

Appendix K

Summary of the Four Stages of Serving the Poor

In an essay entitled, “The Service of the Poor and Spiritual Growth,” South African theologian Albert Nolan outlines four identifiable stages of spiritual growth observable among those who are struggling to serve in situations of oppression. These stages can serve as a “spiritual map” of the rites of passage likely to be encountered by whoever would come into relationship to the poor. What follows is a summary and adaptation of his understanding.

Stage 1: Searching Compassion

Those of us who find ourselves socially, economically, and politically among the privileged normally begin to come into relationship with those who are not similarly privileged on the basis of compassion. We “see” suffering and want to help. Personal contact leads to an impulse of kindness: media exposure provokes beneficence. The usual response at this point involves some kind of relief work and perhaps an attempt to simplify our own lifestyle. Spiritually, our experience can be understood as a matter of sharing in God’s compassion.

If we were to categorize this first stage in terms of our perception of the situation, we would say that our awareness of suffering plunges us into a crisis of personal response. Our basic experience of power here is that of our own ego. We recognize a need and we act to alleviate it. Biblically, we might gloss the process as one of developing an “apocalyptic consciousness,” learning to see our world from the point of view of those who live on the wrong side of the tracks, those who fall through the cracks, those for whom the present structures are oppressive and victimizing. We do not really

accomplish a lot at this point except the offering of a few bandaids, and maybe a little companionship. But we begin to be aware of life on the “other side.”

Stage one awareness could be summarized as, “Folks are really hurting!”

Stage 2: Vehement Indignation

Sooner or later, however, our involvement leads to a deeper understanding of the situation. We begin to recognize that, for the most part, people are not poor through personal negligence or laziness. It is rather the case that they are up against a systemic reality that exploits them. They are trapped by environmental constraints, enculturated in impoverished circumstances, discriminated against, redlined, stereotyped, isolated from resources and opportunities. Theoretical analysis complements personal intuition to reveal structural oppression. Our attempts to help begin to meet with systemic resistance. We begin to understand that poverty has a cause.

When this happens, warm compassion frequently shades over into hot indignation. We become angry at the ways people’s lives are systemically exploited, bureaucratically manipulated, and institutionally neglected. Action moves from the remedial level to the structural. We start to struggle for political solutions and systemic change.

Spiritually, the uncomfortable biblical category of “God’s wrath” suddenly takes on relevance. We realize we worship a God for whom earthly suffering is not a matter of heavenly indifference. Anger becomes an index of the genuineness of our concern for the people we are attempting to serve. The energies of compassionate indignation begin to be embraced as “gift” in the face of the difficulties of protracted intervention. And potentially, our communion with God takes on a new dimension in the experience of shared outrage over injustice.

Our perception of the situation at this stage is primarily one of systemic violation, and our experience of crisis resolves around the question of institutional affiliation. We begin to question our own relation to the corporate realities against which we are struggling. Our awareness of the power dynamics shifts from that of our own individual egos to that of society's collective structures. The forces of entrenched resistance seem overwhelming. Biblically, we could be said to be engaged in a discipline of prophetic confrontation. It is no longer enough "just" to be aware of the experience of victims in our society or to offer momentary alleviation of their suffering; we now feel impelled to actions attempting to address and eliminate causes.

Stage two awareness could be condensed as: "This thing is intractable!"

Stage 3: Humbled Admiration

In a certain sense, stage three forms the crux and crucible of the entire process. It is here that real "conversion" out of one's own inherited posture and preferred assumptions begins to take place. A certain "grace at the base" of society becomes apparent as we work with those who live there. We move beyond the responses of "mere" horror at the suffering or anger at the (so called) underdevelopment to admiration of surprising abilities. We have now established enough relationship with people struggling against poverty's privations to start to recognize their innate genius. We are taken with their tenacity, struck with their sagacity, provoked by their perspicacity.

Marked and remarked is the vitality of some of the poor in the face of violent constraint. Their courage in living while daily looking into the abyss, at times, astonishes. They have heart. Ruthless street smarts and savvy folk wisdom reveal themselves as the estimable legacy of life under the gun of oppression. Perspective emerges as if from beyond. Humor cuts the confusion and softens the savagery. Since smokey

bureaucratic mystifications rarely blanket all the way down to society's base, incisive commentary may pepper ordinary conversation. The remove of indigence often enough confers the simple grace of unofficial vision.

And the discerning will discover God's quiet powers at work in spite of the malevolent fog of discouragement and despair. Suffering but unbowed faces regularly reveal more than mere struggle. The tracks of the Spirit show up as tears and tenderness right at the heart of the terror. Resurrection quietly breaks surface in the guise of resilient dignity. The shadow of death's constant grin only serves to highlight a certain undaunted presence.

