

“The Wound of Love” and the Pursuit of Holiness

--Frances Young’s Spirituality in a Broken World

Rev Dr Justin Tan
Centre for the Study of Chinese

One of the most unlikely arenas of theological reflections comes from people with disabilities. It is a perspective from a broken world which challenges the “usual” tenets of Christianity. There is the obvious attitude of compassion to consider, but also a concerted effort in tackling a spirituality of inclusion in a world of brokenness. Prominent Methodist theologian, Professor Frances Young, has embodied this deep Spirituality in her life and writings. She is a mother of a seriously damaged child, Arthur. Being highly intellectual and deeply committed Christian, she has struggled through the theological and spiritual implications of living in a broken world. Her spirituality is poignantly put in her own words: “We are not in control of our lives; that we are mutually dependent and dependent on God; that we are creatures; that our vulnerability and mortality is essential to our being – suffering is simply unavoidable given our creatureliness, and it is the place where we are formed for the holy life”. This paper attempts to learn from her.

Brief Biography of Revd Prof Frances Young



The Revd Professor Frances Young¹ taught theology at the University of Birmingham from 1971, becoming the Edward Cadbury Professor and Head of the Department of Theology in 1986. During her time at the University, she also served as Dean of the Faculty of Arts (1995-7) and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (1997–2002). In 1984, she was ordained as a Methodist minister, and has combined preaching in a local Circuit and pursuing her academic career. She was made an OBE for her services to Theology in 1998 and has written an extensive list of books of both academic and more popular theological writings. In 2005, she retired from the University.

She and her husband cared for Arthur Thomas, their son born in 1967 with profound learning disabilities, until June 2012, when at 45 years of age he finally left home for residential care. In 1985 she published *Face to Face*, an account of her son’s life, development and education, her own struggle with faith, coming to terms with the situation

¹ This bibliography note is a combination of several sources which are all available on line, eg. Wikipedia. Most of them give an accurate summary of Frances Young’s life and work. I quote only the part that is relevant to this paper.

and her call to ordination. Since then she has frequently been asked to speak about theology and disability, and her journey of understanding has continued through Arthur's adulthood.

This throws up the problem of suffering and evil and a good God. "The phenomenon of handicap can produce a naive sentimentality which refuses to admit it is an evil, but everything in me protested against it as cruel and unnecessary. And if every individual is important to God, how could he even afflict one of his creatures in this way... denying them the possibility of fullness of life." And yet, she sees through this veil of tears into the hope that is re-created in the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ.

Her academic publications include *From Nicaea to Chalcedon. A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (SCM press, 1983, 2nd edition 2010) and *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (CUP, 1997); she co-edited *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature and The Cambridge History of Christianity: Origins to Constantine*. And many more.

Her works on Spirituality are also very impressive, not least on the spirituality of brokenness. her experience as the mother of Arthur. Because of this she has worked on the theological and ecumenical dimensions of the L'Arche communities with Jean Vanier, their founder. From the first account of her reflection on her life with Arthur in *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (1990) to *Brokenness and Blessing: Towards a Biblical Spirituality* (2007) and then the continuing story of Arthur in *Arthur's Call* (2014), they are full of deeply felt reflections on the very central tenets of Christianity and Christian Spirituality.

Misconceptions and the Reality about Disability

In our reflection on the spirituality in the broken world, Frances Young first leads us into a world of discrimination, misconception and fanciful promises.

Ancient societies looked upon disability as a menace and curse to nature and society, especially the Greek notion of order, balance and harmony. Diseases, malformation and material misfortune were often seen as signs of ill will of the gods². With the advent of Christianity, there was a dramatic change in attitude that followed the example of Christ in strongly embracing the intrinsic value of human life. This value has become less and less tied to whether it has contributions to the public good, and thus, 'Christians' countercultural social practices paved the way for public institutions of charity for the socially excluded.'³

However, Frances Young notes that when it comes to these type of questions, the answers will inevitably be ambivalent⁴, it is never easy when subjective feelings and reactions, and very personal ones at that always intrude into a rational theological reflections.

