1 Prologue: Letters in My Luggage

As a student I enthusiastically embraced the challenges of liberation theology, became involved in activist politics, and joined international solidarity movements. The resistance to apartheid particularly captured my imagination as it was justice-seeking and also generating new theological thinking. I ached to understand more, engage more, and share in this political/ideological struggle. I was 21 years old when I packed my rucksack, travelled by coach to London and boarded an evening flight from Heathrow to Johannesburg. I had been awarded a WCC Scholarship to study at the famous black theological seminary FedSem – then located in the sprawling township of Edendale.¹ That, as a white person, I gained a visa to study at the seminary now seems incredible. At the time I was too excited (and too naive) to appreciate the strangeness of my situation. I also had some distracting practical concerns. What to take with me from home to sustain me on this life transforming journey?

My sleeping bag and the lovely dress my mother bought me for graduation were obvious essentials. I rolled up a spare pair of Jeans with some tee-shirts and a long cheesecloth skirt. I remember carefully choosing a little broach in the shape of a rose. But what books to take? In the end only two; my Bible and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers from Prison (1973).

During the year I spent in South Africa I lived in the pages of this book. I loved Bonhoeffer’s fine theological mind – formed by a classical education and rooted in the great traditions of the Church – a background very different from my own. But while enchanted by him I was also irritated by his deeply bourgeois sentiments, his at-homeness in a world of man-friendships, cigars and courteous, but quaintly patriarchal, attitudes to women. I suspect if meeting in person conversation would have been awkward. But on paper his life became open to mine and, in my new context, revelatory.

I was young. I was in South Africa in the middle of a war. I was living in a township on a campus surrounded by a high wire fence and sharing a small room (actually the converted ‘ladies’ end of a toilet block) with Lindiwe – the only other woman student. I was beginning to get to know people who were ‘involved’ and at risk. I was also living alongside Bonhoeffer in the last days of the Reich and the last days of his life. There is not space here to list all that this particular collision of worlds generated for me, but some things are particularly important.

¹ The seminary had been exiled from its previous campus for political reasons and was in temporary accommodation.
I was learning that in a struggle you must live with deception, silences, the acknowledgement that informers are your friends, and your friends might be informers. You become oddly close to your enemies and simultaneously distanced from people whose lives are not dominated by the ongoing conflict. What I grasped about Bonhoeffer’s letters in this context was that they are written by a committed activist whose famous celebration of ‘worldly’ Christianity is constituted out of experiences of deep ambiguity and irregular intimacies. The man on paper knows he is a ‘guilty’ actor not an innocent victim. He must always dissemble and remain silent about matters of fundamental significance. The voice that reaches us strains to speak and cannot do so clearly:

Am I then really all that which other men tell of? Or am I only what I know of myself […] struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat. (Bonhoeffer 1973, 349)

What South Africa was also teaching me, and which I found reflected in the letters, was the peculiar intensity of relationships forged under pressure. I have never been to better parties than those in which people segregated by the state drank together and banned persons broke their banning orders to come dancing. When Bonhoeffer writes that despite everything he would not ‘wish to live in any other time’ I understand it. His deep love for friends is palpable but so also are the realities of separation. Separation of distance but also of circumstances. Bonhoeffer has taken sides, but he is still not suffering in the same way as those without any power who do not await trial but are casually condemned. Pondering Bonhoeffer’s writing I became acutely aware that although I settled down each night into my camp bed (the sleep-
ing bag had proved a wise choice) only a few feet away from where my friend Lindiwe lay down to sleep, in reality, we still inhabited different worlds. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer and many of the other activists I met in South Africa had made irrevocable choices with their lives. I was passing through.

The time I spent in South Africa formed me as a person and shaped my theological work. The way I think and the ideals I cherish are entangled with strong sense impressions and body-memories out of which they were generated. As I write this paper I am standing again at the open door of my room as evening falls in the township. I can hear fellow students singing hymns as they chant their way out of chapel. I can smell cigarette smoke and cooking fires and the particular clear amber soap and coconut oil skin cream that Lindiwe used. I can taste the pink-sweetness of guava juice. In *Letters and Papers* Bonhoeffer’s theology does not come cleansed of its context. It is a theology that communicates the feel of rough woollen blankets, the smell of men in confined spaces, the taste of a ‘glorious liver sausage’ (1973, 100) sent by his mother, the sound of sirens and the sweep of light across the sky, a sense of Spring in the air outside and the noise of a fellow prisoner weeping. And most of all it comes from a small and restricted space. Bonhoeffer compared his prison cell to the cell of a monk. A place confined and apparently set apart. Yet also one in which the life of the world is compressed into spiritual and theological energy; as a magnifying glass turns light into fire.

