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# The FURROW

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Michael A. Conway

## ‘I put my mouth’: Teaching from Technology to Theology

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Because of the vicissitudes of life, it turns out that I’ve attended lectures and classes in several disciplines, in several languages, in several institutions, and in several countries.<sup>1</sup> And when I look back on it all, what I can say (and these statistics are purely subjective) is that about 60% of those classes (you’ll excuse me using theological language) were as boring as hell – soul destroying, dispiriting, manipulative, unilateral, sleep-inducing, and disconnected from reality as I knew it then; about 5% were like being in heaven – intellectually stimulating, respectful of the students’ presence, out of time, engaging, energising, and leaving one in suspense for the next session; and the remaining 35% were somewhere in between – not quite purgatory, but, sometimes, close enough. And these judgements were not only mine, but they were shared by many who took these same classes. And the statistics are independent of subject, language, institution, and country. In fact, one of the best experiences that I had in the classroom was in a small language school in Düsseldorf in Germany.

Now, many years later and as a teacher myself, I’m troubled (in a good way) by these same ‘statistics’ (and they are completely my own): What’s it like to be in the classroom with me? In my early years I was certainly in the first category, the 60% one; and now I hope that I have managed at least to move into the middle area; and who knows, one day, before I retire, perhaps, I might reach, even if only on a few occasions, that 5% heavenly category. The more serious question is: How am I to replicate and realize the best of what I’ve experienced in the classroom? How do I ensure that the classroom space that I now facilitate is one of life and not of death, for students, and, indeed, for myself? That is what I’d like to investigate – to some degree at least – in this short reflection. And

1 This is an abridged version of a public lecture given in *Carlow College, St Patrick’s*, on 5 October 2021 (which happens to be UNESCO World Teachers’ Day).

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I'm coming at this material from the perspective of a theologian, but I hope that what I have to say may be of some value to anyone who teaches or works in a learning environment at third level.

### POLARISATION IN KNOWING

To that end, I'd like first, very briefly, to discuss a polarisation in human knowing that will serve as a foundation for what I'd like to explore. There are two ways of knowing that are connected and yet cannot be taken separately and independently of one another. They are distinguishable, but inseparable. You find these polarisations throughout the history of Western thinking and culture, and we've oscillated often between giving priority to one over the other. And at times, too, they have both been read reductively. Awareness of this distinction, I would suggest, is vital if one wishes to understand and promote an enriching classroom experience because in the classroom, too, we oscillate between giving priority to one over the other.

The first is associated most immediately with the mind and its determinations. We could call it simply conceptual knowledge. We grasp the world through the mind, through thoughts, through structures of thinking, through abstraction, through logical inference, and so on. Our various disciplines are most immediately thought of in terms of the categories of conceptual knowledge. This is 'what' I teach; this is 'what' I do.

But this conceptual knowing is not the only or exclusive form of knowing. There is also a more immediate knowing, a more concrete knowing that is much denser than conceptual knowing. You could, with Pascal, speak of a knowing that is of the heart as opposed to being merely of the mind. He makes the distinction between what he calls the *l'esprit de la géometrie* (the mind of geometry) and *l'esprit de la finesse* (the mind of intuition); and you may know the famous quotation: *Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point* (the heart has its reasons that reason does not know). The distinction is there in this statement. So, with Pascal you could say that we have conceptual knowing and we have cordial knowing.<sup>2</sup>

The most ancient version of this distinction is reflected in the contrast between *logos* and *mythos* in the early layers of Greek philosophy; later in Plato you have discursive progress and intuitive contemplation; nearer our own time, Newman will speak of notional knowledge and real knowledge; Karl Rahner, a twentieth century theologian, will speak of categorial knowledge and existential knowledge; and the philosopher Maurice Blondel

2 This cordial knowing should not, however, be reduced to an exclusive sentimental kind of knowing.

will speak of the noetic and the pneumatic (the noetic being more of the mind, and the pneumatic being more of the spirit).<sup>3</sup>

What I want to take from this is simply the distinction and the recognition that our knowing is not merely a matter of the conceptual, the abstract, and the discursive, i.e., conceptual thinking never exhausts concrete reality. Being aware of this distinction can be very helpful when you begin to think about the classroom; about teaching, learning, and living.

