 A. Szakolczai, 2018, p. 30. B. Thomassen, 2018, p. 40. 'Old certainties have lost their validity and new ones are still not ready.' K. Jaspers, 1953, p. 51.
9 C. Anbeek, H. Alma, S. van Goelst Meijer, 2018, pp. 13-16.
10 B. Thomassen, 2018, p. 48-49.
11 Th. M. Van Leeuwen, 2009.
12 C. Anbeek, 2013.
13 J. Kalven, 1999. M. Ronan & M. O'Brien, 2017.
14 J. Butler, 2015. H. Springhart, G. Thomas, 2017.D. Burghardt, N. Dziabel, T. Höhne 2017. E. Fineman, 2013. S. Stalsett, 2023, M. Maher, 2023.
15 S. Szakolczai, 2018. B. Thomassen, 2018. T. Carson, 2016. T. Carson, 2019. S. Lee 2010. S. Motta, 2018.
16 Turner coined the word "communitas". Those who share the liminal passage develop a community of the in-between, a connection that transcends former distinctions between status and station created by social structure. V. Turner, 1969, pp. 94-130.

1 **Main philosophical themes Part 1**

In the first essay "Rumbling in the distance", I describe how, as a young philosopher of religion full of dreams, I slowly but surely realize that I have found myself in different philosophical borderlands. Grail and Remonstrants share with each other that they are in a transitional area, resulting in differences of opinion, quarrels and power struggles. Mountains and valleys with wild rivers, a wild and at the

same time quiet in-between, provide a salutary respite. They inspire me to examine more closely where I ended up as a philosopher of religion.
In the second essay "Remonstrant turmoil", I zoom in on the Remonstrants as a concrete case study of a faith community that, after four hundred years, has once again found itself in a liminal zone. What forces and power relationships are emerging? Perils over a battle of directions cast a shadow over the celebrations of the four hundredth anniversary. A dream during the jubilee celebration in the large stately Arminius Church in Rotterdam, about places of hope outside the Church, gets me in trouble. The final symposium of a momentous year challenges me to reflect on "In everything love," a central theme for the Remonstrants.
In the third essay "Borderlands," I follow anthropologists and philosophers like Szakolczai and Thomassen, to further explore the risks and opportunities for border crossers. Sociologist of religion Hellemans shows how religions worldwide have found themselves in areas of transition. His analyses make clear what is at stake, but he also make suggestions for a possible future. Regarding the Remonstrants, I sharpen the dangers as well as the opportunities. The Dutch philosopher Boutellier suggests that in a secular experiment, all the old religious treasures should be thrown overboard. A morning and evening celebration in a small mountain church make me realize that I cannot do without old and new stories of hope, faith and love. They make my heart beat faster.
In essay four "Motherland," I follow the mothers Joan Didion and Elaine Pagels. Both write poignantly about the loss of their child and husband. The no-holds-barred depictions of pain and grief make me want to learn more about the triad of love and the preciousness of the everyday. Love is subservient, transgressive and endlessly meaningful. It encompasses everything: day and night, joy and sorrow, birth and death.

2 J. van Ginneken, 1932, p. 27. [Willem Kloos (1859–1938) was a 19th century Dutch poet who set himself against the moralistic and cliché-ridden poetry of minister-poets of the time. – trans.]
3 Ibid., p. 28.
4 Ibid., p. 30.
5 A. Naess, 2002.
6 H. Michel, 1970, p. 408.
7 J. van Ginneken, 1931, p. 3.
8 M. van Wooden, "Are the Remonstrants drifting away from their Christian foundations?" Wed. Feb. 26, 2019.
9 Composer Willem van Twillert.
10 "We realize and accept that we do not find our rest in the certainty of what we profess, but in wonder at what is given to us and bestowed upon us; that we find our destiny not in indifference and greed, but in vigilance and connection with all that lives; that our existence is not completed by who we are and what we have, but by what is infinitely greater than we can comprehend.