## 2 Reading Religious Lives

In a context in which analyses of secularisation, postsecularisation, enchantment, re-ritualisation, religious fundamentalism and religious decline endlessly contend together, it is easy to understand why the study and representation of particular lives appears an increasingly attractive way to reflect upon questions of religious identity. It has also proved a creative means to engage theologically with the complex nature of contemporary faith. Within practical theology there has been a significant and productive turn towards employing life narratives as ‘data’ for social analysis and for theological reflection (e.g., Ganzevoort, De Haardt, and Scherer-Rath 2013; Moschella 2016; Couture 2016; Wolfeich 2017).

Although, until recently, our academic use of personal life experience has been relatively uncommon it has enabled some very important developments to take place within the discipline (e.g., McLemore 1994). Today, however, more and more practical theologians are placing elements of their own life narratives within their texts (e.g., Beaudoin 2010; Couture 2017; Graham 2017; Walton 2018; Wigg-Stevenson 2017). This is in part due to a (rather belated) acknowledgement of the necessity for reflexivity in research practice (Dreyer 2016; Goto 2018; Bennett et al. 2018). Although our use of life writing is still often cautious and circumscribed, there is also growing recognition of how fruitful an epistemic resource personal experience might become. Practical theologians are hard-wired to make deep connections be-
tween faith and practice and life writing is a fertile space in which to explore this process.

Published works in practical theology that employ life writing are thus increasing exponentially. However, to date there has been very little focussed exploration into the nature of life writing itself. Nor has there been substantial critical engagement with the work of scholars from other disciplines who are bringing their own methodological insights to this discursive form. In the sections that follow I will refer to some of these methodological developments – while illustratively referring back to the personal narrative with which I began this chapter. I shall then focus in Part Three upon my own work and what I hope this contributes to developing project of practical theology

2.1 Literary Studies

Life writing is one of the oldest and most engaging literary forms but comprehending life writing ‘as literature’ is a challenging process. For example, many practical theologians take for granted that their task is to empirically represent lived religious experience and then hermeneutically elaborate upon it. However, when we consider life writing through a literary lens it begins to appear that experience itself is constructed within the narrative process. As Paul Ricœur has famously argued it is through the constructive work of ‘enplotment’ that experience is shaped into a form that enables us to access and comprehend it. To become intelligible at all it must be placed within a narrative frame:

> It seems that our life, enveloped in one single glance, appears to us as the field of a constructive activity, deriving from the narrative intelligence through which we attempt to recover [...] the narrative identity which constitutes us [...]. It is exactly the kind of identity which the narrative composition alone, by means of its dynamism, can create. (Ricoeur 1991, 437)

So, although my South African story is a sincere attempt to communicate experience it has been constructed to achieve a particular end and the experiences themselves receive their form through the story I have told. It is true. But it is also ‘fictive’ and this quality marks all life writing as it is as dependent as any other literary form upon the plotting devices out of which narrative is formed.

But literary critics challenge us further by pointing out that enplotment is not a creative act that takes place ex nihilo. We fashion our own stories according to the narratives we inherit and the patterns they have laid down. For many literary scholars the starting point for exploring this process is St Augustine’s Confessions which is frequently taken as initiating the autobiographical genre within Western culture (Anderson 2004). Augustine’s work borrows the structure of a quest myth from the legends of battles and heroes, exiles and homecomings that were the cultural currency of his time.
This form became the pattern through which countless spiritual writers who followed him were to express their own stories of travail, transition, and transfiguration.²

Romanticism, emerging within late eighteenth century as an aesthetic response to the rationalist ethos of the enlightenment, radically inverted Augustine’s narrative of the soul’s journey towards the divine. Instead, it imaged the human quest as a self-creating journey towards personal authenticity. It is this romantic quest narrative that many influential cultural theorists identify as shaping notions of the self and spiritual identity in contemporary Western culture – whether or not people identify as religious (e.g., Taylor 1989; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). When I ask my students to describe their own spiritual journey’s they speak of: ‘being true to myself’, ‘discovering who I was meant to be’, ‘needing to find my own way through’ etc. As they do so they are standing within a narrative tradition that stretches from Augustine to the present day, but which has taken many twists and turns through history. However, although we employ a common script it does not imply that our spiritual narratives are nothing but shallow repetitions of received ideas.