² Almut Caspary, "the Patristic Era: Early Christian Attitudes Toward the Disfigured Outcast" in, Brian Brock and John Swinton (eds.), *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 24. Caspary goes on to paint a very bleak picture of those born with disabilities: "The disfiguring conditions of monsters, as they were called (*pridigia* in Latin, *terata* in Greek), were largely ascribed to supernatural powers that needed to be exorcised and purified for the benefit of society as a whole. Often such monsters were seen as manifestations of supernatural powers foreboding danger for the community; divine signs, portents, or bad omens for their families and the polis at large." (p.25).

³ Ibid, 25.

⁴ Frances Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), Chapter 2.

But life must go on no matter how we try to rationalize it, she admits, “there had been a time when I could not break the hope-less mood which underlay the whole of life, even as we coped and joked and survived.”⁵

From the moment of Arthur’s birth, Frances has been constantly struggling to show affection and love. Breast feeding became a problem as Baby Arthur did not have the capability of normal suckling. The crave to show love and the feeling of rejection has persisted throughout their mother-son relationship.

The reality of Arthur’s disability came as a shock: “When the full nature of his problems we revealed, shock, puzzlement and some anger were the first reactions. But it all soon turned into a dreadful sense of failure.”⁶ But there was an even worse reality check awaiting her and her husband: “Consciously or unconsciously all parents have dreams for their children. We had to accept we could dream no dreams.”⁷

It is at this point that Frances Young, being a highly achieved intellectual, fought with all her breath to seek to reconcile this shocking reality with her Christian faith. She was not one to give up on her faith when the going was tough, but she was also realistic enough to expect a tougher battle of the mind and the soul, a life and death struggle with her whole self and her God. She would describe herself as the Wrestling Jacob, seeking blessing even though in the end there was brokenness, but came away with blessing nonetheless, and brought along with her the suffering of the broken world.

The Pursuit of Holiness

Frances Young defines the pursuit of Holiness in terms of Biblical Spirituality that “challenges the culture we have assimilated, and its assumptions and values, while offering a realistic view of the human condition and the wonderful gift of grace which brings hope of transformation. It is the conversion of heart which constitutes the purpose of Scripture, according to the Fathers.”⁸

The obvious challenge of this formulation of authentic Biblical spirituality is to the modern cultural environment that fosters a desire to assert basic right of freedom from pain and suffering. Rather than viewing out human frailty and mortality as things to be denied or overcome, biblical spirituality encourages us to place them at the very center of our being and our belief. This is because true biblical spirituality involves suffering and an acceptance of our own and others’ brokenness and flaws.

Frances Young puts the authentic Spirituality in simple terms as the discovery of our limitations, wrestling, following, imitating, emptying, and longing. It is a journey of faith, hope and love, and above all longing to be whole again. And more specifically, it is the pursuit of holiness. And she loosely categorizes it in five stages, each helps to build up the argument for the other, but there is still a logical progression from the first stage of accepting the present to the embracing the world of brokenness, and finally hope.

⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁸ Frances Young, *Brokenness and Blessing: Toward a Biblical Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007), 8.

A. First Stage: Holiness as a Journey through the Desert

Frances Young never sees holiness as a static attribute; it is always a dynamic interaction with God and with the world. Part of the reason why she starts the contemplation of a life of holy living as a journey through the Desert is because we need to begin at the beginning, a contemplation of whom we are and where we are going. However, her experience with living with a severely disabled son creates a unique premise for her contemplation.

Drawing from the spirituality of the Desert Fathers, she, like them, also looks at the Desert in metaphorical term⁹. The Desert is a place of trial and temptation. There we find our inner demons exposed: fear and insecurity, anger and violence, self-deception and self-hatred. Drawing from the example of Christ in the Wilderness, the Desert Fathers saw temptation as inseparable from experience, and was a good thing, enabling discernment of spirits, and endurance. It produces freedom and a willing to move on and venture into unknown territory. This is where Frances' experience comes in, and forces her to rethink about her beliefs and what is meant by 'normal'.