#### THE CLASSICAL MODEL OF THE CLASSROOM

Having made this distinction between two polarizations in our knowing, I now wish to turn to the classroom. And I would like to study, so to speak, two models; one, the more classical, the other, more aspirational; one that I know well, and the other that I would like to realize. And, necessarily, these are ideal types; in concrete life they are mixed together to some degree, but distinguishing them will, nonetheless, permit me to explore and reflect on the classroom experience.

In the classical model, the classroom operates from within a space of teaching and learning that is hierarchically structured, governed largely by anonymous instruction, and marked by enormous power invested almost exclusively in the teacher and in the institution. The ‘discipline’ that is explored is a knowledge and a mechanism that displaces the student to a zone of incompetence and the teacher to a place of absolute power. Even the layout of the classical classroom reflects this (and when you walk into the room the division takes place immediately). It fosters passivity in the student and rewards, generously, both docility to, and replication of, the teacher’s mind. Most students will readily collude with these dynamics, if only for an easy life. And usually, there are substantial rewards if one plays the game correctly. Pavlov would be proud of such a classroom.

It is the dominant model of education in many disciplines and is most easily realized through the scientific ideal of knowledge as that which is, supposedly, objective. When the currency in the classroom is such objective knowledge, there is little need for anything beyond the exchange of instruction and clarification. My job as teacher is to teach and explain to you, the student, whatever the object might be. Many disciplines – and some that should know better – attempt to replicate the ideal of (scientific-) objectivity in their own domains. Even theology can attempt to do this. In terms of my earlier distinction, it is the conceptual that is valued,

3 Both Rahner and Blondel have a series of binary pairings that reflect this same basic polarity.

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with little real attention being paid to its limitations or to the other polarization of knowing.

In this classroom mode, the ‘subject matter’ is presented as a knowing that is destined to conquer: vocabulary, methods, techniques, skills are developed with a view to understanding, grasping, controlling, having power-over, instrumentalizing, and, of course, making money. A ‘degree’ is an instrument in the technology of privilege, of power, and of prestige. This very finality permeates the entire classroom experience and the academic environment. It fosters certain dynamics, whereby the overriding one is that of competition, with ensuant resentment, jealousy, and the darker dynamics of the *bellum omnium contra omnes* (the war of all against all).<sup>4</sup> The resentment is, of course, rarely expressed directly or addressed; it is almost always masked and underground, where passive aggression is one of its symptoms. It nurtures, implicitly, hierarchy, and with it the dynamics of dominance, of rivalry, of power-over-the-other, of self-consciousness, and most oftentimes, of debilitating fear. The fear can easily be exploited by those in positions of power in the academy (from the Chancellor to the tutor), who can use it to manipulate, to disempower, to alienate, and to silence others. And many in the academic environment collude in such dynamics for their own ends. What it eschews is service, respect for the other, thoroughly open communication, and full transparency; and it does this in the name of putative higher ends.<sup>5</sup>

And, ironically, we meet, to some degree, the end effect of such classroom dynamics, later, in churches, in hospitals, in supermarkets, in colleges, in offices, in the army, in companies; in short, in every workplace, and we shake our heads and say ‘isn’t it terrible.’<sup>6</sup> And we see no link whatsoever with what we do in our classrooms.

From the students’ perspective, the classical classroom experience is alienating in the extreme. The student’s mind is directed for the most part to the outside: the material, the content, what is to be learned, memorized, and possibly even regurgitated as proof of appropriation. It implicitly says that the world is over-there and not really where you are; and, not only that, but you need to get over there. All energy is directed at this movement to the over-there (determined by the teacher or the institution). This outward directionality, the objective (in both senses), continuously undermines the student; it’s not really about you; it’s about this

4 See Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 3-20.

5 This is a last refuge for evil according to Paul Ricœur.

6 For a discussion of some of these dynamics in a hospital setting, see Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Humanizing Healthcare Reforms* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2013).