First it has to be said that the script endures because it remains meaningful to many people. Whether employed to describe a struggle with cancer, gender transitioning, becoming a poet or religious conversion – a story that tells of a difficult journey to positive selfhood can be a powerful way to frame identity. Second, as the generative work of Judith Butler has enabled us to understand, in the day-to-day performance of socially inscribed scripts individuals find themselves unable to fully achieve the roles ascribed to them. We improvise and make changes and these small performative gestures mean that the scripts are not as stable as might be imagined and are, themselves, implicated in creative processes of social change. Third, as literary critics have delighted to point out, in the inherited tradition the quest for a coherent narrative self is never achieved – it deconstructs before our eyes. The ‘I’ Augustine establishes is continually on the edge of toppling into chaos; anxiety wrestles with faith throughout his text (Anderson 2004, 27). Even within the romantic tradition, in which huge energy is devoted to the social performance of the expressive self, there is consistent uncertainty that this has been adequately achieved. Life writing is writing that both constructs identity and displays the contradictions and incongruities out of which it is formed.

The literary insight that our personal narratives are both scripted and unstable might be thought of as undermining their theological use. However, in my opinion, it opens up much more depth and complexity to the form. If I simply read Bonhoeffer’s letter as the saintly musings of a man boldly facing martyrdom, they might be inspiring. However, they became revelatory for me precisely because of the intense struggles they embody and the silences they contain – hands ‘compressing my throat’. There are things he cannot speak and things he does not know how to say, and they mark the text just as surely as the faith and hope he seeks to commu-

² See Walton (2015) for a detailed exploration of this mimetic process.
nicate. This partial and often contradictory narration of Christian experience makes sense to me. I am always conscious of mispronouncing the sacred script and that the border between belief and betrayal is never a wall but a very fine line.

I write these words aware that theologians are still rather inclined to seek the inspiration of virtuous and exemplary lives as data for theological reflection. However, some very interesting theological reflections emerge when we admit the ambiguities that haunt religious life narratives. For example, in her recent work on women’s life writing practical theologian Clare Wolfteich (2017) takes the risk of writing about Dorothy Day’s separation from/neglect of her daughter as she struggled to fulfil her religious vocation. A tragic tension in the life of this iconic woman is revealed. This is a very hard account to write and to read. However, Wolfteich has gifted me with a narrative of Day that I find I can now place next to my own life in powerful communication with my own struggles and dilemmas. Similarly, in my life writing I always seek to make evident the points of tension and contradiction in my faith life in order that the frayed edges of my own story can become threads my readers might connect with.

2.2 Epistemology

Reflection upon the ambiguities, gaps, and silences inherent within narrative construction was fundamental to the massive epistemological shift generated by second wave feminism. Women began to question why so many aspects of their experience were culturally invisible and, indeed, whether they were unnarratable in a patriarchal frame. Convinced that male experience had shaped ways knowing the world the movement was symbolically rooted in constellations of small consciousness raising groups in which women began to share personal narratives and to explore their political significance. Those involved cherished the conviction that narrative agency could produce both personal healing and new knowledge.

Pressing this insight further feminist cultural theorists developed standpoint epistemologies. Opposing traditional conventions of critical neutrality Sandra Harding (1991) argued that ‘strong objectivity’ is achieved when those bear the impact of social marginalisation are recognised to have a privileged understanding – and are enabled to explore their insights in conversation with others. Donna Haraway’s generative work on situated knowledge similarly emphasised that vantage point informs viewpoint. Her vision was that networks of persons differently located, yet in dialogue with each other, might together produce ever more ‘truthful’ understandings of embodied experience:

So feminists don’t need a doctrine of objectivity that promises transcendence [...] but we do need an earth-wide network of connections, including the ability to partially translate knowledges among very different power differentiated communities. [...] Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledge (Haraway 1988, 579–80).
Views of epistemology as both located and dialogical have now gained currency across a range of different fields and, to return to life writing, encourage us to read our own lives in relation to those of other people in different contexts whose insights challenge and enrich our own. This work does not entail abstraction or generalisation but delving deeper into the particularity of persons and lives in order create relational wisdom. Encountering Bonhoeffer’s soul-searching reflections in South Africa was transformative for me – deepening my perception and giving me keys to interpret my own experiences. However, I return to Haraway’s assertion that we should seek the translation of knowledges ‘among very different power differentiated communities’ to question how we might understand the limits of such dialogue. Although separated by time, gender, and class I shared with Bonhoeffer a saturation in Western culture and a privileged social location. In some ways it was easier for me to engage with his reality than that of the good friend with whom I shared a cramped intimate space for several months. A genuine desire for meaningful communication does not mean it is easily achieved.

