

The background is a solid yellow color. It features several stylized sunflowers in a light yellow or cream color. The sunflowers have long, thin stems, several oval-shaped leaves, and large, circular heads. Each head is composed of concentric circles, with the outermost ring being the most prominent. The sunflowers are scattered across the page, with some in the foreground and others in the background, creating a sense of depth.

# On Becoming A Practical Theologian

by Dawn Collins

To the late Joseph W. Mathews, Charles and Doris Hahn and George Holcombe who posed the question 40 years ago to the corporate entity of the Ecumenical Institute/Institute of Cultural Affairs: How do servants of the church, world and community sustain themselves in the task of creating change for the common good?



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# On Becoming a Practical Theologian/A Spiritual Riff on John 14:6

Sunday, April 27, 2014

My neighbor Mrs. S. all of 93 years young, was often fond of passing on repeatedly wisdom from her parents. My favorite aphorism from her, “If you’re not sure what to do, take a nap.” I really put those words to practice when I “sleep on” making a mail order purchase testing whether or not it fits the budget and is a spiritual necessity. Taking the time “to sleep on it” in making a decision appears to be good advice even when pressed to make more than one decision or when time is short and of the essence.

“I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE. NO ONE COMES TO THE FATHER EXCEPT BY ME.” Aren’t you glad there are others (angels) like Mrs. S to guide you and keep you faithful to the Way?

Guess I’ve been on the “Way” since I was 10 or so. My 3 generation family lived in the same block as the tiny local church where my cousins and I attended nursery school and played in the sandbox in the adjacent yard. Could even find an occasional worm or two to shake in each others’ faces.

I don’t remember Sunday School attendance; but am sure there was third generation involvement. As for the “Truth” that was administered to me in the large playground across the street from that same tiny church. A woman of an uncertain age approached me while I was playing on the far side of the grassy field by myself. My cohorts were a few yards away. The lady walked purposely towards me with a book in her hand. Yes, I learned shortly that it was a Bible of sorts (if you hadn’t guessed already). As she opened it up in a landscape format, like Joseph’s coat, it was a book of many colors. And each page had its own unique color which the woman held in teacherly fashion for me to see; while she told the Christian Story unfolding the life, crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The last page? Bright gold.

It took many a year fraught with many dilletantive detours in life and literature from fantasy, science fiction, horror to philosophy, yes even self help before I wound my way back home so to speak through world religions into the message of the “Truth” we find in the Scriptures.

I knew not at the time of my initiation at the age of 10 into the company of “Christ for life” seekers that the journey could be so fulfilling and decades long. So I kept in contact with the Word sporadically and then later with some more or less spontaneous structure which brought me to the realization that the dialogue between the Scriptures, myself and the overlay of the Word on the ways of the world could change you from the inside out for life.

So you want to know if you’re a “good person” (meaning good enough to go to Heaven) trust the embodiment of that Word revealing itself literally in someone like Mrs. S, or some physical occurrence or situation becoming a deep learning experience that becomes ingrained in your character. A life journey full of small to ever greater “Aha moments” awaits you.

The “Riff” is therefore your mark on the planned or spontaneous improvisations (where just like in jazz) you contribute your role with due diligence to the whole composition or to

a life lived abundantly and assuredly in the “Way”, the “Truth” and the “Life”.

Any reflections/comments or insights? There are blank pages for your notes or questions in the back of the pamphlet.

# On Becoming a Practical Theologian/Life Quest (Part A)

Wednesday, June 11, 2014

Have you ever wondered to yourself, “What Am I Here For?”

I submit this is the quest of the New Human of our age who zealously tackles this depth spirit issue to discover the problem is not primarily with the various interpretations of “The Word” (about Life, that is); but the real problem lies in denying and defying the efficacy of “The Word” into the entirety of one’s life.

So the spirit problem of today manifests itself in people becoming angry and confused as their interior space becomes squeezed into smaller and smaller vessels from what may appear expansive; but in fact has become a compartmentalization of the spirit especially if they’re wasting their demythologizing skills on the bombardment of surface issues of the day and their own personal placement in the struggle with “The Way Life Is” without targeting the core reason for their existence. Doubt as to their worthiness as a human being begins to raise its ugly head. And finally we seek answers by turning to and looking for answers in “The Good News”.