Guided by this realization, we believe in God's Spirit who transcends all that divides people and animates them to what is holy and good, so that singing and being silent, praying and acting, honor and serve God.
We believe in Jesus, a Spirit-filled man, the face of God who looks at us and disturbs us. He loved humanity and was crucified but lives, past his own death and ours. He is our holy example of wisdom and of courage and brings near to us God's eternal love.
We believe in God, the Eternal, who is unfathomable love, the ground of existence, who shows us the path of freedom and justice and beckons us to a future of peace.
We believe that we ourselves, as weak and fallible as we are, are called to be connected with Christ and all who believe, to be church in the sign of hope.
For we believe in the future of God and world, in a divine patience that grants time to live and to die and to rise, in the kingdom that is and will be, where God will be forever: all in all.
To God be the praise and honor in time and eternity. Amen"

11 C. Anbeek, et. al, 2019, Introduction to the Creed. *Thanksgiving service at the 400th anniversary of the Remonstrant Brotherhood (1619-2019)*, Sunday, March 3 Arminius Church Rotterdam.
12 C. Anbeek, et al., 2019. See also: T. Mikkers, 2019.
13 A. Szakolczai, A., 2018, p. 30.
14 C. Anbeek, 2021.
15 C. Anbeek, 2013. C. Anbeek, H. Alma, S, van Goelst Meijer, 2018.
16 E. van Kuijk-Spaans, 2019.
17 S. Hellemans, 2019.
18 K. Stanglin, 2009.
19 H. Boutellier, H., 2019, p. 29.
20 Ibid., p. 216
21 M. McLennan, 2019, p. 19.
22 J. Didion, 2012, p. 5.
23 Ibid., p. 31.
24 Ibid., p. 69.
25 Ibid., p. 186. The philosopher Matthew McLennan writes, "In a godless universe, one way that ethics gains its meaning is through the inherently impossible but heroic task of weaving lasting and honest fabrics of memory in human communities." M. McLennan, 2019, p. 205.
26 E. Pagels, 1979.
27 E. Pagels, 2019.
28 Ibid., p. 109.
29 Ibid., p. 126.
30 Ibid., p. 143.
31 E. Pagels, 2018, p. 232.
32 E. Pagels, 2018, p. 239.

1 **Main philosophical themes Part 2**
Essay five 'Fieldwork' shows how borderlands provide inspiration for dancers, poets and dreamers. In uncertain in-between areas, they express their despair and hope. They help to further explore border areas in which we ourselves are caught up. Scientists also wander in borderlands, wondering how to gather adequate knowledge. Insights and concepts that previously offered direction seem to have become meaningless. The anthropologists Holbraad and Pedersen open avenues for the unknown reality itself to speak to us.
Essay six 'Places of promise' explores how in the unknown territory we have entered, all sorts of things are happening. Aided by our senses on edge and no longer hindered by what we thought we knew, we field workers can discover all sorts of things. Hopeful places that we hardly saw before suddenly stand out in the light of disruption: a children's hospital, a chocolate factory, a workshop, a schoolyard, a house full of happiness and unhappiness, a proponent's exam with complicated theological questions and a touching embrace. In lived life, I encounter places and situations where communities with a heart spontaneously appear before my eyes.
Essay seven 'Living and thinking' is about one of the problems I struggled with as a student of philosophy of religion. I could not relate the abstract theological concepts I was taught to the disruptive experiences in my own life. Writing a dissertation on death only widened the gap. The intellectual edifices of Lutheran theologian Pannenberg and Zen philosopher Nishitani disappeared like skyscrapers high in the thin air. I could not translate them back to my own life with experiences of loss. In fact, I had no idea what they were about. Theological and philosophical reflections and the messy life seem unrelated. The work of Paul Tillich is an example of this. Tracy Fessenden criticized him for this. I did get my degree and thus gained my freedom. The helm changed radically. Disruptive experiences in which the vulnerability of life becomes tangible and visible became the starting point of my theological reflections.
2 P. Celan, 2003, p. 275. [English translation from *Poems of Paul Celan: A Bilingual German/English Edition, Revised Edition*, translated by Michael Hamburger, Copyright © 2002 by Persea Books, New York.]
3 M. Holbraad, and M. A. Pedersen, 2017, p. 5.
4 Ibid., pp. 19, 20.
5 D. Hooghiemstra, 2013, p. 146. [*Werkplaats* can be translated as "workshop" or "workplace," but here it is a proper noun. – trans.]
6 Ibid., p. 57.
7 S. van der Sluijs, 2021, p. 11.
8 Ibid., p. 12.
9 C.P. Tiele, 1869, p. 208.
10 C. Anbeek, 2021.
11 P. Tillich, 1952, p. 41.
12 Ibid., p. 190.
13 H. Arendt, 2007, p. 471.