The spirituality of disability will inevitably need to critique the ideology of normalcy. Being created in God's image and likeness can no longer be articulated in terms of how that image relates to the attributes of God. It demands a fresh understanding of the human condition that will expand our definition of 'normal': "Because many kinds of difference are feared and shunned, the disability experience has been a different experience... Variety is normal."¹⁰ Perhaps Beldon Lane's observation is pointedly obvious and demands our change in attitude towards the disabled:

"Our culture substitutes the glamorous for the grotesque, denying this awkward vision of the *imago dei*... If we define a person exclusively in terms of rational ability and productivity, someone with Down syndrome will inevitably appear less than whole. The eccentric, the ugly, the abnormal lie beyond the measure of our society norms. We are left with a stylized and truncated humanity, dangerously imaging itself complete."¹¹

There is in Christian Theology the concept of God creating the World and humans in it with a moral purpose. Frances Young's experience of a profoundly disabled child would question that, as this will make the disabled child less than who he is, less than human even! She feels as if she is thrown into the Desert of trial and temptation, but also given the gift of venturing into new and unknown territory. She relates her Desert journey thus:

"Indeed, my pilgrimage with Arthur has been a kind of Exodus, through the wilderness to the Promised Land. For years I found holding to my faith profoundly difficult. God seemed absent... The need to let go of preoccupations and anxieties, to journey into the unknown, to accept the utter transcendence and incomprehensibility of God, allowed me a renewal of faith, and soon afterwards a sense of vocation in which Arthur became a central part of my ministry. Overall my journey has involved a

⁹ *Brokenness and Blessing*, 14-22.

¹⁰ Block, *Copious Hosting*, 85, quoting from, Barrett Shaw (ed), *The Ragged Edge: The Disability Experience from the Pages of the First Fifteen Years of the Disability Rag* (Louisville: Avocado Press, 1994), xii.

¹¹ Quoted by Block, 86, from, Beldon Lane, "Grace and the Grotesque," *Christian Century* 107, no. 33 (14 November 1990): 109.

profound shifting away from the questions of theodicy, from the anguished questioning of a Job, to a sense that through the wilderness of coping with Arthur I have had the privilege access to a deeper sense of meaning and value.”¹²

Eventually Frances comes to understand it this way:

“ I came to realized that one of the really important things that we find in the Bible is an absolute realistic acceptance that all flesh is grass, we are part of the natural order, things go wrong. In the Autumn the leaves change colour, whither and come off; and in the autumn of our lives we go through something somewhat similar. Just as accidents happen, so accidents can happen even while the embryo is in the womb. This vulnerability, this frailty, this being a creature as part of the created order is something fundamental about our being as human beings... Then there is a further stage. Not only do we have to accept that we are part of a created order, which has these frailties built in. This experience has, it seems to me, been a kind of sacrament in which I have increasingly found that I have privileged access to the deepest truths of Christianity.”

By ‘the deepest truths of Christianity’ she means ‘the Godness of God’ and ‘the frailty of creation’. She would explore the former in her second stage of her journey, but here the frailty of creation is absolutely crucial to her formulation of theological anthropology. It means that human beings are no longer defined in terms of ‘normalcy’, but ‘frailty’ in all its forms¹³. The very humanness is the human beings is limited and vulnerability, prone to accidents, even in the womb. Disability is thus not an exception but in fact one manifestation of humanity!

She then relates her experience of the frailties of humans to the very heart of Christianity in Jesus Christ:

“ It seems to me that one of the things that Christianity says is that strangely, and in a way that find difficult to understand, it was God’s own self which in Jesus came and took responsibility for all the, what I call, “ gone wrongness” in the creation. The fact that we do wicked things; that things go wrong; that there is suffering and hurt, and all kinds of the terrible things that happen. That somehow, in Jesus, God took responsibility for that and through that we can know that at heart, even though he dared not damage it by grabbing it like that butterfly, the whole world is in the hands of God.”