This struggle with interpreting or demythologizing a word for the living of these days, if you will, enables us to make allowances for the customs and mores of the day along with societal and spirit problems of the BCE and early CE; and calls for placing ourselves individually (or corporately) within the context of claiming archetypal appearances in the Scriptures to inform our own self-story within our own time and history itself.

Like the merchant seeking goodly pearls (see I Corinthians 13:46), upon finding that one pearl of great price returned after selling all he had and bought it. Thus a variation of “What Am I Here For?” manifests itself in “What is Worth it All?”—(as in all that I own or profess to own).

So as we seek and attain our “pearl of great price”, directly or indirectly, deep has called to deep evoking the Mystery of the Spirit calling our attention to variegated signs, symbols and wonders and we begin to create a sublime framework embracing authentic principles and parameters to capture and recreate our lives and rebuild them from the inside out in the here and now. Call it a watershed moment or an epiphany, we are just fortunate to be chosen, as it were, to be in the right place at the right time for this delightful happening.

Thus we progress deeper into a life quest which asks us four key questions which we’ll look into in our next blog.

## OBAPT/Life Quest (Part B)

Tuesday, July 01, 2014

So we have arrived at a juncture in our journey where we contend with four forthcoming questions and insights. But first, muse a little with me in the discovery that our spirit journey seems to open a beckoning door to more questions. Why is that? (Just a bit of levity to begin our pondering)...Yes really, maybe you'd like to comment on what you've gleaned so far from the past three posts "On Becoming a Practical Theologian". The field is ready for tilling or harvest as the case may be. But first, a spirit break to refresh the content to come.

"The steps of a good (wo)man are ordered by the Lord; and (s)he delights in the [Lord's] Way."-Psalm 37:23

I needed to hear the above which gave me incentive to forge ahead into the unfolding in our consciousness in this Life Quest of four questions emerging out of the new tapestry of life created by paying attention to the signs, symbols and wonders of sublimity in the world of the spirit which produces new parameters and fresh principles forming this framework from which we recreate, build and capture a life which has literally turned us inside out and 180 degrees around. Necessary steps of repentance? Maybe.

Upon reaching a stage of contemplative pausing from our thoughts and meditative insights we begin to focus on what I envisage as the four questions that point toward how we will go forth into the future. Namely, how does one find:

(1). The Absolute Truth granted in the Word about Life? (2). The Absolute Reality which God gives friends of Christ. (3).The Absolute Affirmation from the Source of our living, moving and being? (4). The Absolute Validation found in the gentle coaxing yet firm guidance of the Holy Spirit?

Would you like to brood over these questions a bit before we move on and offer up or contribute your appropriation of this propitious turn of events in our spirit journey.

So as we anticipate more ingredients for the stew. We'll pick up in a bit insights we've gained that may illuminate our Life Quest. In the broad, I'm intuiting our insights will be what gives us balance, ease even comfort along with the impetus, inclination and concrete practical means for taking care of ourselves.

I'm thinking two or three weeks might do it and we'll pick up at where we left off with "OBAPT/Life Quest (Part B)".

# OBAPT: Life Quest (Part C)

Monday, July 21, 2014

We all, all of us, are about the task of finding meaning and purpose in our lives no matter what caste, clan or class, ethnic origin or nationality, religious persuasion, gender or age. Wee babes for instance are joyful in being their “babyhood” and delight their parent(s) when making their first meaningful word whether it is “ma-ma” or “da-da”. And soon they begin to communicate a sound which becomes a pattern of sounds that creates understanding across the span of age and maturity.

When we apply Scriptural knowledge within our constant dialogue, which is a living process evoking happenings in our lives and those around us—we begin to explore the map of our life’s purpose and meaning.

So we lay the problem for now at the door of theologians and scholars especially those who have attempted to create a joint effort of comprehensive study of the Old Testament and New Testament into what could be called the progressive New Secular Religious Scriptures for Modern Times.