As we are increasingly aware political silencing is achieved through processes which render personal narratives inadmissible: stories of the forced removal of indigenous children, child abuse and the sexual victimisation of women were often told in the past but remained as if untold by their narrators. Coloniality as a cultural mechanism similarly renders many contemporary experiences unaccountable. Decolonial thinkers are now calling for the “unveiling of epistemic silences” and the creation of a “geo and body politics of knowledge hidden from western epistemology” (Mignolo 2009, 4). This will entail engaging with a reservoir “of ways of life and modes of thinking that have been disqualified by Christian theology” (Mignolo 2013, 133) and post-enlightenment thinking. Yet to access such a reservoir of understanding entails more than the silenced gaining the power to speak. Coloniality does not simply divide us from others but also create fissures within the self as people struggle to find modes of communication between the diverse worlds they inhabit. Kwok Pui Lan names the difficulties encountered:

What is the process of self-fashioning that is going on in the story-telling process? ‘Speaking for oneself’ is never an easy and unambiguous process, especially when one constantly navigates between two cultures and languages. For example, are there silences and ellipses in the narratives? [...] Can one deal with the moral ambiguities and inconsistencies when one worldview collides with another in the process of negotiating multiple identities? (Kwok 2011, 35)

Practical theologian Courtney Goto has reflected deeply upon the fact that the fractured stories of people experiencing oppression do not easily find a space within a discipline dominated by white western voices and modes of expression (Goto 2018). She questions whether practical theologians possess the capability to engage with voices that resist incorporation into conventional frames of academic credibility and coherence. Convinced that ‘empirical’ research can become another form of cultural imperialism through which personal stories are colonised within an alienating interpretative framework she argues that people must, nevertheless, be enabled to
share their lived experience. Referring to her own pedagogical practice she advocates that instead of withdrawing in disillusion students resisting coloniality should be encouraged to enter this communicative process *more deeply but differently*. First of all, there should be appreciation of epistemic advantage, “*a critical, perspectival edge created by experiencing oppression personally or empathically, enabling a knower to stand in multiple places, discern what others might neglect, and challenge ignorance or violence*” (Goto 2018, 202 italics original). With the recognition of this advantage students may gain confidence to write with forms of hyper-reflexivity and embodied rhetoric that reveal how they have been integrally formed by their contexts and display their affective as well as their intellectual means of grasping the world. It is Goto’s hopeful vision that writing which is courageously open is paradoxically less vulnerable to objectivization for it “invites readers to engage in a parallel process” of self-examination and to consider the ways in which their own experiences have “been shaped by patterns of prejudice, privilege and violence”. In other words, it invites relationship; “author and reader are in conversation in the space created by writing and reading” (Goto 2018, 216).

2.3 Social Research

Goto’s hope for a relational narrative connection also stands behind the turn to forms of life writing which are becoming hugely influential within contemporary qualitative research. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, leading scholars in this field, argue that an encounter with the narratives of those resisting ‘epistemic silencing’ should prompt qualitative researchers in all fields to “construct stories that [...] will be dialogical counternarratives [...] stories that create spaces for multicultural conversations, stories embedded in the critical democratic imagination” (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, 6). Specifically, the development of autoethnography as a lively and productive methodology facilitates this form of encounter as it “provides a framework to critically reflect upon the ways in which our personal lives intersect, collide and commune with others in the body politic” (Spry 2011, 54).

Autoethnography, which is a relatively recent arrival within the field of qualitative research, encourages deep critical attention to personal life narratives as a means to gain understanding of issues that have a collective cultural significance. Not only does it esteem ‘insider’ knowledge, but it also pays attention to the form in which this understanding is communicated. Pioneers in the field Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner have repeatedly emphasised that autoethnographic writing must be evocative; framed to engage intellectual and also affective, embodied responses.³ Norman Denzin goes further and argues autoethnography not only communicates

³ See Walton (2014) for an overview of ‘evocative autoethnography’ which builds upon the foundations established by Ellis and Bochner.
but ‘performs’ transformation as it embodies “a way of writing, hearing and listening [...] a return to narrative as a political act. [...] It uses the words and stories people tell to imagine new worlds” (Denzin 2003, 105).