The desert way of life, or the first stage in our path to holiness, according to Frances is the acceptance of human frailty, and non-conformity to the values and the conventional “ labeling” of the world.

B. Second Stage: Holiness as a Journey Towards Encounter with God

Frances Young takes the Biblical Stories as a record of people encountering God, falling short of God’s glory and finding salvation in all kinds of different ways¹⁴. She takes

¹² *Brokenness and Blessing*, 28.

¹³ *Face to Face*, 189-193.

¹⁴ In a lecture at St. Martin-in-the Fields Autumn Programme, *The Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last*:

the story of Jacob wrestling at the Jabbok (meaning ‘Wrestling’) in Genesis 32:24-32 as the paradigm. The emphasis lies in the experience of Jacob being both blessed and disabled at the same time. It is revealing that Jacob called that place of encounter, ‘Penuel’, stating that “I have seen the face of God and yet my life has been preserved”.

The story has become a paradigm of human encounter with God, especially when Jacob’s was renamed ‘Israel’, as one commentator puts it, “The history of the people of Israel was often to be a tale of just such encounter with God: a costly turbulent struggle in the darkness of tragedy, exile and persecution, but an authentic experience in which they came face to face with God.”¹⁵

Frances Young then takes us on a journey of Early Christian interpretations of the story, but confirms that “at the core is the idea of Jacob wrestling with God, a mysterious Being discerned in human form, and being disabled, blessed and given a new name through the contest”¹⁶. But what really caught her eyes and mind is the fact, expounded by St. Gregory of Nazianzus¹⁷, is the mystical interpretation of the wrestling, and it is this interpretation that brought Frances face to face with the problem of suffering. She put the exposition succinctly thus:

“ For Gregory the story is about the human struggle to know God, and its ultimate failure because we are mere creatures, It’s only because God accommodates the divine self to our human level, through the inevitably limited human language of scripture, and above all by accepting the constraints of incarnation, that we have any chance of knowing about God”¹⁸.

And none of the human struggle is as acute as the problem of suffering. For Frances, she speaks boldly and realistically from her own experience of her life with Arthur: “He became for me the symbol of all the ‘gone-wrongness’ that modernity has identified as a good reason for calling God in question”¹⁹. The ‘gone-wrongness’ is the presumption that humans are self-sufficient and should have the god-given right to demand things from God. We imagine we are in control, we make up our minds, we decide whether we would seek God or not, but the whole point is that we are mere limited creatures, vulnerable, far from in control. By wrestling with God, we may think to prevail, to be master, to accuse and to demand, only to discover that we are the ones to be marked by the struggle, and yet given a new name. In the end it is not that we judge God, rather we are judged by God; and that implies a need to reconfigure our concept of God.²⁰

So the spiritual struggle at this second stage of the journey to Holiness is not the attempt to find answers to theodicy, but to seek to know God as God is. Sometimes, life experience becomes the truest critique of the Theology we hold dear. Theologians like Karl Rahner and David Tracy have both advocate that for any theological investigation to be relevant, it must engage two principle sources: the Christian texts and common human experience and language²¹. This is when theology and spirituality meet and inform each other.

She relates one such experience. Out of the constant burden of having to take care of Arthur, in her tiredness and desperation, she began to waver a little in her once staunch belief:

The bible Opened to All (2010), entitled, “Being Biblical, Being Broken and Blessed”, p.1.

¹⁵ Davidson, *Genesis 12-50*, p. 186.

¹⁶ Op. cit., “Being Biblical, Being Broken and Blessed”, pp.6-7.

¹⁷ In St. Gregory’s 2nd Theological Oration.

¹⁸ Op. cit., “Being Biblical, Being Broken and Blessed”, p7.

¹⁹ Ibid., p8.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ As summarized by J. W. Block, *Copious Hosting*, 11-12.