Certain circumspect folk would negate or deny developing a constant meaningful dialogue with the Scriptures as they apply to one’s daily life, with God who meets us as we are in the here and now. They will miss out on the sheer efficacy of comfort this perpetual conversation from the abyss to the sublime ministers to believers. We greet that “still small voice” which echoes and resounds throughout the universe with signs, symbols and wonders creating a whole new framework of “spiritual residue” if you will, injecting new parameters AND paradigms into our zeitgeist (picture of the world).

It may appear that this journey into the spirit deeps occurs to a select number of people and I believe that is the case. It’s not that God is choosing favorites; it is that he is selecting those believers who persevere in their struggle, which becomes second nature for some to do His Will in the everyday, in the moment, in the space and time He has provided us with and given us the resources to do and be and know His mission, i.e., to inject His Word into every situation involving human encounters where we meet Him in the everyday and where History is made.

So, the most important encounter in our quest is to faithfully seek reconciliation to the Trinity and to understand the Trinitarian Formula as a mathematical problem requiring a personal solution. Thus, these “called out ones” willingly struggle to find answers to the four questions below. Again, this endeavor or life’s vocation of seeking the answers to life’s deepest questions can become real to anyone God chooses to belong to the flock of the Good Shepherd. We cannot bring transformational life altering change about by ourselves.

So epiphany after epiphany becomes the order of the day in the here and now as we live our Life Quest or journey in God’s Way, Will, Inclination and Pleasure. We seek and find all at once serendipitously answers to the following questions presented to every practicing practical theologian. These questions can and may erupt out of any life happening or encounter from the most adversarial and combative of circumstances to the most playful and sublime within our everyday life shared albeit with ordinary and extraordinary people.

Even as we seek we find answers to the following questions:

1). How do I find Absolute Truth? By engaging in constant dialogue with The Word and applying it even in the most pleasant or sublime situations to the most numbing or even combative or adversarial encounters with Life as it happens to us. Remember these are questions evoked from everyday experiences of one who is simply speaking trying to get close to God. In that nearness as close as your very breath you are constantly checking with God to reveal to you His Truth as his gift to you to impart to your neighbor.

2). How do I find Absolute Reality? We know or can know when we have encountered an authentic Human Being; i.e., there is no overt or covert competitiveness or undertone of combativeness to literally dominate the space you are sharing in your face to face interchange whether by an individual or group of individuals. The “other” is a veritable “touch stone” of humanness whether on the giving or receiving end of the discourse you are sharing.

The undertone beneath this particular “presence” in one’s life is perceived as a “knowing” you appropriate as from a “still small” voice which beams forth from heart to heart and head to head proclaiming “yes, I too am a fellow traveler on the Way” that God has intended, given me and still giving me to share within this moment, however long or short it may be. For you and I know ourselves to be the children of God who would speak and LISTEN for and to God’s response—an impetus within the foolproof demands or commands pertaining to our next decision or action.

We “know” each other as friends of our Exemplar, Jesus Christ. We walk and talk as our friend and Savior would have us imitate Him until this level of our relationship becomes a natural self-story created deep within our being. We become practical believers of the faith accepting the Christian Story of Jesus Christ who was born to us; lived, was crucified and died for us and was buried and rose up on the third day resurrected for thee and me. What’s next after this discovery leads to the third question/answer.

3). Where may we find Absolute Affirmation? For it to be a complete and lasting experience for us which reverberates through all human/divine encounters that seem to abandon us after fleeting moment(s) that will not tarry...yet the afterglow so to speak, is to experience within those moments a firm edification from (an)other of genuine kindness without self-serving pride or hidden motivation. We find ourselves attracted to genuine kindness as a mutual “transference” occurs where I become you; you become me. So our dialogical touchstone; if you will, with the Scriptures has become a three part conversation between “The Word, ourselves and the “Other” (Beloved speaking to beloved).

There are clues of this new relationship from the realm of the spirit delightfully intervening into our physical space within often overlooked signs and symbols. For instance, why do so many windows and telephone posts contain the Cross that is also inherent in other entities and major or minor happenings. Every full bright to crescent moon, every sunrise and sunset or every interior whirling dervish dancing within—all of these signs, sounds, symbols and wonders serve to deposit God’s love for the People He has created to be able to know in the everyday that these spiritual guideposts all point to a Love greater than we could ever individually live in our ordinary or extraordinary lives.