14 T. Fessenden, 1998, p. 46.
15 W. Pauck and M. Pauck, 1976, p. 83.
16 T. Fessenden, 1998, p. 48.
17 T. Fukai, 2013, p. 13.
18 Ibid., p. 15.
19 T. Fessenden, 1998, p. 50.
20 C. Anbeek, 1994, pp. 18–22.
21 C. Anbeek, 2018, pp. 213–215

1 **Main philosophical themes Part 3**
The courage to be vulnerable concerns the messy, difficult, bewildering, but also wonderful and joyful earthly existence. In the *Courage to Be*, Tillich pointed out the distinction between being brave and being courageous. The brave soldier can be a heroic individual, but for the courage to be we need another. We cannot do it ourselves. For Tillich, the courage to be is rooted in the ground of Being. You may also call it God above God, Buddha, the Ultimate. God beyond God appears when everything else has vanished into meaninglessness and doubt. We are seized by the power of Being.
To be vulnerable, you also need courage. This could also not be done alone. This courage is rooted in others to whom you must trust; others who care for you, cherish you, but who can also harm you and do bad things. What characterizes our mutual interdependence and which communities are necessary for the courage to be vulnerable? What earthly and concrete philosophical and theological reflections help us along the way? In the eight essay 'Women's Voices', I follow the women philosophers Hannah Arendt, Alison Stone, Susan Brison and Adriana Cavarero who provide building blocks for communities with heart.
The ninth essay 'Religion Inside and Outside Us' is about the difference between religious studies and theology. According to Tracy Fessenden religious studies reflects on the intertwining of life and religion. Religious voices outside us become compelling voices inside us, defining our lives. In my theological reflections, I look for theological building blocks for communities with heart, where we can live vulnerably together and care for all that lives. Instead of abstract concepts such as God, the Infinite, and the Good I find concrete persons, intimations of transitional areas, and verbs.
The tenth essay, 'Rainbow Experiences', is about how the search for communities with a heart sometimes feels like being adrift on a gray body of water. Looking back and forward, I search for green twigs that can help find direction. Two life-threatening experiences made theologian Serene Jones search for new meaning. Aided by philosophical traveling companion Luce Irigaray, she arrives at 'breath'. Our breath is the most radical path we can take to re-imagine the divine.

Who were my theological and philosophical travel companions? What have they brought me? For my dissertation, I bent over thinkers about death for many years. Later this turned around. Being born, vulnerability, flourishing and allowing others to flourish became important. I decide to leave behind the much

imagined 'memento mori', remember to die, and turn to the living. Those who breathe. Breath of life. Breath of grace.

2 H. Arendt, 1958, p. 178.
3 H. Arendt, 1978, p. 29.
4 A. Stone, 2019, pp. 66–100.
5 S.J. Brison, 2017, p.218.
6 S.J. Brison, 2002.
7 S.J. Brison, 2017, p. 223.
8 Ibid., p. 224.
9 Ibid., p. 225. See also L. Norton, Y. Sliep, 2018.
10 A. Cavarero, 2015 p. 4.
11 Ibid., p. 10.
12 Ibid., p. 11.
13 T. Fessenden, 2018, p. 18.
14 Ibid., p. 29.
15 Ibid., p. 29.
16 S. Jones, 2019, p. xv.
17 Ibid., p. xxii.
18 A.G. Castermans and S. Du Croo De Jongh, 1991, p. 11.
19 "Thou who summoned the morning and called forth the light,
Bless us too with your light!
Unquenchable fire,
Over us rose like a sun,
Grasp us in your rays,
Make us thrive in your sight!
Thou who wants to break the resistance of the night,
Forcing our future to the dark,
Who summoned the morning and called forth the light,
Bless us too with your light!" (Sytze de Vries)
20 M. Foucault, 2019, p. 95. [The English translation in this volume uses the alternative name for Apollo, Phoebus.]
21 Ibid., p. 97-98.
22 A. De Botton, 2012, p. 188.
23 M.B. Katan, 2015.
24 Katan writes in his column, "And Job? Even stranger than its origin from a vacuum is the fact that scholars have included the book in the official Jewish Bible. It is true that Job never literally curses God, but his description of the supreme being comes close to a heavenly Assad who kills at his pleasure. How I would love to see the minutes of the meeting where the canonization of Job was decided. The chances of those turning up are slim, if only given the way in which in the Middle East including the Temple Mount the remains of the past are now being destroyed. I suspect the poignant poetry of Job played a role in the decision; the descriptions of the dewdrop in the desert, the sun on the horizon, the gates of death. I think the voice from the whirlwind was the deciding factor. I don't need

a bearded man who rewards good and punishes evil, but I also find no satisfaction in how molecular biology describes man: like a blind copying machine that can join the scrap after seventy years. I prefer the grandeur and absurdity of the All according to Job; it helps me accept the meaninglessness of existence."

