

Excerpts

Excerpt from the Preface

I have written each of my books in an effort to make up for deficiencies in the last one. *Life Abundant* is no exception. After completing *Super, Natural Christians*, subtitled *How We Should Love Nature*, I realized love was not enough. I realized that we middle-class North American Christians are destroying nature, not because we do not love it, but because of the way we live: our ordinary, taken-for-granted high-consumer lifestyle. I realized that the matter of loving nature was a deep, complex, tricky question involving greed, indifference, and denial.

So I have set about trying to rectify the inadequacies of my last book with yet another (inadequate) book. The thesis of this one is that we North American middle-class Christians need to live differently in order to love nature and to live differently, we need to think differently—especially about ourselves and who we are in the scheme of things. And by "think differently" I do not mean our conscious, "for publication" thoughts about ourselves, but the largely unconscious picture of who we are that is the silent partner in all our behavior and decisions. These world-pictures or worldviews are formed by many factors, one of which is the religious assumptions about human beings that operate implicitly in a culture.

The current dominant American worldview, a legacy from the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and eighteenth-century economic theory, is that we are individuals with the right to happiness, especially the happiness of the consumer-style "abundant life." The market ideology has become our way of life, almost our religion, telling us who we are (consumers) and what the goal of life is (making money). In report after report from the United Nations Development Programme and similar organizations, the grim results of this lifestyle are becoming apparent: a widening gap between the rich and the poor as well as the unraveling of the irreplaceable life systems of the planet. Is this loving nature—or our neighbor?

I don't think so. I realized that a basic deficiency in my last book was the neglect of economics (partly because I thought it was too difficult to understand). There is, however, no avoiding it—and what ordinary people need to know is not its technical side, but the assumptions and results of consumer-oriented economic theory. We do not love nature or care for two-

thirds of the world's people if we who are 20 percent of the population use more than 80 percent of the world's energy. There is not enough energy on the planet for all people to live as we do (and increasingly, most want to) or for the planet to remain in working order if all try to live this way. We are on a path that is unjust to others and unsustainable to the planet. But most of us do not know (or acknowledge) this; we keep ourselves in denial because we like this way of life, and our economic system and government collude with us. We middle-class North Americans are addicted to the consumer lifestyle, even if it means depriving others and putting the planet in jeopardy.

Life Abundant is not a feel-good read, at least not initially. Reading it will probably be like writing it was. Eventually, I could imagine another abundant life, one that I found deeply satisfying. However, the route to it for folks like me and you (the presumed middle-class North American reader) involves limitation and sacrifice, a radically different view of abundance. It involves re-imagining the good life in just and sustainable ways. Why is this satisfying? I invite you to read on and discover, but most simply, for me, because I sleep better at night, thinking of another possible way to live, one in which most of the world's people would have the necessary basics and the planet could remain more or less intact.

So, this book is about imagining another way to live "abundantly" on planet Earth. The route to this other way, to what I call the ecological economic model, is a bit circuitous because I want to show how I got there. I believe that all Christians must have a working theology, one that can actually function in their personal, professional, and public lives. Gradually, over many years I have developed one and it is a theology for just and sustainable planetary living. I will share my theological journey as a possible case study for readers who might want to undertake a similar one. I decided to write the book this way in part to de-mystify theology: there is nothing special about theology—every Christian has one. The question is how good, appropriate, and functional is it?

One way to test your theology—those deeply-held, perhaps subconscious beliefs about God and the world that profoundly influence your actions—is to examine it. This is an old Christian practice, epitomized in Augustine's plea, "For Thy mercies' sake, O Lord my God, tell me what Thou art to me." One undertakes a contemplative exercise for the purpose of living with God and for neighbor more appropriately and fully. It is a way of doing theology that begins in experience and ends in a conversion to a new way of being in the world. Developing a working theology is not "doing one's thing" or finding a

comfortable view of God; on the contrary, it is undergoing the discipline of the examination of conscience for the purpose of living the Christian life more deeply and fittingly in one's own time. Needless to say, if this exercise does result in a view of abundant living, it will not be the popular contemporary one. Perhaps Dorothy Day sums it up best when she wrote: "I wanted life and I wanted the abundant life. *I wanted it for others too*" (italics added).

This book, then, has a dual aim: to describe a Christian theology of the good life and to show how I have come to this theology. Needless to say, this is only one such theology. Whether it is helpful toward attaining a just, sustainable planet and whether it is Christian is for readers to judge. At the very least, I hope it helps you work out your own theology.