4). Finally, where do we find ongoing or Absolute Validation? Such validation is found in the response from the heart or deep calling to deep found in the spiritual conduit of Holy

Spirit consciousness found in the “other”. This personage enables us to make choices, decisions and commitments within a depth discernment of humanness. So we choose a). justice over oppression or dominance b). authenticity over fake familiarity c). and most of all Love over perfunctory care or concern.

So, I say the Lord’s Prayer in moments of repose, am amazed at how easy it’s become to study the Scriptures and be reminded of a verse that aligns itself to a situation, say grace at mealtime, create little songs or prosaic sayings to honor and praise the One who gave me life and breath and unspeakable joy. You may do meditative walking or journaling or share your reflective insights with others via face to face or social media; these are all things we may do out of the humanity found at our core and I am filled with joy at the reminders we receive and/or angels we encounter prompting us to do so.

In a word: Is Life lived in God’s Way grand, or what?

In conclusion; hopefully this small treatise will lead to further illuminations of The New Secular-Religious as the Body of Christ Reformed. For it comes to us by Way of the Master, who petitioned the Father with His life that His “Abba, Father” refrain from further polarizing His People of God internally (in the spirit) and externally by setting up walls between the different tongues, races and nations.

The holy spirit impels us to proclaim the time of the two-story, dualistic yin yang spirit consciousness where opposites in tension attract and repel has passed. Our life issues have become “both/and” rather than “either/or”.

So, now the world and all creation await on tip toe to ponder what a glorious and grace-filled re-union of atoning power our God has wrought on our behalf. We are inspired to become his renewed creation and witnesses to His foundational Word and Love.

“We come therefore as Christ’s ambassadors. It is as if God were appealing through us; in Christ’s name we implore you, be reconciled to God”.  
(2 Corinthians 5:20)

# OBAPT: Life Quest (Part D)

Tuesday, October 28, 2014

These reflections on practical theology have been formulated within this forum to pour out ideas addressing salient wisdom relative to the contentious grounding of what it takes to be a responsible human being in our time and in all places by such vessels as we.

I found the need previously to flesh out thoughts on how we lose sight of absolute truth under the weight of too many words encumbering the Word and struggling with key life questions that impinge upon us on our journey. Could this struggle and separation from “Life the Way It Is” be at the root of the experience of societal angst we experience while teetering on the precipice of the abyss as it opens beneath us.

Embroiled in this lack of certainty, the resultant disorder on the planet of wars and chaos invades our lives daily, locally and globally with depictions of abhorrent deeds of suffering that visit victimization amongst the most vulnerable: most often the poor, the young and women also. And the “middle class squeeze” across nations also takes its toll.

Income inequality, epidemics, voting disenfranchisement, climate change and its issues of cataclysmic weather events occur on our coasts and interior lands and impinge on our lives and consciousness of late without surcease.

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord will deliver [the]m from all [afflictions]“...Psalm 34:19. And by the power of his healing Word.

Do you make lists or jot down notes on scraps of paper, napkins, envelopes or perhaps small or large notebooks? I wrote the above quote around the edges of a tiny pocket of sweet smelling stuff for women. It was just handy for writing on at the time. My notes encompass everyday “to do’s” both immediate and long range to Scriptural wisdom, prayers and insights gleaned from progressive religious programs) on TV and DVR, including sermons, meditative images/music; also everyday encounters with friends and acquaintances as learning experiences whether literally or via the media. I have a friend who calls these spiritual resources a “cloud of witnesses”.

Thence my ongoing “trialogue” with the Word, myself and the world creates a contextual underpinning as I go about my daily life as I encounter diverse others, children and youth too. Keeping in touch with the young ones in the family is one of my maxims. As an ex-teacher I find the use of the Socratic method in posing questions in conversations that evoke their burgeoning passions can be quite illuminating for each of us.