25 G.J. Hoenderdaal, *1977*. Hoenderdaal notes that liturgy can be especially helpful in a secular world and face to face with vulnerability. "We celebrate in a world that threatens to devour us." p. *195*.

26 M. van Bokhoven, *2022*.

27 Rengetsu, *1994*, p. *79*.

28 P. Young-Eisendrath, *1996*.

29 S. Jones, *2019*, p. *232*.

30 Ibid., p. *235*.

31 S. Jones, *2011*.

32 Ibid., p. *3*.

33 Ibid., p. *26*.

34 H., Arendt, *1978*, pp. *86-87*.

35 H.M. Vroom, *1988*.

36 C., Anbeek, *2005*.

37 G. Parkes, *2019*.

38 C. Anbeek, *2005*, pp. *111-115*.

39 G. Parkes, *2019*, p. *474*. "It gives me a melancholy pleasure to live in the midst of this jumble of little lanes, of needs, of voices: how much enjoyment, impatience, and desire, how much thirsty life and intoxication with life comes to light at every moment! And yet for all these clamorous, lively, life-thirsty people it will soon be so silent! And behind each one of them his shadow stands, as his dark fellow traveler! It is always as in the last moment before the departure of an emigrant ship: there is more to say than ever before, the hour is at hand, and the ocean with its desolate silence is waiting impatiently behind all this noise - so covetous and certain of its prey." (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882), quoted in Parkes, *2019*).

40 G. Parkes, *2019*, p. *474*. "A hundred years hence, not one of these people now walking in the Ginza will be alive, neither the young nor the old, the men nor the women [...]. In a flash of lightning before the mind's eye, what is to be actual a hundred years hence is already an actuality today. We can look at the living as they walk full of health down the Ginza and see, in double exposure, a picture of the dead [...]. This kind of double exposure is true vision of reality [...]. The aspect of life and the aspect of death are equally real, and reality is that which appears now as life and now as death."

41 H. Arendt, *1958*, p. *246*.

1 **Main philosophical themes Part 4**

In the eleventh essay 'Being silent and speaking', I explore breathing rituals. Breath brings me back to my teachers Nishitani and Ueda in seated Zen meditation. Something ineffable reveals itself in silence. Van Ginneken, a linguist, was interested in breathing rituals of small children: crying, sucking, laughing and babbling. They practice the suppleness of tongue, uvulva and lips. Making sounds, as animals also do, is not yet purposefully saying something, but it is essential for learning to speak. The wonder of language and speech is like a light. According to Van Ginneken and Arendt it creates direction and meaning. They point beyond ourselves to the other and our shared world. Without breath we cannot speak, but not everything that breathes speaks, or does it? How can we learn to listen beyond the human and what does this bring us?

A new lockdown just before Christmas provides the occasion for new and old reflections. The world has changed and so has the place of religion. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor worries about the gap between the many seekers for meaning and the warehouses full of spiritual riches. Human flourishing is insufficient as the only direction for our lives. We need religious visions and practices that point beyond the human. The transcendent can be helpful here. He calls for an ecumenism of friendship: deep and patient conversations between young and old, rich and poor, religious and nonreligious.

A Christmas Eve from more than two hundred years ago provides a glimpse into the multicolored nature of friendly conversations, which can also be about the transcendent. Many writers commented only on the last part of this ancient masterpiece by Schleiermacher. Here men's speeches take center stage. Julia Lamm pleads for the whole of the Weihnachtsfeier to be taken seriously. Something very different becomes apparent. Women, men, children, sociability, music, gifts, stories of joy and sorrow, darkness and light, reflection on the meaning of it all and silence: they all matter!