The subject matter of autoethnography varies hugely. I have used this methodology to reflect upon motherhood and secularisation (Walton 2014, 21–30), political activism and the work of preaching (Walton 2014, 10–20). However, as a form of life writing it shares the concerns of this genre with two distinct but overlapping foci: the epiphanic and the everyday. In reference to the first Ellis and Bochner encourage researchers to write about epiphanic insights that emerge from their particular cultural identity or social location. Norman Denzin also advises autoethnographers to focus on moments of revelatory significance that construct identity; “always write out of those spaces and experiences that carry the sting of memory, those epiphanies, and turning point moments that leave a mark on you”⁴

This is good advice because what a writer communicates with passion about moments of clarity and awe (including fearful moments of pain and grief) presses into the imaginations of their readers and generates intense responses. Interestingly these responses are not tied to the subject matter that evoked them. When I read about Bonhoeffer’s prison experiences, I understood that they were very different indeed from my own encounters with the confining power and ‘banal’ evil of the apartheid regime. However, they spoke so powerfully to my context that it seemed natural to me to use his prayers and memorise his poetry as a means to express my own developing spiritual / political understanding. When I write about my own particular and personal ‘epiphanic’ experiences I am asking my readers to engage with different experiences from their own contexts which provoke similar intense, hyper-reflexive energy. I am asking them to seek out the epiphanies present in their everyday lives.

Attention to the significance of everyday life is fundamental to autoethnographic writing – and part of a turn to the everyday within social research more generally. Recognition has grown that the oftentimes neglected sphere of daily living is where most people exercise agency and construct selfhood. It is the plane on which our most meaningful life experiences unfold and also where the impacts of economic and political forces are most keenly felt – and, in some cases, resisted (Walton 2014, 170–85). The multi-layered nature of everyday living is what inspires radical autoethnographic researchers who continually seek to delve deeper into the particularity of experience as a means of voicing their political challenges. It is also why a turn to everyday life is also proving theologically generative.

For example, in the work of mujerista theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz we are presented with a powerful articulation of the importance of lo cotidiano as the place in which Hispanic women engage in caring and cooking, shopping and sex but also social struggles and meaning-making work that “has descriptive, hermeneutical and epistemological importance” (Isasi-Díaz 1996, 67). It is from the every-

⁴ https://www.dur.ac.uk/writingacrossboundaries/writingonwriting/normandenzin (08.10.2019).
day that vibrant theological understandings emerge out of lived religion. These incarnate epistemologies appear as very different from the ‘normative’ perspectives of ecclesial and academic traditions and encourage a reconceptualization of theology itself making it “possible for us to see our theological knowledge as well as all our knowledge as fragmentary, partisan, conjectural and provisional” (Isasi-Díaz1996, 72).

Isasi-Díaz is articulating here points about the nature of theological thinking through life narratives that I have been at pains to stress throughout this chapter. However, I would wish to add that theology generated in this form is not only fragmented plural and provisional it may also be rich, colourful, and vital. In Bonhoeffer’s letters his unsystematic reflections are not separable from the cultural textile and personal texture of the man who wrote them. As such what they offer is not abstracted understanding what the cultural theorist Bruno Latour describes as truth ‘warmly clothed, incarnated and strong’ (Latour 1989, 115). As practical theologian Natalie Wigg Stevenson (2017) has argued we need to develop more nuanced ways of approaching where truth lies in our theological reflections. Older understandings of normativity are difficult to operationalise in relation to autoethnographic writing. However, as their evident epistemological significance cannot be denied we will need to discover new means of appraising value. Significant work on this topic is underway in qualitative research but is only just beginning within practical theology.

3 Writing My Life

Up to this point I have been at pains to stress the rich potential of life writing as we seek to understand contemporary religious practice and also as we seek to become more creative in our theological reflections. I have argued that we are not engaging with coherent and reliable (so-called empirical) accounts that can be easily processed into conventional theological statements. Quite the contrary. Life narratives are unwieldy and difficult to tame for our own ends. They reveal things we might prefer to ignore such as:

– The constructed, fictive, and mimetic nature of narrated experience.
– The gasp, silences and fissures narration contains.
– The difficulty of representing trauma and pain – or indeed any deeply disruptive experience within a conventionally ‘storied’ framework.