or that or the other. Education is a preparation for life, lived elsewhere, otherwise, and later. The real is not now, life is not now in this classroom. *In this way, the density of the present is robbed of its depth.* And, of course, there is the obvious tragedy that a small number of students will never get to live this life later; their learning will have been in vain. Is it any surprise that students might be bored and tired and indifferent in such a space? that they long to escape, as they say, ‘to do their own thing’ (and the expression is telling). But if education is directed always and for the most part to a future, and if you do not really live here and now in the classroom, Why should you look forward with enthusiasm, energy, and hope to living something wholesome later? There is a core alienation at the heart of our academic institutions, which, of course, is not the whole story, but *which can easily become the whole story for many students and for many teachers.*

Of course, it does not have to be like this. How might we minimize this alienation? How might we ensure that the classroom is a living space, in the present, this afternoon, and tomorrow morning?

#### THE HORIZONS OF THE CLASSROOM

To that end, I’d like to consider what I am going to call the horizons of the classroom, and I will explore three such horizons, understood as being concentric and moving – as you move, they move (as horizons always do). And this movement, itself, is the recognition and acknowledgement of the transition from the conceptual to the cordial, from the mind to the heart, from the notional to the real, from the categorial to the existential, and from the noetic to the pneumatic (and here the pneumatic includes the idea of breathing, of spirit, and of life).

#### THE FIRST HORIZON

The first horizon is the horizon of the conceptual. In terms of the classroom, it is the obvious one. We all know it; we operate within it most of the time; and I am doing so right now as I share these thoughts with you. It’s the common horizon of the classroom in terms of all our disciplines. It is what can be generalized, communicated, agreed upon, declared as fact, and, by some, even as truth. Much of the classroom work operates within the space marked out by this horizon. It is acknowledged explicitly in all our disciplines, and, to some degree, all disciplines aspire to be transposed into its categories and schemas (the visual arts, music, and sport are the obvious exceptions). There are thousands of

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doctoral theses that remain largely unread on library shelves all over the world that attest to the importance that we give to the conceptual.

Claude Lévi Strauss and Michel Foucault – for example – have shown that our understanding of ourselves, of nature, and of society is mediated by conceptual schemes that are discovered, transmitted, and transformed across the generations. They dominate our thinking and, in turn, determine to a significant degree what it is that we find problematic, what we believe, and what we find meaningful. If this is the case, then the very institutions that contribute so much in ‘constructing’ these conceptual schemes are clearly vital to our personal, social, and ecological identity and well-being. They contribute to opening up the world for us, enabling us to negotiate its complexities, and, importantly, equipping us in terms not only of knowing who we are, but also of living in ways in which we might flourish and that we find meaningful.

But these same conceptual schemas may also blind us, limit our capacities to explore dimensions of life that lie outside the conceptualizations that may be in vogue; that is, they may imprison us, while informing us; or maybe, in more tragic terms, they may deform in the very act of informing. This horizon, for example, may be artificially fixed, so that nothing can be asserted about what might lie beyond the fixation. For this reason alone, I believe that it is vital that an academic space is a critical place, with a spectrum of voices and disciplines, that enable those life-giving conversations that enrich and, at the same time, limit the deforming dynamic in education.

This first horizon is very important to life; but life is more than this; and life in the classroom is more than this, too.

## THE SECOND HORIZON

And so, I’d like to move to a second horizon. And remember, they are concentric circles, so I am not denying or leaving behind the achievements of what takes place from within the boundaries of the first horizon. The second is the horizon of the inter-personal. As we move to the acknowledgement of this horizon, something fundamental takes place, which is extremely important for the classroom experience. The interaction in the classroom is no longer considered to be exclusively about the objective; but is recognized to be an exchange between subjects. There are two things to pay attention to here; First, *all teaching involves interpersonal dynamics*. Even if you are teaching the axioms of topological spaces in mathematics, you do so as a person who is engaging with other persons. The temptation may be to hide behind the discipline

that you are teaching (and even, literally, the lectern); but even when you do that, it is still an interpersonal exchange in which you, as teacher, are trying to hide. And, of course, students see and know this. Secondly, your discipline itself may or may not acknowledge this horizon as part of its own conceptualization and practice. But either way, it is a vital horizon in the classroom. And even having a basic awareness of it is enough to ensure a relatively richer classroom experience.