In the thirteenth essay 'Friendships, I reflect on who might be our friends in Taylor's ecumenism of friendship. Who inhabit the earth and who are our friends? A bizarre promotion ceremony in a COVID-19-empty auditorium of the Free University pushes me to the facts of changing student life. The demand for connection seems more urgent than ever. According to Korsgaard and O'Connell, not only do humans thrive by being and playing together, but so do our fellow creatures. Our animal friends can teach us something about friendship and the power of rituals. They greet each other, grieve, mourn, go on pilgrimages. Students and scholars, even before they were locked in their rooms, are gloomy, lonely and suffer from high performance pressure. Psychologists offer help, but animals and the transcendent remain out of the picture. Perhaps here lies an opportunity for ancient wisdom: not every flowering needs to come from ourselves. Sometimes something is given to us. Could the transcendent perhaps be a valuable friend in our circle of friends after all? The analyses of the sociologist of religion Hans Joas, make clear that this is a risky friend. Transcendent and self-destructive forces show us the extremes of life: beauty and

delight, but also destruction. We need each other to channel "experiences of the sacred". Theologians like Gebara, Eaton and Pope Francis, identify pitfalls of the Christian concept of transcendence. The earth, its vulnerability and imperfection, the fragile and the magnificent come to be overshadowed by a higher reality. They suggest replacing old interpretations of faith with new ones. Daring to go barefoot and take new steps with empty hands on the uneven uncertain path of life.

2 S. Ueda, 1992.
3 Ibid., p. 1.
4 Ibid., p. 4.
5 Ibid., p. 7.
6 J. van Ginneken (1917). *Story of a toddler.* Oudenbosch.
7 Ibid., p. 6.
8 H. Keller (1903). *The Story of My Life.* New York: Doubleday, p.3, cited in J. van Ginneken, 1917, p. 22.
9 Ibid., p. 12, cited in Van Ginneken, 1917, p. 26.
10 Ibid.
11 Van Ginneken, 1917, p. 27.
12 H. Arendt, 1958, p. 176. "This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human."
13 H. Arendt, 1978, p. 58-59.
14 Ibid., p. 88.
15 Ibid., p. 100.
16 C. Anthony and S. Hellemans, 2021.
17 C. Taylor, 1999.
18 A.J. Carroll and S. Hellemans, 2021, p. 5.
19 C. Taylor, 2021, p. 185.
20 Ibid., p. 189.
21 Ibid., p. 193.
22 Ibid., p. 196.
23 C.D. Schwarz, 1869.
24 Ibid, p. xix.
25 F. Schleiermacher, 1869, p. 147.
26 Ibid., p. 157.
27 J.A. Lamm, 2012.
28 Lamm quotes from her own translation of *Weihnachtsfeier, Christmas Eve:* "Soon they had everyone listening as devout listeners, and as they were ending, it happened, as it always does, that religious music brings about first a quiet pacification and withdrawal of the soul. There were some silent moments in which everyone knew that each soul was lovingly directed toward all the rest, and toward something higher still." J.A. Lamm, 2012, p. 401.
29 Ibid., p. 407.
30 Ibid., p. 412.

31 Ibid., p. 414. "As we all laid hands on the child, according to the fine, old local custom, it was as if streams of heavenly love and delight converged on the head and heart of the child as a new focal point and so would stream out again in all directions, and it was certainly the shared feeling that they are there enkindling a new life."
32 Ibid., p. 414.
33 Ibid., p. 415, "'Now both come to me at the same time, given immediately by God. On the festival of the new birth of the world, unto me is born to a new life the darling of my heart. Yes, he lives-there is no doubt about it,' Charlotte said, while she bent over him, hardly daring to touch him or to press his hand to her lips."
34 I. Speckmann, 2021, pp. 247-248.
35 C.M. Korsgaard, 2018.
36 Ibid., p. 22. "For animals, eating and drinking, sexual activity, physical activity, playing with children and with each other, warmth and comfort are positive goods. It is a mistake to think of life as a big empty space into which good or bad things may equally well be inserted. Life is a good, *existence* is a good, except when it is bad – and that is not a tautology."
37 Ibid., p. 176.
38 C. O'Connell, 2021, p. 5. "Animals have incredibly sophisticated rituals that are related to all aspects of their lives. These rituals allow them to survive in a very complex world, to predict what will happen next, and to connect deeply with their families and communities. These rituals are very similar to our own."
39 Ibid., p. 13. "By learning from these powerful ceremonies within the wild, we, too, can access our own innate ability to find healing, self-awareness, community, and ultimately deep connection to the world around us."
40 J. M. Dopmeijer, 2021.
41 J.M. Dopmeijer, J. Nuijen, M.C.M. Buschm, N.I. Tak, 2021, p. 10.
42 J.M. Dopmeijer, 2021, p. 124.
43 H. Joas, 2017, p. 352. [Reference is to the German edition.]
44 Ibid., p. 472.
45 Ibid., p. 433.
46 Ibid., p. 434.
47 Ibid., p. 438.
48 Ibid., p. 439.
49 H. Marsman, 1960, p. 72.
50 H. Eaton, 2017, pp. 19-44.
51 Ibid., p. 34.
52 Ibid., p. 43.
53 G. van den Brink, G., E. Van Urk-Coster, 2019.
54 K. Stanglin, 2009.
55 G.J. Hoenderdaal, 1975.
56 G. van den Brink, and E. Van Urk-Coster, 2019, p. 456, "If humans are created in the image of God, should they not relate like this God to those who are at their mercy, and expect from them the same sort of submission that we owe to God?"

