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# Finding rhythm within: A polyphonic (auto) biographical pastoral reflection

## ABSTRACT

*Intimate, a-rhythm autobiographical experiences, originating from my own life text, serve as initial rhetorical spaces in which possible melodies of persuasion can be heard. In this regard, polyphony serves as the central metaphor in this article. Initially, this musical metaphor acquired theological meaning in the Christological reflection of the well-known German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Four idiomatic soundtracks, namely tone-deaf, rhythm, polyphonic narratives, and dance determine the structure of the article. Although each of these soundtracks represents a unique story, together they create a harmonious melody, as in the central metaphor of polyphony. In this newly composed polyphonous melody, my own voice is audibly and rhetorically integrated with the resonant tone of development within practical theology and pastoral care. The new contribution offered by this article is found in the autobiographical pastoral reflections of persuasion on the newly composed polyphonic melody, creating a harmonious rhythm within identity and praxis.*

## APPRECIATION

I would like to dedicate this article to my dear friend and colleague Francois Tolmie. Francois has had a special impact on the international academic theological landscape and is reckoned to be one of the foremost experts in his specialised field of the New Testament. Besides his outstanding academic contribution, Francois has, over the years, contributed in various ways to the



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activities of the University of the Free State's Faculty of Theology and Religion. His strategic leadership will be remembered for a long time and has, in decisive moments, helped the Faculty take direction-finding decisions. On a personal level, Francois' compassion for, caring of, and involvement with myself and so many other people will always be dear to me. I would, therefore, like to dedicate this contribution to Francois, with my wishes that these preliminary ideas on a polyphonic autobiographical discourse will be marginal notes in his advanced research.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tone-deaf.

Rhythm.

Polyphonic narratives.

Dance.

The above intentionally typographically placed four words provide a dynamic expression of aspects of my own personal journey in discovering the meaning of polyphonic narratives within my life and work. I also subsequently use these four words to structure the different movements in, and development of the article.

With this contribution to the Festschrift for Francois Tolmie, titled *God, people and persuasion in Scripture and theology?*, an intimate insight into, and reflection on some of my initial personal tone-deaf experiences are provided. These personal a-rhythm experiences serve as imaginative rhetorical spaces, in which possible melodies of persuasion are composed with the aim to invite the reader to a polyphonus dance. With this approach and intended methodology of life writing (Walton 2014; 2022), I find a valuable connection with Francois' text-centred rhetorical analysis of the text (Tolmie 2021:1), in which the text, "my life" in this case, is allowed to speak freely without being limited by an applied particular rhetorical model. Underscoring this academic endeavour would then be to trace down possible rendezvous points with practical theology, and more specifically pastoral care, in reading and discerning the meaning of a personal life text. Over many years, I trusted Francois with my stories, and in now sharing and reflecting on these melody lines from my own life; the possibility of creating implicit discourses with the life and work of Francois, as well as with that of the reader, are envisaged.

Central to this article is the metaphor of polyphony, or playing a number of notes simultaneously, in which multiple meanings are recognised. The “hi-story” narrating the importance of this metaphor for my own life story will unfold in this article. To start with, Salamon and Gómez (2012:1759) described the concept as follows:

By polyphonic we refer to music in which two or more notes can be sounded simultaneously, be it different instruments (e.g., voice, guitar and bass) or a single instrument capable of playing more than one note at a time (e.g., the piano).

On the basis of associative networks of meaning (Müller & Maritz 1998:64), derived from the polyphonic metaphor, I develop and structure the article on the basis of various polyphonic subunits, soundtracks, or contours, each making a unique and integrated contribution. The following subunits (this could also be soundtracks, contours, or even keys) contribute to the polyphony provided in this article. First, tone-deaf addresses preliminary aspects of (auto)biography and narrative identity. Secondly, rhythm addresses the development of pastoral care and the space for autobiographical perspectives. Thirdly, polyphonic narratives addresses the polyphonic significance of the self and provide an integrated polyphonic reflection on the significance of pastoral care and the developing concept of lived religion. Lastly, dance describes the ear and foot that dance to the polyphonic rhythm of the self, as expressed in the praxis of pastoral care to the self and other. These subunits are polyphonically entertained in the article by a dynamic, interactive, and integrated practical theological movement between fragments from my own life story (portrayed in *italics*) followed as reflection by some theoretical perspectives. In this ongoing methodological manoeuvre between life fragments and theoretical reflections, I will attempt to demonstrate the classical spiral movement of practical theology between practice and theory, as developed, described, and motivated by Browning (1991:41). By providing “up close and personal” perspectives, utterance is given to a practical theological reflection which is embodied, concrete, and contextual:

This way of thinking is always concrete, local, and contextual, but at the same time reaches beyond local contexts to transdisciplinary concerns (Müller 2009:205).

This way of thinking is embodied as well as concretely and contextually expressed in fragments from my own life story.

## 2. TONE-DEAF – ON (AUTO)BIOGRAPHY AND NARRATIVE IDENTITY

*In 1981, I was in Standard 5 (currently, Grade 7) at the Queenswood Primary School in Pretoria. With my class, I took part in the school's annual concert as a member of a Cape Coon dance group. My dance steps in the back row entertained many people because I apparently have no rhythm.*

As indicated by Freedman and Combs in their highly influential *Narrative therapy. The social construction of preferred realities* (1996), these fragments from my own (auto)biography form part of the scaffolding of narratives that influenced the formation of my own identity in a monotone way. This eventually became my dominant, problem-driven identity description, in that I do not have rhythm and, therefore, cannot dance. This directly influenced my identity, even my theological understanding and integration, on many levels in a strange way (Freedman & Combs 1996:16, 42).

Only recently (2022), did I discover that the diagnosis I lived by, namely “I do not have rhythm”, is also known as “tone-deaf” or, in scientific language, “congenital amusia” (Phillips-Silver *et al.* 2011:961). This diagnosis provided another significance to my (auto)biography, as will become evident later in this article.

*In 1987 (then Standard 9; currently, Grade 11), I attended a sokkie dance on a Friday evening at the Afrikaanse Hoër Seunskool, where I was a learner. I watched my friends on the dance floor from a distance and, even though I could identify well with the familiar pop songs of the 1980s, I simply could not relay the melody proverbially from my ears to my feet. I told myself that I do not have rhythm and that I cannot dance. In fact, I may not dance ... In those days, debates on dance at church youth actions were the order of the day. I did not realise that I was tone-deaf for both musical rhythm and to a certain extent even larger movements in life.*

In following this trajectory of experiences and thought in reflecting on my experiences, I once again realise that the understanding of human lives as so-called “living human documents”, initially coined by the American pastoral theologian Anton Boisen, is crucial for the theological science and hermeneutical art of interpretation (Gerkin 1997:15). The emphasis on the narrative character of theology, taking seriously, among others, the concrete daily experiences of living persons as sources of theological insight (Gerkin 1997:15), is specifically expressed in the facilitation of a storied theology as can be noted, for example, in (auto)biography (Müller

2011). As a further explicit expression of this orientation, I have decided to write (auto)biography in brackets not only to emphasise my personal story, but also specifically to recognise that these fragments are always implicitly related to, and integrated with the stories of Francois and all other readers of this article.

### 3. RHYTHM – ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PASTORAL CARE

*I understand “beat” as the rhythm one uses to put one’s feet in time to the music. Apparently, on account of the title of the article, I did not have the ability to have a proverbial ear and foot to hear and keep rhythm. Congenital amusia assumes that these distinguishing rhythms (“beats”) are not heard in music. It took some courage for me to initially inquire with various experts about possible therapeutic interventions, in order to acquire the skill of “hearing the rhythm”. Based on the advice I received, I made a first appointment with a musical professional. To address my own personal challenges with tone-deafness, he guided me with basic lessons in drumming which taught me how to keep rhythm. In these sessions, I literally had to learn (and practice!) to hear the harder accentuating “down-beats” and to distinguish these from the lighter “up-beats”. I very well remember the Saturday afternoon when, after a few weeks of class and practising, I first managed to hear the different beats and was able to start keeping rhythm. I was instantly persuaded to start tapping my feet grooving to the music which I was now able to truly “hear” for the first time.*

To exploit the possibilities offered by a re-evaluation of the meaning of (auto)biography for a pastoral rendezvous with the fragments of my life, hopefully creating a pastoral rhythm, I present the following perspectives or notes on recent developments of pastoral care. To orientate this move and development, it is important to take note that “pastoral care” is derived from the Latin word *pastorem*, referring to shepherd, with the profound etymological meaning of caring for the defenceless and their needs (McClure 2012:269). Add to this the prominent meaning of “care”, in the concept “pastoral care”, and this presupposes caring and leadership on all levels, also for the own, private, and intimate story of the self.