However, the revelatory power of life narratives also sheds light on things that we are learning to celebrate. These include:

– The dialogical and relational nature of meaning making.
– The importance of everyday life and the epiphanies it contains.
– The located and embodied nature of our understanding.
– The potential of an intense focus upon the particular to illuminate wider cultural, political, and theological issues.
The vivid and compelling nature of theological reflection that is ‘incarnate and strong’.

I now turn back to my own practice to explore how I seek express these qualities of life writing in my own work. I would like to highlight three practices that have become particularly important to me as my engagement with theological life writing has developed and deepened.

The first relates to making explicit links between life experience and theoretical thinking. I am a life writer, but this does not mean that I wish to repudiate theoretical thinking and embrace a moist and moody immanence. I am someone who is, by temperament, perhaps a little too analytical – I love a good theory. It is rather that I now seek to tie my theoretical reflections back into the life situations out of which epistemic challenges arise. In recent years I have made it my custom to include short life writing extracts in my most ‘abstract’ scholarly articles. The incident retold gestures towards the existential elements the theoretical argument addresses. So, for example, an article on postsecularism begins with an account of going to church one Sunday morning (Walton, 2018) and a discussion of new materialist thinking begins with an account of clearing up after putting my daughter to bed:

Blossom, the favourite doll, was sprawled face down on the carpet. Her stiff limbs outstretched, and her long golden nylon hair tangled. I bent to pick her up and it was as if a current ran through me. A small but perceptible force that made me shiver slightly. This doll could not be impersonally handled but commanded respect. She was animated and something of my child’s life was bounded up in her. I combed her hair with my fingers, smoothed her dress and sat her in my daughter’s little chair where she could be found and loved again next morning (Walton 2014, 31).

Secondly, I now seek to make evident the relational nature of understanding by addressing very directly (as I have done in this chapter) the ways in which my own ideas are formed out of intense encounters with others – which may be personal, political and/or textual. I treat authors I admire as friends and write about my friends in ways that acknowledge their shaping influence upon me. In my book Not Eden (Walton 2015) I employ an extended, ‘relational’ metaphor to describe my experience of becoming politically engaged in South Africa.

I read newspapers and cut out bits to file. I wrote down tables of statistics noting infant mortality, malaria, and TB. I studied philosophy and wrote my diary. I liked this serious person I was playing. She had taken her vows and was dedicated like a nun. But then I went to visit. I stayed in [the Young Christian Workers] house. There was no place for me there. I had to sleep in the bed of whichever person was away that night or in the space that was left when two people shared one bed [...]. I was sleeping in the hollows other bodies had left in the mattress, in rooms where clothes other people had worn were scattered on the floor and where the cigarettes they had smoked were still in the ashtray (Walton 2015, 120).
This image illuminates a process leading from observation to involvement – literally a living-in-the-life-space that others have created. I think this metaphor holds good for my academic theological practice also.

A third important aspect of life writing that is increasingly becoming part of my academic discipline is the active disclosure of the many spheres in which I dwell and the overlaps as well as the tensions between them. This is facilitated by the generative capacity of life writing and, in particular, the practice of journaling. I have published edited extracts from my journals that demonstrate ways in which being a partner, a mother, a friend, an academic, a lover-of-lovely things, a writer, a gardener and someone who enjoys wrestling hard with a dense theory (particularly if it is French/and or Marxist) all tumble together in my theological thinking. Some of my ‘journalled-articles’ are about specific challenging issues in my life such as an extended period of infertility, a personal bereavement and suffering from anxiety. The fragmented heterogeneity of journal writing naturally lends itself to exposing the ‘unresolvement’ that these experiences entail and to experimental theological work as steps in the development (or not) of understanding can be noted and transcribed.

Working in these ways, writing in these ways, still feels a little transgressive within practical theology. It is therefore deeply enjoyable! However, I have to concede that I am only gradually learning ways of proceeding that are taken for granted in other spheres. Artists have always opened themselves up to the inspiration of the ‘found object’; something happened upon in the midst of life that becomes epiphanic to them. Poets and creative writers have similarly found that great power lies in the improper mixing of things that should remain apart. What is metaphor other than relational thinking with revelatory effect?

What artistic work in all spheres teaches is that particular experience, compressed through intense focus upon it, can become incandescent. Light into fire. This was what I found in Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers and which so caught my imagination. The personal writing of a man in a particular and prescribed environment combusted old ways of thinking and sent sparks flying far beyond their prison. I covet this incendiary art for contemporary practical theology and am excited by the challenge of working to develop a theopoetics of practice within our discipline (Walton 2019).

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