Excerpt from Chapter 1

"The glory of God is every creature fully alive."--In the spirit of Irenaeus, 3rd cent.

"We beg you, God, make us fully alive."--Bishop Serapin, 4th cent.

A Religious Autobiography

For many years I have taught a course on religious autobiography; it was the first course I taught and I am still teaching it. Why? Because I am very interested in people who try to live their faith, who have what I would call a "working theology," a set of deeply-held beliefs that actually function in their personal and public lives. Augustine, John Woolman, Sojourner Truth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King are a few of these people. Each of them struggled to discern God's action in and through their lives and then to express this reality in everything they did. Their theologies became embodied in themselves; as disciples of Christ they became mini-incarnations of God's love. We call such people "saints," reflections of God, images of God with us in the flesh. They are intimations of what it means to be "fully alive," living life from, toward, and with God. They are examples to the rest of us of what a Christ-like life is. They fascinate because in them we see God and the human in intimate connection, human lives showing forth different facets of divine power and love.

While it may seem outrageous to suggest, I believe each of us is called to this vocation, the vocation of sainthood. Each Christian is asked to examine their life with the goal of discerning the action of God in it and then to express

God's power and love in everything they do. We are each expected to have a working theology, one that makes a difference in how we conduct our personal lives and how we act at professional and public levels. Becoming a mature Christian means internalizing one's beliefs so that they are evident in whatever one says or does. Made in the image of God, we are called to grow into that image more fully—to become "like God," which for Christians means becoming like Christ, following Christ. And following Christ means following One who, like us, was flesh and bones, of the earth, earthy. It means that Christian saints focus on God's work of helping to make all of us, every creature on the planet, fully alive. Christian sainthood is, it appears, a very mundane—a worldly, earthly—business.

For all the years I have been teaching the course in religious autobiography, it never occurred to me to write my own. Actually, I wasn't ready. I believe I might be now. I want to see how a few beliefs which I now hold undeniably can function as a working theology for the ecological and justice crises facing our planet in the twenty-first century. A bare bones theology, a few beliefs carefully thought-through and actually functioning at personal and public levels, may be more significant than a comprehensive, systematic, but loosely-embraced theology. What is one prepared to live? What beliefs are livable; that is, what beliefs will support the flourishing of life?

I want to use my own history as a case study for other Christians who are also trying to integrate their beliefs and their actions at the deepest level, who are trying to be whole, mature Christians functioning effectively in the twenty-first century on planet earth. The story I will share will be brief, narrow, and focussed. It is meant as a pedagogical tool for others, and hence will ignore all kinds of personal data (family, schooling, relationships, etc.) which undoubtedly in a full autobiography would be relevant but will be passed over here.

I have had four "conversions," four experiences of such importance that they changed by thinking about God and my behavior. The first, which came in two stages, occurred when I was around seven years old. One day while walking home from school the thought came to me that some day I would not be here, I would not exist. Christmas would come and I would not be around to celebrate it; even more shocking, my birthday would occur and I would not be present. It was not an experience of death--and the fear of it; rather, it was an experience of non-being: I simply would not exist. For months, indeed years, I could not get this thought out of my mind; I was fascinated and terrified by it. Eventually, it began to turn into a sense of wonder that I was alive--and so

were myriads of other creatures. Over decades this wonder has stayed with me, growing stronger and deeper until now I believe that one of the most profound religious emotions is wonder at and gratitude for life in all its incredible shapes, colors, and sizes. Along with Annie Dillard I now exclaim, "My God what a world. There is no accounting for one second of it," and along with Alice Walker I notice the color purple in fields when I pass by. That early experience of non-being has eventuated into praise to God for all beings fully alive.

The second stage of my seventh-year conversion occurred one day when the teacher asked the class, "What name will you write more than any other in your life?" Being an eager student, I immediately raised my hand to answer. Fortunately, the teacher did not call on me; had she done so, I would have been red with embarrassment. The correct answer was, of course, one's own name, but I was going to answer, "God." That incident stayed with me as I gradually discerned its meaning. I have decided I was not wrong: "God" is the name beneath, with, and in each of our names. As I have come to realize that we all live and move and have our being in God, the names of each person, species, creature, and element are superimposed over God's name. God is reality; God is the source of the reality of each of us. Panentheism--seeing the world as in God--puts God's "name" first, but each of our names are included and preserved in their distinctiveness within the divine reality. My early experience of God's name as primary, the experience of divine transcendence and pre-eminence, would stay with me and grow.