“How could I go on believing in a good God when something had gone so wrong in the very act of creating a new human being? How could I go on believing that God had a purpose for everyone, to become saints, when here was someone who would apparently never be capable of any independent moral choice?” This was her Jabbok Wrestling. And as the Jacob story implies, there came the experience of reconfiguration of her concept of God. As she was going into the kitchen, she suddenly had a ‘loud thought’: “It makes no difference to me whether you believe in me or not!” It dawned on her that if God is who he is, he has the power of “existing absolutely in virtue of himself, requiring no cause, no other justification for his existence except that his very nature is to exist.”²²

However, the place of doubt cannot be denied, because truth, honesty and integrity belongs to spirituality. Jesus’s agony in the Garden can be read as facing the sense of abandonment by God, a “wrestling” of the soul, in the face of suffering and inexplicable destruction. But with this cry of agony, came the blessing of obedience as Jesus prayed, “Thy will not mine!” His agony is also his blessing!

Frances eventually comes to realize that from her son Arthur, she receives much blessing. Instead of seeing herself as his carer, she begins to see that Arthur is ministering to her. She finds the fruit of the Spirit bearing in her as she sees it from the perspective of the powerless speaking to the one who thinks is holding the power over someone. She can now say with much conviction: “So I would say that after all those years of struggling with the questions, I discovered that through Arthur I have been given privileged access to the deepest truths of Christianity. I stand alongside him as a vulnerable creature, disabled and mortal, knowing my creaturely limitations and my lack of knowledge, especially of God. I know my need of God and my resistance to God’s grace, the inner demons like self-pity that so easily take over my interior life. Yet again I find myself lamed and blessed. I discern signs of God’s presence, I meet God in human form, I discover glimpses of Christ, in the face of some of the most damaged and disabled human persons.”²³

She quotes with much approval Charles Wesley’s rendition of the Wrestling Jacob:

*Come, O Thou Traveller Unknown, Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone, And I am left alone with thee;
With thee all night I mean to stay, And Wrestle till the break of day.
I need not tell thee who I am, My misery and sin declare;
Thyself hast called me by my name; Look on thy hands, and read it there:
But who, I ask thee, who art thou? Tell me thy name, and tell me now.*

.....
*Content now upon my thigh I halt, till life’s short journey end;
All helplessness, all weakness, I on thee alone for strength depend;
Nor have I power from thee to move: Thy nature and thy name is Love.
Lame as I am, I take the prey, Hell, earth and sin with ease o’ercome;
I leap for joy, pursue my way, And as a bounding hart fly home,
Through all eternity to prove, Thy nature and thy name is Love.*

C. Third Stage: Holiness as *Imitatio Christi*

By the Grace of God, the gift of struggling with God is the self-emptying of Christ. Frances Young starts this leg of the journey by a famous hymn which recapitulates the theme of *Imitatio Christi*²⁴:

²² She quotes favourably from Thomas Merton, *Elected Silence*, p139.

²³ *Ibid.*, p10.

²⁴ *Brokenness and Blessing*, 59.

*“My song is love unknown,
My Saviour’s love to me,
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
O who am I,
That for my sake
My Lord should take
Frail flesh and die?”*

The theme of the way of Jesus is simple enough: trust and *kenosis*, but Frances gives them a fuller meaning in light of her own experience. She herself, as a theologian has been involved in the so-called “Quest for the Historical Jesus”²⁵, but finds it tedious and lifeless now, rather the more truthful and life-giving is the hymn’s emphasis on the love of Christ, who for our sake, came to us to bridge the gulf between God’s ‘Otherness’ and our creatureliness by self-emptying (*kenosis*) in the incarnation²⁶. This is God accommodating himself to the human level for our sake. This holds the key to biblical spirituality²⁷.

But this holds poignantly true when we look at it from the perspective of the relationship of people with disabilities and their carers. The carer will need to see as Christ see, people she assists are also fully human, having their own way of relating with the Divine, just as Christ’s self-emptying love shows his total disregard of the state of the humanity he came to serve, the carer’s self-emptying service needs to recognize this, and allow God to relate to them in God’s own way.