57 I. Gebara, 2019, p. 473, "We must go back to walking barefoot on the ground of uncertainties and differences and take a chance on the next step as if it were a fragile certainty."
58 Pope Francis makes a similar point in *Laudato Si.* Human beings need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. "We have forgotten that we ourselves are the dust of the earth (cf. *Gen* 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breath her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters." Pope Francis, 2015, p. 149. G. Kuperus, 2020.

Epilogue

1 C. Anbeek, 2013.
2 Ibid., p. 47.
3 Ibid., p. 54.
4 For the complete list [in Dutch] of theses written by students of the Remonstrant seminary in the past decade, see: https://arminiusinstituut.remonstranten.nl/proponentsscripties/ accessed 3 November 2023.
5 C. Anbeek, W.J. Renger, and H. van Zuthem, 2019.
6 Presentation by Y. Sliep at Radboud Summer School International Grail: Communities-with-a-heart.
7 M. Nussbaum, 2023.
8 For the full formulation, see M. Nussbaum, 2023, pp. 129–131.
9 Ibid., p. 145.
10 United Nations (UN) countries first agreed on development goals for the entire world in 2000. Those were the eight Millennium Development Goals, which ran until 2015. The report of those "MDGs" was mostly positive. For example, the goal of halving the number of people living in extreme poverty was met. Other goals, such as reducing maternal and child mortality, were less successful. During RIO+20, the UN Sustainable Development Summit in 2012, there was the first discussion of "Sustainable Development Goals," the successors to the Millennium Development Goals. The SDGs are even more ambitious than the eight Millennium Development Goals. The new development agenda applies to all countries. It is no longer just about help from rich countries to poor countries. The Sustainable Development Goals have greater focus on peace and security, economic development and environmental issues. They also go beyond the Millennium Development Goals with the complete eradication of poverty and hunger. The idea behind the SDGs is that no one should be left behind and everyone should be able to build a better future.
Moreover, the SDGs were not conceived exclusively within the walls of the UN. Everyone was allowed to have a say on them. See: https://sdgs.un.org/goals, consulted on 3 November 2023.
11 L. Norton, Y. Sliep, 2018; J.M. Stavros, L.N. Godwin, and D.L. Cooperrider, 2015.
12 N. Christakis, 2019.
13 M. Nussbaum, 2023; C. O'Connell, 2021; C.M. Korsgaard, 2018.

"I have long argued that we should not avoid life's all-encompassing fragility but rather embrace it. Fragility, uncertainty, unpredictability, dependence, and porousness, however difficult they often can be, are sources of deep insights. Disruptive experiences bring us into borderlands. They make our vulnerability manifest but also reveal new perspectives and creativity."

Disruptive experiences knock the ground out from under your feet. Who are you when nothing is as it was before? Who can you become, and who can help you get there?

In the era of climate change, refugee crises, growing inequality and war – an era in which prior certainties cease to be and new certainties are yet to be discovered – Christa Anbeek lays out the contours of communities with a heart. Precisely from our vulnerability, we can seek and discover new connections.

CHRISTA ANBEEK was endowed professor of Remonstrant Theology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and is currently endowered professor of Women and Care for the Future at Radboud University in Nijmegen. Her prior publications include the bestselling *The Mountain of the Soul* [De berg van de ziel] and *For Joseph and His Brother* [Voor Joseph en zijn broer], the latter of which won the Best Spiritual Book award in 2019.

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