With this awareness, students can no longer be treated, or related to, as anonymous entities, who are there simply to absorb material and appropriate skills that I am bound as teacher to pass on to them. The learning and teaching environment becomes *an inter-personal space*. In this space, each person partakes in a community of learning that is based on a healthy exchange of ideas and of experience. It ought to facilitate the encounter with otherness in all its guises (including that which operates between students themselves). The teacher has, indeed, a singular role and responsibility as guide and authority in this exchange. This authority – which must be scrupulous in terms of its integrity and its competency – is vital as a service to the classroom experience, where, correctly, it transforms limited views, encourages exchange, opens-up new vistas, and, in this way, enables students to chart their own journey in the discipline in question.<sup>7</sup>

The classroom is not an aggregate of nameless individuals, but a community of learning, which is a special kind of unity.<sup>8</sup> And learning is not a ‘preparation for life’ in the future, but a way of living and being in the present (which, indeed, anticipates the future, and, to some degree, already begins to realize it). In such a space, learning is recognized to be intrinsic to the human condition. When this is practiced and lived, those who emerge from such a real-life experience will, themselves, in due course, have an

7 At one time, I remember getting advice about teaching (that came from a religious sister, who had spent all her life teaching and was renowned for it): ‘You should teach as if you have the greatest expert in your subject in the classroom, and, at the same time, the weakest student in the school.’ Lack of competency leads, almost inevitably, to autocratic teaching and authoritarianism (which, often hidden, is an abuse of power vis-à-vis students). It is the competency of the teacher (in every sense) that largely determines the achievement of students in the classroom space. Karl Rahner puts it well when he writes: ‘Es ist selbstverständlich ... daß eine gute und moderne Studiordnung als gesetzliche Verfügung nicht oder nicht viel nützt, wenn die Professoren selber, die sie auszuführen haben, schlecht sind, keine echten Wissenschaftler oder keine lebendigen Menschen und Christen sind, die ihre Wissenschaft von der Mitte ihrer menschlichen und christlichen Existenz her betreiben’ (Karl Rahner, *Zur Reform des Theologiestudiums* [Freiburg in Br.: Herder, 1969, 8]).

8 Hannah Arendt sees the classroom as an important place of transition between the ‘home’ and the ‘public sphere’ (see Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, ed. Jerome Kohn [London: Penguin, 2006], 170-93).



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increasing desire to bring about and realize in the wider world, precisely what they have experienced during their formative years. This is a deeply humanizing dynamic that prepares *in the present* a future marked by wholesome engagement, respect for the other, mutual support, responsibility, honesty, and peace.

## THE THIRD HORIZON

And now it gets a little more interesting. There is, I believe, another horizon that is, indeed, privileged in theology, but which is operational in every discipline. It is a horizon for every classroom (whether acknowledged or not). I am going to call this one, the horizon of transcendence. It is marked by a fundamental openness to a beyond, a transcendent, that cannot ever be encapsulated within the established boundaries of any discipline, including those of theology (and it is important to remark that). This horizon is operative as the ultimate horizon of the classroom. It is an infinity that is encountered immediately and directly by everyone in the classroom. It is there in terms of the presence of each student, in terms of the class as a special unity, and, crucially, in terms of the teacher. Being able to acknowledge appropriately this horizon changes everything about the communal space. The 'what' and the 'who' of all our disciplines are placed in the framework of life in its wholeness, complexity, and mystery; not, however, as a totality, but as a genuine, real space of openness, of exploration, of transgression, and of transcendence. Let me say immediately that recognizing this horizon does not necessarily imply a faith commitment; although, if such a commitment is part of your self-understanding, then, it will, of course, be much easier to acknowledge and recognize the importance of this third horizon.