Prominent scholars in the field of practical theology and pastoral care (see Weyel *et al.* 2022) has already extensively narrated the story of the character development of pastoral care. With its history embedded in the Christian tradition, pastoral care has three main aspects of development, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the First World War, the dialectical

theology of, among others, Karl Barth strongly informs a kerugma-filled pastoral care, whose chief exponent was Edward Thurneysen. From the first emphasis on a unilateral announcement, the so-called therapeutic pastorate eventually formed the antitype of a kerugmatic-oriented pastoral care, with Seward Hiltner as exponent, among others. After the kerugmatic and therapeutic phases, a new hermeneutical phase with, among others, Riet Bons-Storm as exponent, emerged in the 1970s. In this phase, theology and therapy/psychology are in a bipolar relationship with each other.

With this history as background, various paradigmatic shifts in the development of pastoral theory formation can also be identified. First, a movement from a unilateral pastoral care orientation, where the pastor is instrumental in leading people towards discovering God's involvement in their lives, to a more participatory dynamic. This offsets the context and is a shift away from the unilateral professional approach to the mutual care of believers. Secondly, a movement to a more hermeneutical-oriented pastoral care is identified. Initially, therapeutic pastoral care emphasises insights from psychology, whereas in a newer development hermeneutical pastoral care asks less to explain problems and more to understand and explain these. For example, narrative pastoral care seeks signs of God's presence in people's stories. Intimately linked to the history and stages of development of the pastoral care, the emphasis on the importance and meaning of (auto)biographical life texts, is clearly indicated.

*Touching and reading the proverbial braille text of one's own interconnected fragments of life ... Tracing down the sacredness of that very specific special moment in which my ears were connected to brain (and heart!), and I was able to hear rhythm for the first time. What would be the spiritual meaning (if any) of [my] being able to hear rhythm for a first time?*

#### 4. POLYPHONY – THE POLYPHONOUS MEANING OF (LIFE) TEXTS?

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 ... 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 (Walton 2022:49).

In reflecting on this time in my own life, this section of the article endeavours to find a rendezvous point with these personal experiences and perspectives from pastoral care contributing to the discovering of life texts with a polyphonous meaning. In this regard, and following the trajectory of the academic argument, I dare to trust the reader and share some of my own theological (braille) dwellings during this time. Based on this, I also try to indicate the meaning for an own life story. To start with, I entrust the reader with the following intimate personal perspectives:

*For various personal reasons, this article was one of the most difficult to write in my career. In writing this article, I, despite discovering rhythm, experienced a difficult time in my own personal life and struggled with creativity and productivity. In documenting this reflection, I started to write the article from my own personal praxis. In this difficult process, in which I was, by way of speaking, often rhythm-less, I endeavour to give form to a practical theological orientation in moving from praxis to theory and back to praxis, with profound and broadened meaning that can be articulated polyphonically.*

It is, however, essential to be able to hear musical rhythm before one can experience polyphonic reality. As an alternative to tone-deaf or congenital amusia, and to express the discovery of the meaning of polyphony, the following soundtrack sections in this article develop the significance of rhythm as to be explained in the development of pastoral care. God is experienced in the intimate. The praxis of life writing, as expressed in (auto)biography, then provides for a praxis of spirituality in which accounts of the self become vehicles for theological discovery (Walton 2014:xx).