At this point we begin to move out of the "helping" mode and into something much more eschatological. The last become first. We feel inadequate to the situation not just of structural change but of basic guidance. At one level, the marginalized "know" much more than we do; they have certain capacities and credibilities that we cannot match. In many ways, they are better equipped to deal with their problems than we could ever hope to be. We feel "ancillary," irrelevant to their task. We may even at some level envy them their rugged "formation" and romanticize their potency. We might try to assimilate their style, or mimic their music, or imitate their language, or appropriate their stories – but all without ever really facing the depths of their constraints. We may even try to follow their lead.

At this stage, our perceptual focus has shifted away from the personal suffering or structural oppression of the victims to their human and spiritual wealth. We are plunged into a crisis of personal inadequacy and even humiliation. We discover that class and cultural constraints work both ways. We are simultaneously "advantaged" and disadvantaged." We are finally in position and condition to experience the power of the "other." Biblically, a kind of reverse evangelization takes place. We begin to

recognize “good news” in forms and under guises and from quarters we never would have imagined. We are conscientized. Rather than speaking, it is now we who are spoken to: rather than giving, we receive. It is “we” who have become the objects of the world of conversion, and we are astonished and humbled.

Stage three awareness could be characterized as: “Such richness!”

Stage 4: Realistic Determination

But until the last stage, we are still struggling with some level of ideology and illusion. If we remain involved long enough to enter upon this fourth stage, we will find ourselves betrayed by the very people we are attempting to serve. We are disabused of the romanticism of the previous stage. We discover the poor as finally also “sinners” – subject to the same temptations to manipulate, the same desires for comfort at the expense of others, the same ambitions for power, as any of us. Failure swallows up much of our effort. We watch as the poor themselves sell out or are coopted. A dark night of the soul descends. We may even give up and walk away in despair.

But if we hang tight in our confusion and hurt and continue to identify the abuse of the poor and the suffering as God’s cause – in spite of the unfaithfulness or weakness of particular poor people – we can emerge into the possibility of genuine cooperation for change. Our efforts now testify not only to love for certain struggling persons, but even more to our trust in an ever struggling God.

In addition, we recognize the limits of our personal involvement with those who have suffered the system’s worst ravages. Oppression does not only “deform,” it “conforms” and “informs.” The victims will have a level of solidarity and community with one another that we can only note and admire, but not interfere with or pretend to “crash” like somebody else’s party. We give our assent to both our own gifts and those of the

oppressed. Our respective abilities – and consequently, our respective roles in a common effort towards greater justice – complement each other to difference. We do what we can – and “appreciate” what we can’t.

In this last stage, we have finally cleared away enough lies, deceptions, romanticisms, and discouragements to start perceiving the situation realistically. The crisis precipitated by our discovery of the inadequacy of the poor themselves can be brutally crushing – but also astonishingly fertile. Power – whether our own or that exercised by the “other” – has shown itself uncertain and ambiguous. In proximate terms, solidarity is potent: ultimately, however, we all stand, vulnerable, before the great, unmanipulable mystery that undergirds all of life.

Biblically, we have come to the moment of saving incarnation. We have prepared human space for the divine. Stigmata indelibly tattoo our social context: for the eye of faith, the marks of the cross show fresh in the flesh of our cooperative struggle. We are giving collective birth – and are dumbfounded to discover that the spirit is being freed and allowed to live for a moment in time in God’s own. At last, we begin to understand something known only by the least and the littlest: for all of history, the heart of God hovers wounded but unshakable over those who hope and wrestle for a new earth. Unflinching social incarnation is the radical means of divine liberation.

Stage four awareness emerges as: “You’re just like me only different!” And, then finally, as silent, tear-and-blood-streaked wonder.

These four stages are experienced in practice as both chronologically cumulative and simultaneously spiraling. We can never be exactly sure where we are and may feel ourselves to be in more than one place at once. It is enough that we are on the way – and open to going further. The “map” is only a helping construct at best, a kind of litmus test of motivation and gauge of vision for those of use who are non-poor (the

poor and oppressed have their own journey to undertake). As with Anthony of Egypt's evaluation of prayer to God, so here regarding our relationship to the poor: those of us who are still conscious we are pursuing it probably haven't yet really begun.

The ultimate aim is the cultivation of a habit and lifestyle of radical interdependence. We who will always be able to opt for safer, less demanding turf socially, must become spiritually bound to a living condition. When we have become utterly converted to and intimately dependent upon the human-God who comes to us in the eyes and hands and words of the oppressed, then we will be ready for the final face-to-face encounter. To meet God before that moment is perhaps dangerous.