Amos Yong²⁸, speaking from a pentacostal perspective, having a younger brother with Down Syndrome, redefines the *ordo salutis* of traditional soteriology, preferring to state it in terms of *Via solitis*, as a dynamic process, agreeing with the Theologian John Swinton, he says:

“Rather than asking whether people with intellectual disability are religiously conscious or responsible, he inquires into how they become religiously engaged. If human beings are multidimensional, dynamic, and relational through and through, then with regard to people with intellectual disabilities, relational criteria comes into play that are not exhaustively determined or constricted to the intellect. There can be a genuine affective apprehension of and even conversion to God for those with profound cognitive disabilities whereby their existence in loving relationships mediates real saving experiences of God.”²⁹

Frances Young sees the dynamism being played out between the disabled and carer: We need “a reorientation which can face and accommodate the challenge that the handicapped present...to our ideology of what is human....It is not the handicapped who need community care. It’s US. To learn from the handicapped requires a new heart and a new spirit within us, but if we are prepared to learn, it will produced the new heart and new spirit

²⁵ *Brokenness and Blessing*, 59.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

²⁸ Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007)

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 237.

and we will be immensely enriched—indeed, it will be our salvation, We shall discover what it really means to be human.”³⁰ Amos Yong adds, “As importantly, I suggest, our conversion facilitates their won, so that what emerges is a new community consisting of us and them, beyond us versus them”³¹.

The relationship is played out in terms of self-emptying and trust, and it goes both ways. The reliance of the disabled manifests the emptying of oneself and simple trust in the carer; the service of the carer is a manifestation of self-emptying and willingness to learn from the simple trust of the disabled. The disabled sees a Christ-figure in the Carer in her service, and the Carer sees a Christ-figure in the disabled in their trust. This is life-giving and life-transforming: “I come so that they can have life, and have it more abundantly”. And that is *kenosis*, in the true sense of the word.

Frances relates an episode in the Othona community where she was invited one day to speak to for a week, taking Arthur with her³². Silence was required throughout the prayer session. As usual, it was impossible to keep Arthur quiet, so with Arthur present, silence cannot be kept in the usual way. So the leader suggested that they create silence by singing Psalms. The version of Psalm 131 of the Othona community brought tears and silence of the soul to all presence:

*I am too little, Lord, to look down on others.
I've not chased great affairs, nor matters beyond me.
I've tamed my wild desires and settled my soul.
My soul's new-fed child at rest on the breast.
My brothers seek the Lord, both now and for ever.*

Frances exclaims: “Suddenly Arthur became the Christ-figure in our midst.” What Arthur has done is to make us more than what we are.

D. Fourth Stage: Holiness as Resident Alien

It follows that recognizing the Christ-figure in people will inevitably lead to embracing humanity as they are. So Frances Young proposes that welcoming difference lies in the heart of the Gospel and deepens spirituality and the experience of worship. She puts it succinctly: “It is being open to meeting the strangeness –welcoming the difference – of others, which allows us glimpses of God’s Otherness” .

The idea of Resident Alien is never far from the core of Biblical theology. That is the very core of the identity of Ancient Israel: “ For the Lord your God...upholds that cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing.—You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:18-19) Therefore the person who is the ‘other’ is a sign of what Israel truly is, i.e., ‘gēr’ (resident alien), whose status and condition cannot be changed. But God is no respecter of persons and loves the alien who lives among them. In the New Testament, Christians may be ethically related to their pagan neighbours, but they have become different –aliens and exiles, sojourners, resident aliens (cf. I Peter 2:11-12).

³⁰ Ibid., 177,183.

³¹ Ibid., 238.

³² *Brokenness and Blessing*, 79

For people with disability, they are more often than not, being looked at as strangers or resident aliens³³, sometimes even by their carer. Frances Young relates of the times of alienation with Arthur. At times, despair set in, she is forced to accept, “little by little he got weaker. It is impossible to know what to do for the best! At least I don’t get guilty any more – whatever you do is wrong anyway!”³⁴ Frances is honest enough to call her life with Arthur was “a battle of love”, she puts it in a very raw and stark emotional outburst: “The worst feature of it was that when he was distressed, there would be gradual build up of distress in me, until I could no longer contained my feelings. It was his rejection of love and care that hurt; it was the distress for his distress which undermined my ability to cope. There seemed no point in his life. If you put an animal out of his misery on compassionate grounds, why not Arthur?”³⁵ She concluded her outburst in saying, “How could we justify [Arthur’s] continued misery when the future held nothing for him?”³⁶