Exemplary of this is the well-known German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's personal love for music and its integration in his work as theologian and in his life. In *Polyphony of life: Bonhoeffer's theology of music* (Pangritz 2019), the polyphonic characteristic of Christology is linked to the many levels of life. Not only did the musical metaphors, which Bonhoeffer employed, provide for theological insights articulating what is meant by to be in the world, while still being rooted in Christ. Smith (2006:205-206) affirms that Bonhoeffer's engagement with the musical metaphor of polyphony

achieved resistance to the systematized, instrumentalized rationality of modernity while still maintaining engagement with the multidimensional world to which Christians are called to belong.

The tonality of first recognising fragments of a life story of being part of a “human living document” and, secondly, discovering that theology is linked to many (all?) levels of life, provide for possible polyphonous rendezvous points with newer developments in practical theology and pastoral care. A good example of this is the tracing down of the sacred in everyday life. The concept “lived religion”, sprouting from more recent developments in the fields of sociology and practical theology, therefore plays an important role in my orientation towards my search for finding the sacred in every minute of the day, not only in the lives of ordinary people on the street, but especially also in my own life (Ward 2017:55). In this article, the metaphor of “autobiography”, in direct conjunction with a previous accent on “storied identity”, is used to provide accents that are inherently but also explicitly part of “lived religion” with the expectation that the “turn to everyday life is also providing theologically generative” (Walton 2022:55).

## 5. POLYPHONIC NARRATIVES – TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED PERSONAL (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTION

*My father was, in many respects, a role model for me. As minister, I learned so much from my father that it has had endless significance for my humaneness and congregational ministry. Despite my father’s retirement in 2004, he continued with active ministry at Huis Herfsblaar, a large retirement village in Pretoria. At the end of 2021, my father experienced specific challenges as far as his short-term memory and general orientation are concerned, leading to a new re-definition of our relationship also regarding our professional identities. I had for example to, with the help of my mother and brother, facilitate the process to guide my father that he would not be able to take pastoral responsibilities in the congregation and the old age home anymore. My father’s health gradually deteriorated further until he passed away on Saturday 11 November 2023. On various levels this great loss is one of the reasons for [my] experiencing a difficult time in my life.*

I have decided to include the above reflection since it formed part of the timeline in which I have discovered rhythm. However, life did not play it out in monotone, but experiences such as those above provided polyphonous (very often paradoxical) rhythms in my own life story. In his article “(Auto) biography as theology” (2011), Müller not only provided a description of, but also emphasised the importance of context, connectivity, and tradition as significant characters in the documentation of autobiographical theology (Müller 2011:n.p.). I have chosen to present a mode of description



by using autobiography and biographies as part of a critical self-reflection, representing one of the key moments in a practical theology methodology.

Life writing also raises issues of authenticity and self-awareness that are particularly important as we contemplate our understanding of God (Walton 2015:91). Although the concept of reflexivity is directly related to theological reflection, it also strongly encapsulates an autobiographical notion of discernment. Graham (2017:70) rightly pointed out that:

[i]n the interests of integrity and transparency, the self as researcher as one who brings particular presuppositions, questions and interests, must be prepared to write themselves into the text of their research.

“Writing myself in the text of my research”, I am aware of my own role in the construction of identity, very often self-made and chosen. Acknowledging that it enables me to be self-reflective of my own life epistemology, space is created for interrogative processes that enable us to understand our meaning-making strategies (Walton 2014:xvi). The role of (auto)biography is to explore

our sense of personhood, identity and purpose ... Because of the close ties between our sense of who we are and our grasp of who God is, life writing has become a key resource in vocational exploration and formation, the development of spiritual awareness, theological research and pastoral care (Walton 2015:91).

In his work, the Australian practical theologian Neil Pembroke describes the significance of the Trinity for pastoral care (Pembroke 2004; 2006). With significance for the reflections offered in this article, Pembroke (2006:23) introduces the metaphor of polyphony to describe the dynamic character of the Trinity. “The Trinity is a polyphony in which three distinctive notes are sounded without any one note muting any other”. In his reflection on Pembroke’s work, Kelly (2010:121) describes the value as follows:

Of particular note is Pembroke’s application of the musical concept of polyphony to the different parts of the Trinity that paradoxically co-exist in harmony. This resonates closely with co-existing yet, contrasting significant dimensions found within a relationship of care, for example, wisdom and folly, communion, nearness and distance.