This outermost horizon, ironically, is the most intimate one and is no less rational than the other horizons and can be determined in discourse in its anonymity. Whereas each of the horizons have, indeed, a role to play in determining what is meaningful, it is this third horizon that is the most important in terms of generating a sense of freedom, openness, and meaning at the deepest level in the classroom. It mirrors the infinity of the human mind and heart as they seek a response to our searching, our lostness, and our longing. You can speak with Levinas of an infinity that ruptures totality in all its manifestations, including those in the academy that would attempt to secure definitively the real in a particular place, time, or structure of thought. It ensures at the deepest level that the classroom is a place of life, of movement, of discovery, of growth, of encounter, and, ultimately, of love.

When a culture no longer asks the deeper questions about the

self, the other, and the transcendent, then, it is greatly impoverished in terms of knowing itself, of exploring its own foundations, and finding a life-giving direction for its future. It survives on an ocean that it ignores or has forgotten; and this is marked by a sort of *Gottvergessenheit* (a forgetting of God) in the wake of what Heidegger called a *Seinsvergessenheit* (a forgetting of Being).<sup>9</sup> Necessarily, such a culture, then, remains relatively superficial in its determinations and conceptualizations (no matter how complex they might appear to be). Whatever might be the responses that one gives to the fundamental questions of the human condition, to cease to be interested in these questions, to stop asking about them, exploring them, etc., is already to have opted in some way for the death of one’s culture. It would be akin to us all returning to Plato’s cave and ignoring that once upon a time, someone, somewhere saw the sun.

The finite being that we are harbours a longing for the infinite, and if the places in our culture of inquiry and exploration no longer include the possibility of exploring that infinity, then many (if not most) of us will end up being suffocated, stunted, and limited by our very environment. The air that we breath will become too thin, and we will gasp for meaning. There will always be some, of course, who will seek to break out of limitations, of prisons, of deformations, and it is vital that there be places, where they can do this, guided by intelligence, critique, wisdom, tradition, past achievement, and so on. Theology is not an add-on, an optional extra, to a world that is already solidly constituted and secure in its own belonging; *its concerns are written into the fabric itself of our culture and into the heart and mind of every human being.*

In saying this, I’m not suggesting that everyone should do theology; that would be absurd. Neither I am suggesting that you should do theology when you study technology or mathematics (that would be silly, although, ironically, it is quite common to associate mathematics with transcendence). The crucial issue is that you should not use mathematics or technology or any other discipline to obfuscate or obliterate this horizon of transcendence as a living reality. That, to my mind, would be deformation in the formation that takes place in the classroom. It would also close off a vital source of life and energy.

I’m not sure if I need to say this, but, so that there is no misunderstanding, theology, as I appreciate it, has nothing to do with converting, enticing, persuading, or proselytising others, all of which I consider to be abusive in terms of the discipline. It would violate the fundamental respect for the other that is the

9 See Karl Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1977), 54-61.

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initial condition, as it were, of all mutual exploration in theology. Theology does not exclude anyone; and all that it requires is a certain rectitude, sincerity, and openness to learn in exploring the human condition. The ‘enemies’ of theology (so to speak) are the fundamentalist and the absolute agnostic.<sup>10</sup> The fundamentalist has always already arrived; and the absolute agnostic has stopped and is not open even to the promptings of her own mind and heart. They are, however, ironically, both similar, in that they both, implicitly, claim to take the place of God; and both, of course, would vehemently deny that diagnosis. The absolute agnostic is afraid of herself, so she inserts interior breaks (as in the breaks of a car); the fundamentalist is afraid, too, but he is afraid of God, so he accelerates into the ‘safety’ of a false and manageable God, a pseudo-absolute, be it the bible, dogmas, religious ideology, or, as they say, whatever. There is, however, a ‘healthy’ agnosticism, that mirrors an openness to the beyond, to this third horizon, that corresponds to the task of theology.

Theology as a discipline in any academic environment will not give economic advantage, but it can contribute to the richness of the experience of being there for students and, perhaps, even, for staff. And in this way, it might well contribute substantially to the quality of life in future generations, which cannot now be measured. It is, of course, for the academic community itself to decide if this is important.

## BACK TO THE CLASSROOM

Let me go back to the classroom. Remember, I am wondering about the experience of being in the classroom. What I would like to suggest is that when all three horizons are appropriately acknowledged and operative, then you have the best chance of having a living, vibrant, life-giving exchange in that privileged space that is the classroom. Everyone will be able to breath in the deepest sense of the human spirit.