This is what Ian Cohen termed “the strange belonging yet not belonging of the ‘alien’ child in the family, the strange child who is different, though ‘bone of me bone, flesh of my flesh’”³⁷. Frances confesses that “as a parent myself, I have to acknowledge having the powerful conflicting emotions about my son, who is flesh of my flesh but not like me, not at all like his adult younger brothers... It is no good pretending there is no difference.”³⁸

But it is precisely the recognition of this difference and the discovery of “letting go” that love could return. Frances goes though it this way: at first she tried every which way to “remedy” Arthur, but eventually she had to admit that they did more harm than good, and indeed a lot of permanent damage to Arthur’s physique. It all seemed to ease her self-accusation of not trying hard enough. But the release ironically came in the form of realizing her own possessiveness, a form of self-centred love, then came the healing idea of letting-go, “It is only when we can let go, become detached that we really love the other person for himself, allowing him to be himself and do his own thing without the binding cords of possessiveness. And this is when the relationship, paradoxically, deepens.”³⁹

So, if we are to welcome difference, to affirm the ‘other’ and embrace the stranger, we have to acknowledge first that there is a difference. And then new life can be found in being open to meeting the strangeness, welcoming difference, which allows us glimpses of God’s Otherness⁴⁰: “Welcoming God’s difference deepens spirituality. Welcoming the difference of others deepens the experience of worship.” This indeed in a path to holiness.

E. Fifth Stage: Holiness as Longing and Fulfillment

Is there hope for the broken world? The path of the pursuit of Holiness inevitably lead us to the future, where expectations and fulfillment of our longing could be realized, otherwise the journey would be in vain. Yet according to Frances Young, “People in contact

³³ Frances Young draws heavily on the work of a paper read by Rev Ian Cohen, later collected and reproduced in a private publication entitled *Mental Handicap, Theology and Pastoral Care*, ed. Stephen Pattison. In *Face to Face*, p 135, n.4.

³⁴ *Face to Face*, 27.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁷ *Brokenness and Blessing*, 90.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁹ *Face to Face*, 47.

⁴⁰ *Brokenness and Blessing*, 101.

with the handicapped have to learn to accept disappointment.”⁴¹ But she calls this the dark side of hope which becomes the birth-pangs of the new creation!

The experience of Frances Young’s gradual realization of the insight above is played out throughout Arthur’s life till now, who is 45 years of age. There is always longing and expectation of a parent for her son to grow to at least to an acceptably normal adult. But Frances has to acknowledge early in Arthur’s life that it wasn’t to be. When longing becomes a false hope, it comes crashing down on her, increasing her sense of ‘failure’, and creates unnecessary ‘guilt’ and feelings of inadequacy⁴².

In her desperation earlier in Arthur’s life, Frances went through the so-called ‘I will do anything’ syndrome, hoping against hope that by trying every remedy that was available, to stimulate Arthur to achieve progressive response and mobility. But she realized soon that that would be unhealthy: “the mother’s singlemindedness really can become an obsession, to the exclusion of any other care that might be needed in the family as a whole. It would only lead to breakups and may be delinquency in other siblings⁴³.

But what can you do when a child stays practically on one sport of growth and no progress is in sight?⁴⁴ The acceptance of the fact, ironically enough is ‘progress’ in itself, both for the carer and the child. For the carer it is a ‘progress’ in coping with failure: “Our ideology is so ‘success-oriented’, and ‘success’ defined in terms of constant little bits of ‘progress’ towards ‘normalcy’, that the reality of non-progress is far too demoralizing to admit... what matters far more is trust and respect, a relationship in which love can flourish because it is relaxed and accepting.”⁴⁵ For the child it is a ‘progress’ in terms of the switch in the carer to ‘force’ or ‘foster’ a change in him, albeit with very good intention. Frances’ word has a strong ring of truth: “But I do think that Arthur’s progress has to a large extent been ‘inbuilt’, and a lot of our efforts to force it have in fact created more problems for him and us.”⁴⁶ It is this that finally brought Frances to formulate her very brand of a theology of hope.