All of the above practical “rituals” enhance ways of listening and responding rather spontaneously to God. You might just pick a particular book in the New Testament (I’m spending time with Hebrews and Colossians these days) and bring your life issues to it thus entering into a deepening perpetual conversation with God. You find yourself continually operating out of the life context of being “in.but.not.of this world” in our day to day living, checking in so to speak with the Divine. Attending church is another way of checking in with the tradition that reminds us who is in charge of the universe and our place in it. I’ve been attending a little church up north on line for several years.

Oh, I do read edge publications making free time to watch escape fare to avoid “spiritual overload”. Everything from food shows, travelogues, documentaries, musical concerts,

even listening to the soothing toddler music channel (you can understand all the words!) to smooth jazz/bossa nova and classical guitar or uplifting contemporary or traditional gospel. I also like comedy and view comprehensive news coverage of economic- cultural-political events on progressive broadcasts. Those “other guys” on the other end of the spectrum make knots in my stomach and I cannot view them for very long.

Mind you I have been on a lifelong quest to discover the meaning of life; where my question at 10 was “Who is this Jesus?” As I grew older I visited Baptist, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches on Sunday with my 12 year old girlfriends and asked myself what do these churches have to say about the existence of God Himself.

Then in my teens I began to pay close attention to my relatives, especially my three uncles (two were twins), at family gatherings where the imbibing of beer brought on long and sometimes convoluted disagreements on various topics. My aunt, Lunette (the largest one of my grandmothers five children), would “bogard” her way into their midst if the pitch escalated, as peacemaker. I can hear her saying, “Alright now, let’s talk about something else; that’s enough about that.” I listened to all my elders during this period awaiting an “aha” moment which would disclose the absolute truth at the bottom of life itself. Not to mention the one-on-one times with Mom while she groomed my hair for the upcoming days of church and school. I felt I could talk to her about anything and we did. It was a memorable time of bonding with her for both my sister and I.

So what “word” do we grasp and hold on to in the mere complexity of the myriad encounters invoking enchanting life changing possibilities that God prepares and delivers to us as we go about consciously leading our daily lives? With the Biblical admonition to pray unceasingly, (I Thessalonians 5:17) we perform our “action prayers” that issue forth and come boldly before the throne in our sanctification (or set apartness) and proclaim and pass on the “Word” and listen, listen to His beckoning response sometimes in just a still small voice we hear in our hearts saying simply:

“Keep in touch”.

“Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near.”-Isaiah 55:6

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## 5 Questions Addendum for OBaPT (On Becoming a Practical Theologian) Pamphlet

This Addendum presupposes you (the facilitator) have access to the green pamphlet, *On Becoming a Practical Theologian*, which was previously sent to you by mail and is also available from Global Archives in Chicago and that you can make copies of the pages for potential participants. Each of the five sections contains the following: Most probably a meal followed by team enablement assignments and a brief break is recommended before the Intro/Context/Instructions, 5 Questions, and Closing or Sending Forth of each section.

Prelude: OBaPT/A Spiritual Riff on John 14:6

Intro/Context

Did you ever have the desire to really "see" and comprehend the meaning of life at any given moment? Theological glasses are possible for anyone. Put them on as you read the following selection and be sure to number the paragraphs before you begin. Take 20 or 25 minutes to read this section.

5 Questions:

1. We'll begin by saying your name and can you think of the title of a book or other work of art that significantly impacted your life?
2. Did this Section of the paper ( Para 1-5) help recall similar situations in a movie or TV program?
3. Or did it bring up a memorable event in History? Para 4-5)
4. What about in any given decade in your life? (Para 6)?
5. How would you sum up your state of awareness at present (in a phrase) (Para 7-8)?

Closing

This is our time to make any necessary announcements e.g. counting off by teams for set-up/clear meals, time of next meeting, etc.

Let us stand and close with a ritual claiming our awareness of this time and space and its significance in our own unique place in it. (And it is compliments of the 5th City PreSchool)

**L: This is the Day we have!!**

P: This is the day we have!

**L: We can live this Day...**

P: Or throw it away!

**ALL: This is the Day we have!**

.....

## OBaPT/Life Quest (Part A)

### Context/Introduction

Let's put on our theological eyeglasses again to inform and enable us to look deeper into our spirit journey. We'll number the paragraphs and circle or underline key words and phrases. Feel free to write in the margins.

