

SAYING YES TO OUR DESTINY

Why do we hate to read Gogarten?	Key words: Vicissitudes of Fate Destiny Petition Faith	My Personal Destiny
1-7	8-18	19-23

1. As I tried to analyze what it means to be a part of the staff of the Ecumenical Institute in terms of our own individual journey, I have come up with a process that at least is my process, and being something of an existentialist, I believe it is everybody's process. First, we must get ahold of the context of what we are about. Only after we have gotten ahold of that context can we move to absorbing the content, which is the second step. Then, only after having gotten ahold of the content, can we develop a style that is appropriate to what has to be done. Context, content, and style.

2. The problem with that is that it doesn't happen that way, in a neat little order. You can't spend six months (or next year or next two years) working on the context, and then cut loose to go ahead with developing a style that is appropriate to the mission. All of those things happen at the same time, they just come converging on us. I can't really get ahold of the context unless I am getting ahold of the content and style at the same time.

3. If we could just compartmentalize and spend the first six months of internship on context, and then the next block of time on content, it would be so much simpler. In a way, we have gone after Gogarten in that fashion, and that is where we get burned. We hoped that now we had a theologian of some report, who would lay out what the Christian Dogma and theology is, one, two, three, and we would at last get ahold of it in a way that we have never been able to get ahold of it. I think perhaps that is where some of us have grown a bit disinterested or turned off. It is just not laid out in that one, two, three, fashion-- nor can it be, because Gogarten is dealing with the deeps of life and that is not compartmentalized.

4. The other reason for exceedingly great interest (or disinterest, as the case may be) with a man like Gogarten is that he is the kind of theologian he is. When someone says he can't understand Gogarten, I have high suspicions that that person is a liar. The problem is we understand him too well. He is not fooling around in theological abstractions. He is just zooming right in so that we who have been inoculated with RSI are getting RSI in a whole new way. We don't have our defenses up.

5. The other day at children's breakfast I heard thrown back at me what we are always saying to the children. There was a bit of unpleasantry going on, and one young girl crawled under the table, which she did about four times that week. (Her brother is the only one who can get her out. He can out-manipulate her manipulations.) I started to put my head under the table and she said, "I know, I can decide." We have gotten those phrases down pat, but Gogarten is coming in under our jargon. He is

coming at us in a fresh way. We don't want to read what he is saying because it speaks to just precisely where we are on our own individual or corporate journey. So we plead that it is too confusing or that those German sentences are too much. No, we understand what he is saying too well!!

6. Probably the best way we could teach Gogarten is go right through the RSI short courses and give a lecture on them. I was too cowardly to do that since I am supposed to deal with chapter 17. But I think we are getting past the immunity that we have to those short courses with Gogarten. Gogarten is getting at the stuff of our lives. He is dealing with the deeps of existence, but not existence in any kind of abstract terms. He's talking about my existence here and now, about the decisions that I make today and tomorrow.

7. Gogarten is repetitious. He understands what it means to be tangential and he just comes at you in a hundred different ways. I don't think I have read a chapter where I did not get a full review of all of the preceding chapters in the process of what it was he was dealing with in that particular chapter. If you want to get irritated you can say that he said that before. But he is saying it again in case you have got your defenses up.

8. As Gogarten moves into Chapter 17, there are several key words that we ought to hold up: vicissitudes of fate, destiny, petition, and faith. Gogarten discussed most of these words in other chapters, but now he pulls them through the experience and life of Jesus and tries to see how this became the thrust of Jesus' own preaching as it was born out of his own experience.

9. Gogarten is always struggling with this question: Did Jesus speak these words, was this his experience, or did the early Christian community realize this was the essence of life and write it into Jesus' experience and words? Gogarten says that though this has been a theological struggle over the ages, he accepts it as Jesus' own experience and moves on.

10. What Gogarten calls Jesus' vicissitude of fate, or stroke of fate, I think we could identify as the Christ event, that event that just booms in upon us. Well, then when did Jesus have this moment of awakening? When was his vicissitude of fate? What was the event that just crunched in on him, that made him move from this world to the other world? Gogarten states that it was when Jesus realized the doom of this world, as it just moves on in its own patterns, That caused Christ in his response to move to the other world.

11. Gogarten does not say this, but to be consistent with his thesis, I would say that this moment occurred during Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. There Jesus went through the test of whether he was going to be in this world or the other world, or whether he would live in accordance with those patterns which he understood full well led ultimately to doom.

12. As Gogarten lays it out, the vicissitude of fate that is ours is that moment of realization, awakening, awareness, which demands of us a response and in which, depending upon our response, our destiny is revealed. Your vicissitudes of fate are those moments of flash or insight that you have had which were in violation of the structure and fabric of the present world's patterns and existing structures, where you just knew that that insight revealed the way it was. In that flash, in

that insight, was demanded a response and you either said "no" or "yes" to it. It is very easy to say 'no,' because the flash or insight is in such utter violation of the present world and its patterns.