She starts, as she always does, with biblical wisdom and her own experience. We can summarize it thus⁴⁷:

1. Human beings are dust and to dust they will return. In the field of handicap, it is usual to recognize that no complete cure is possible, and that learning to accept the situation is only realism. True, we should not give up finding ways to alleviate the situation, but we need to accept the limits of human competence.
2. It is the power of God which keeps one in being, thus all life is a privilege not a right.
3. Life is a miracle, and resurrection a miraculous renewal of life by God. Thus there is no expectation that humans can create utopia or solve all problems or reach perfection by their own strength or wisdom. For this to happen, it has to be a miraculous re-creation.
4. There is a mutuality in all humans: we share the same need, we have the same instinctive desire for life (even for the profoundly disabled), the same ultimate

⁴¹ *Face to Face*, 196.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 196-7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3-37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 199: “He remained in the same class for years, and the same school until he left at eighteen. Effectively teachers were struggling with the same self-help skills when he finished as when he started – notably feeding and toileting. The reality is that at twenty-one he is still in nappies and still has to be fed, and you could say that no progress was made at all over all those years.”

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 200, 201.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 206-15.

end in death, the same frailty and the same vulnerability.

5. Yet, there is the inauguration of hope when Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God, the 'now' and the 'not yet' of God's dealing with the World: on the one hand, believers are already justified, sanctified, adopted as children of God and heirs of the kingdom; on the other hand they have to become what they already are.
6. Thus despite all the doom and gloom of the present world, human life is shot through with miracles of grace, genuine change, real hope at the penultimate level.
7. This is realistic hope: the dark side of hope is the pain and judgment involved in the world's labour to give birth to God's new creation, a hope for the ultimate new creation guaranteed by anticipations now.

The theology of hope has given rise to a reflection on the fifth stage of the pursuit of holiness. Frances Young uses the term, "Desire Frustrated and Fulfilled" to describe the paradox of hope. She explores the various ways in which the Early Fathers interpret the Song of Songs, and comes to see Gregory of Nyssa's language of *epektasis* as the most appropriate of this paradox of hope. Gregory's idea was first formulated in his spiritual interpretation of *The Life of Moses*, and then elaborated in his spiritual commentary of the Song of Songs. Essentially, Gregory saw 'desire' in a positive light. The longing of the soul for God creates a desire to follow him and reach beyond the boundary of its own capacity into the incomprehensible. But this is an endless quest, because no created being can ever grasp fully the infinite God. But the desire to pursue is created by God giving glimpses of glory and beauty of himself, but it is also a 'frustrated' journey, as it is always beyond our reach. It is not all negative, however, as the frustration induces further desire to pursue.

In terms of our spiritual journey in a broken world, glimpses of God's goodness and glory will invigorate our desire to experience more of it. It becomes a perpetual spiraling quest from frustration to fulfillment, but all the while in ascending order, till we meet him face to face in perfect love.

Thus Frances Young comes back full circle to his Methodist spiritual roots, and concludes her vision of the pursuit of holiness with Charles Wesley's most well known hymn:

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
Pure, unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation
Enter every trembling heart.*

*Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise!*

We conclude this contemplation of the holy life with Frances Young's words:

“Disability is the condition of blessing. Humankind has over-reached itself, forgotten its essential creatureliness and its role in creation's ecology, and put itself in God's place. The rediscovery that God is beyond us, and yet reaches out to us in Christ to grasp our hands in the midst of the struggle, even to wound us with his arrow of love, might enable us, both individually and as the body of Christ on earth, to live the way of love and true humility in following Jesus, this would make us the best witness to the Gospel in the pluralist global village of the twenty-first century”.⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ *Brokenness and Blessing*, 126.