10 The sincere atheist defines himself or herself – even at the level of language – in the most intimate way in relation to God. Both identities continue to be mutually supportive in their negation. The signifier ‘God’ has not been annulled and cannot be obliterated without a corresponding annihilation of the self. For this reason, the atheist could be said to be a deeply wounded ‘theist,’ and theology *per se* is not adequate or in a position to heal that wound; it requires something else altogether. In the context of a discussion on Marxism, for example, Karl Rahner observes that ‘Atheism is a horrible deformation of the person and of human consciousness’ (Karl Rahner, *I Remember: An Autobiographical Interview with Meinold Krauss*, trans. H. D. Egan [London: SCM, 1985], 79.) See also the interesting discussion, Paul Ricoeur, ‘Religion, Atheism, and Faith,’ in Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (London: Columbian, 1969), 57-98. And it is well worth reading carefully *Gaudium et spes*, Nos., 19-21.

And just to take things one small step further (although I have already hinted at this). If I were to boil down everything that I’m trying to say to one statement that would express the key insight – but at the risk of being seriously misunderstood – then, I would say, simply, that ‘you must love your students.’ You must do this in the most disinterested way possible, including foregoing your need for recognition (they may never see or understand how and what you invest in your discipline); that, I think, is at the heart of teaching. There is a special unity in the classroom, a synergy that engenders life in the most wholesome of ways, and no matter what you teach, you have the potential of instituting that kind of space. A statement from Hegel captures the dynamic very well: *In der Liebe ist das getrennte noch aber nicht mehr als getrenntes, sondern als einiges* (in love, there is still separation, but not anymore as separation, but as unity).

There is no doubt that students are on a journey, when they come to college; but so, too, are teachers. It is easy to see that they, the students, move; *but we, teachers, move, too*. We change, develop, grow, and are transformed through our experience in the classroom, year in, year out (I’m old enough, now, to see this in hindsight). Maybe, I’m just inviting you to be more conscious of the importance of your own journey *as teacher*, which is, undoubtedly, neglected in the contemporary university, where prelation is given to research.<sup>11</sup> And so, in that spirit, I’d like to finish with a poem by Philip Larkin, called ‘I put my mouth.’ I read it as an invitation to change, or better, perhaps, to be changed or even transformed; and, if you are a person with a faith commitment, then, I am reading it as an invitation to be redeemed.

‘I PUT MY MOUTH’

by Philip Larkin

I put my mouth close to running water:  
Flow north, flow south,  
It will not matter,  
It is not love you will find.

I told the wind:  
It took away my words:  
It is not love you will find,  
Only the bright-tongued birds,  
Only a moon with no home.

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that for Newman the essence of the university is teaching and not at all research.

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It is not love you will find:  
You have no limbs  
Crying for stillness, you have no mind  
Trembling with seraphim,  
You have no death to come.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed., and Intro. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 1988), 276.

**The Providence of God.** If we see God’s providence as the backdrop of our lives, it is amazing how we can find small scraps of hope even in times of desperation and fear, seeds of wisdom even in unwanted experiences and unwelcome happenings. Does hope also mean believing in small, modest, ‘everyday’ miracles? Some would say it does. The twentieth-century German theologian, Karl Rahner, SJ, had a deeply contemplative approach to the mystery of God as revealed in our ordinary human experiences. Once, when he was asked whether he believed in miracles, he replied that he didn’t *believe* in them, he *counted* on them to get through each day. Having a keen sense of divine providence in his life, he saw the finger of God in the apparently chance events, good and bad, that come to us all. To him, these everyday experiences were ‘miracles’ because they spoke to him of God’s guiding presence in life. It was not that he believed God deliberately made such things happen – nature, luck, human freedom, human sinfulness, coincidence could have caused them – but for him they were more than simply a conspiracy of accidents; they were a source of hope, of confidence in God’s presence in his life. And hope is always miraculous ...

– TERESA WHITE, *Hope and the Nearness of God*, (Bloomsbury, 2021,) p. 24.