13. If you by chance said "yes" to that, you caught a glimpse of what God has called your particular life to be in history. That is what Gogarten means by destiny. If you said no, you said no to your destiny. Your destiny is revealed in those vicissitudes of fate, those strokes of fate, those things that sometimes happen and sometimes don't. Depending upon our response to those moments, we are in touch with our destiny.

14. And Jesus' response to his vicissitude of fate, which was the damnation and doom of the present world under its existing patterns, linked him with the world and at the same time made possible his unity with God. That is, to understand the doom of the world is to take responsibility for it. Therefore, it is unity with the world. These moments don't come in any little particularized way, though they are a particular moment, over a particular thing--but the vision is for all. In those moments you do not get little directions and insights only about a particular given situation. They always have to do with the total.

15. At this point we have to tie this in with the category of petition. Jesus was always the petitioner, petitioning God, asking questions of God. You cannot point to a place in the scripture where he did this, but this was his preaching, and therefore his style. Where Jesus admonished in his preaching, "Ask, seek, knock, and it shall be given to you," there was nothing in particular that he said to ask, seek, or knock about. It was the petitioner stance that he was pointing to, and that stance is what enables those vicissitudes to become one's destiny. It is a stance of openness, a stance of seeking, that Jesus is admonishing, the stance which reveals one's destiny.

16. You can get hung up in liberalism at that point, always being open to more data, more data, without the response of faith. The response of faith occurs when that vicissitude, that awareness, comes in answer to the openness, and my all is demanded. It is destinal because all of my being is involved in the response to that awareness, that opening, that insight. If I respond with anything less than my all, the response is not adequate, it is not the response of the man of faith. Faith is the response to the vicissitude of fate which comes in the midst of the openness of the petitioner stance, but in which I respond with my all.

17. The perversion of the liberals is that they have stood for years saying that they are open, they are tolerant, and they are going to get all the facts and all the data, and have moved into reduced processes of "dogoodism." They have responded with openness, but never with the totality of being which would allow God to flow through liberalism. Gogarten is very clear that it is the response of faith which enables the power of God to act through our lives, to act through human life. Finally, it is this encounter with our destiny and our response with the faith act that enables God to move in humankind.

18. Gogarten uses this understanding of the response of faith to analyze the stories of the life of Jesus in the gospels: he delineates the response of Jesus to the stroke of fate, how he came up against his destiny, how that destiny is historic both in terms of the past and the future, and how the faith stance that grew out of that enabled God to act in human history.

19. Now we need to get ahold of what Gogarten is saying in terms of personal destiny. The stroke of fate (and this is where we come to the contentless Christ) happens to each of us in a different way, simply because we are different people. It has to do with the whole of our individual history. This is why Gogarten is so tangential in his writing. This is why Jesus said "the Kingdom of God is like, is like," and just pointed to whole different areas. The stroke of fate calls out all of our particular neuroses, lines them up, and then hits us here, hits you there, hits me over here. There is no pat formula that can be laid out so that we could say that this is the moment that will hit everybody, and in which we will all have the chance of responding. The destinal encounter that we have in that moment, where you just say there is where my life ought to be, that is what I ought to be doing, this is what needs to be done, has the peculiarities of your own unique self wrapped in it, as well as God behind it.

20. We have talked a lot here about trusting your intuitions. I suspect that were Gogarten in our corporate group, he might switch 'vicissitudes of fate' or 'stroke of fate' to something like "trusting your intuition." We have a colleague who is great on trusting his intuitions. But never press him for a rational reason or pattern for acting on that intuition. Time and again I have just been furious at him for saying, "This is the way it is," and it just didn't seem to me that that was the way it is. If you press him, he will explode because he cannot give you a rationale that has gone into that intuition. But there is a subliminal rationale that has gone into that life through years of experience and study. Two days later, you ask him for a rationale for that intuition that he expressed and it's there. But at the moment that it was an intuition, it was just the whole backdrop of a lifetime of study, of contemplation, meditation, prayer, of standing present to life, that reared itself. Later he can patch it together and bring out the rationale.

21. It is something like that: that out of my past, all the sordidness and everything else that is there, come these moment of vicissitudes of fate in my daily experience, to which I am called to respond. And depending upon my response, I catch a glimpse of destiny, my destiny, of what, if you please, God wants me to do, God's will for me.

22. Then Gogarten talks about how I live in the midst of that response, in the face of that destiny, as the petitioner. How do I live as the one who is always open, and yet in the midst of that openness, responds with his life, not with an intellectual assent? Gogarten makes it very clear that God cannot work on earth unless my life is in that response. Nor can I appropriate the power of God unless my life is in it. This is where, for me, Gogarten has made clear the theological stance of our time. You might call it something like "incarnational existentialism." The whole of reality is born out of the real experience that is mine, but demands the totality of my response, if it is to be a response of faith or to release God's power on earth. That is nothing less than those vicissitudes of fate becoming flesh, incarnation, of that destinal vision becoming acted out in the flesh.

23. I would challenge you to toy with the question: when were those moments that you caught a glimpse of your destiny? We have all had them and have run from them or have responded to them in a casual way because of their demand, or because of the awesomeness of the encounter with God. But when were those moments in which the centuries were open to us?