### 5 Questions

1. (Go around the table). What words or phrases did you circle or underline:
- 2.. What is the life question being dealt with in (Para's 1-5)?
- 3.. Where have you seen this question manifested in a particular person in History or in a fictional character? (Para's 3-5)
- 4.. When have you wrestled with this issue? (Para's 6-7)
5. What insights did you come away with that you would like to share?

Conclusion: So we have asked the first of four questions that appear to enter into the life of those who seek the meaning of living life in the deeps and not in the shallows.

Once again we conclude this session with necessary announcements for the next time we'll meet.

Let's do the 5th City PreSchool ritual again as we stand and close this time together.

**L: This is the Day we have!**

P. This is the Day we have!

**L: We can live this Day...**

P. Or throw it away!

**ALL: This is the Day we have!**

.....

## OBaPT/Life Quest (Part B)

### Context/Intro

As we put on our theological glasses we'll probe deeper into the life quest we share with humanity close to us and those further away. Again, number the paragraphs and mark key phrases that spoke to you. Take 15 minutes or so to process (deeply).

### 5 Questions

1. What do you suppose might be the significance of the tangent written in paragraphs 1 - 3?
2. Have you ever put a spirit issue on the "back burner" so to speak? Describe in a few words.
3. How would you boil down any one of the questions in paragraph 4 into an original book or movie title?
4. Was there one life question you were the most familiar with? (Para 4-5)
5. Least familiar? Why? (Para 6)

Well, may we ponder insights said and not said as we wrap up our conversation for now.

Now is the time for any necessary announcements to prepare (the table) for our next session.

And our ritual again as we stand is:

**L: This is the Day we have!**

Pl: This is the Day we have!

**L: We can live this Day...**

P: Or throw it away!

**All: This is the Day we have!**

.....

OBaPT: Life Quest (Part C)

Context/Intro

As we put on our theological glasses be aware of any physical reactions you might have had as you read through the text. After you number the paragraphs and circle keywords/phrases, where might you group sets of paragraphs together and title them in the margin?

Take 30 minutes to number the paragraphs and speak back to key points in the margin.

5 Questions

1. How many paragraphs were in Part C?
2. What does that tell you so far?
3. What divisions did you notice?
4. Let's take a look at sections 1-7 first, then 8-16, and finally 17-21 shall we?
5. Picture (Board image) a sheep with 4 legs representing the 4 Questions. Look at the practices mentioned in para 17. Write a sentence on how you might add a practice of a "new you" to your everyday life.

Any announcements?

Let's send ourselves forward with a more adult version of a ritual of dismissal. Shall we stand?

L: These are the Times!

**All: We are the People!**

L: We are the People!

**All: These are the Times!**

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## OBaPT/Life Quest (Part D)

### Context/Intro

So once you've become accustomed to wearing your theological glasses, perhaps it is becoming easier to think more deeply into the realities of life.

Take 30 minutes to read and intentionally number the paragraphs and scan the text using the tools we've been introduced to so far.

### 5 Questions

1. Were there any words or phrases from the paper that particularly caught your attention?
2. Let's have 5 people read the first 5 paragraphs in turn. What insights have we gleaned in this section about becoming a practical theologian?
3. Are there any practices you've come away with that you would like to appropriate? How many of you have kept or are keeping a journal? (Take a look at paragraphs 6-12).
4. Do you see any old habits dropping away and possible new practices emerging you'd like to add to your daily life?
5. Is there a title you can write down now and share to describe your total life journey encompassing what we've learned about becoming a practical theologian? Take a couple of moments. Have 3 or so people share.

Conclusion: Ponder how you might use this booklet of 5 questions around a meal as a group spirit practice or as an individual exercise.

We've done quite a bit of demythologizing during our time together including the wisdom of rituals to take charge of our journey into a world in need of servant/leaders grounded in authentic living who serve in their sphere of influence.

Rhetorical question: How many of you--raise your hands--have picked up some tools for taking care of yourselves while on the Long Journey into creating new structures for a more Human world? And our ritual to send us into a life of service and passing on the baton is:

L: Seek the Source that can be found in every situation!

**All: The Creator is near to all who hear the call!  
Seek and trust the Source/Creator!**

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