As such, Pembroke succeeds in entering into dialogue with the doctrine of the Trinity from the pastorate in a creative new way, with meaningful perspectives for a pastoral ministry in all its aspects

courageously done what many of us in the field of pastoral theology have not dared and that is to seriously engage with the most elusive of doctrines, the Trinity, and its implications for the theory and practice of the ministry of care (Kelly 2010:121).

Typically, listening to the “up” and “down” beats in my life during this time when, on the one hand, I have discovered rhythm and, on the other hand, I have lost my father, what polyphonous theological rhythm would be audible? With reference to the perspectives provided so far in the article, a possible composing pastoral trajectory would then be to ask about the meaning of paradoxes in (auto)biographical fragments and, for example, the significance of polyphonous Trinitarian thought for my own life. This also leads to the soundtrack’s title, “Polyphonic narratives”, as the narrative character of the Trinity is linked to my personal story. In this link, there are also polyphonous ways to link with the stories of others.

## 6. DANCE – AN INTEGRATED DESCRIPTION OF FINDING THE RHYTHM WITHIN: THE POLYPHONIC RHYTHM OF (AUTO)BIOGRAPHY

*My dear wife, from schooldays time, loves dancing. She is very musical and able to hear the beat and rhythm perfectly. Unfortunately, and due to [my] suffering from congenital amusia, I, with my proverbial two left [feet], have in the past very often step[ped] on her toes during an attempt to dance with her. However, now being able to be in step with rhythm, come weddings or other social events, I can luckily dance cheek to cheek with her. Obviously, being able to find the rhythm within now embodies various polyphonous melodies, not only being acting out on the dance floor, but also in other aspects of my life.*

This article does not portray a formal conclusion as one of its rubrics. The reason for this decision is that this last movement of “dance” is supposed to be a metaphor of an ongoing polyphonous theological movement and development. “The facilitation of the transformation of life” (Gerkin 1986:64), then becomes the aim of life writing, or as documented in this article, as a polyphonic (auto)biographical reflection. The meaning of these words resonates in the title of the article, when the proverbial sensitivity is requested for an ear that can hear the (paradoxical) polyphonic significance, but also in its rhythm, for a foot that can move to the music. This metaphor offers room for a concrete description of the praxis of pastoral care to the self and other people. By reflecting on the fragments of my own struggles with, and experiences of congenital amusia, viewed

as a metaphorical expression of various intimate reflections of my life, a description of an (auto)biographical praxis was provided. However, the metaphor of congenital amusia or being tone-deaf also points to a possible larger audience, making space for bringing people into mind who experience some kind of imbalance or shortcoming in their lives. These people might not experience the same tone-deafness as I have described, but the underlying melody lines portrayed in my (auto)biographical description might also be helpful in addressing some of the proverbial rhythm issues with which they are struggling.

It is hoped that dancing to this new tune has illustrated that

[p]ractical theologians are hard-wired to make deep connections between faith and practice and that life writing is a fertile space in which to explore this process (Walton 2022:49-50).

I have also tried to illustrate how the development in practical theology and pastoral care provides the background on a professional level for me to develop not only my own professional identity, but also the ability to start hearing the rhythm within. This ability to hear the rhythm within is responsible for my feet to start tapping and to dance, despite of sometimes still being confused about the meaning in complexed and paradoxical polyphonous life melodies.

In the narrative polyphony of the article and in the dynamic development of my own life format, I have endeavoured to articulate transformation in my own autobiography. Dedicating this article to my friend and colleague, Francois Tolmie, renowned for his scholarship on some of the oldest New Testament texts, I offered some personal and intimate “[I]f life writing [as] one of the oldest and most engaging literary forms” (Walton 2022:50). In plotting these fragments from my own life story, the dynamic development of my own search for meaning, polyphony served as metaphor, forming the accords in which congenital amusia was faded out and replaced by the discovery of a rhythm within. This ongoing development and discovery are stylistically embodied by the following intentionally typographically placed four words, providing a dynamic expression of polyphonic narratives contextualised in my own life:

Tone-deaf.

Rhythm.

Polyphonic (narratives).

Dance.

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