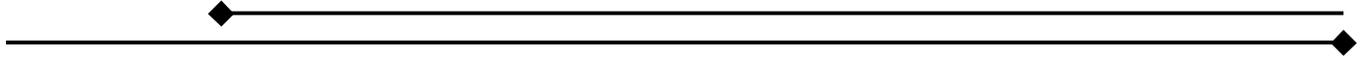


# The Death of Self:

*Transcendence into a New Reality*



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Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come.  
We have only today. Let us begin.<sup>1</sup>  
*The Words of Mother Teresa*

We begin where we end – at death. Few like to talk about it, yet death is a very rich topic. Death comes in different forms – *complete* death and *partial* death, the death of self. *Complete* death occurs once and is that which our finite existence cannot escape – *complete* death is only overcome by the power of the resurrection. *Partial* death, the context for this paper, has its foundation in the words of St. Paul: “For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.”<sup>2</sup> *Partial* death experiences occur from the moment of our conception until we encounter *complete* death. *Partial* death comes to us as our emotional, physical, social, and spiritual systems are reformed and transformed into new transcended realities, sometimes for the good and sometimes for the not so good. Transformation from *partial* death comes through healing, known as salvation.<sup>3</sup> It can be through some historical manifestation, a person’s touch, or directly from the grace of the Spirit.

The following is an introduction towards a proposed pastoral theology that encourages dialogue around the experience of *partial* death - the death of self that folks experience throughout their life journey. A theological and theoretical framework is offered to encourage dialogue, a confessional witnessing to the power of salvation through understandings of *partial* death. The process of New Being defined by theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) is the theological method. The idea of emotional shockwaves and the process of self-differentiation with related predictable responses defined by Murray Bowen (1913-1990) in Bowen Family Systems Theory is the theoretical method. Together they form a foundation to help church communities encourage confessional witnessing as to the power of healing, of salvation over *partial* death, the death of self. As individuals share and interpret their life journey with others,

communities can better understand how God is still speaking in our times – transcending current realities often with worldwide impact.

Imagine a world without a Christianity influenced by Saint Paul (3 - 65). Without his words: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> Imagine life without his words of love: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant.”<sup>5</sup> How different the world would be if Saul had not experienced “something like scales”<sup>6</sup> falling from his eyes, restoring his sight, and being baptized - a *partial* death, a death of self that led to a transformed new reality that produced a worldwide impact.

Imagine a world without the influence of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929 – 1968). Without his influence in the civil rights movement, without his peaceful protests, without his words: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”<sup>7</sup> How different the world might have been if “Michael Luther King, Jr.”<sup>8</sup> had not changed his name to Martin or if he had accepted Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary’s 1958 invitation to serve on its faculty.<sup>9</sup> Imagine the world if Martin had not experienced a *partial* death, a death of self that led to a transformed new reality that produced a worldwide impact.

Imagine a world without the example of love that was Mother Teresa (1910-1997). Without her work in the slums of Calcutta, teaching, caring, living among the poorest of the poor, giving them the courage to live and feel their worth; a world without those who follow in her footsteps, the Missionaries of Charity. How different the world be if Agnes, who later chose the name Teresa, did not follow her “call within the call – to leave the convent and work with the

poor, living among them”<sup>10</sup> – if Mother Teresa had not experienced a *partial* death, a death of self to a transformed reality that produced a worldwide impact.

Imagine a world without the transformative possibility of experiencing a new being within one’s own life. Without the ability to participate in the “history of salvation”<sup>11</sup> which is a “sacred history”<sup>12</sup> with a saving power that breaks into our life, preparing our existence so that it can be received, changed, and lived. How different the world would be if all we could do is receive the past without being able to anticipate or announce the future, unable to prophesize and change life – unable to change history. Imagine a life without the ability to share these revelatory events in community, in our churches. Without the ability to confess the power of salvation with others who recognize that salvation is healing that “is reclaiming from the old and transferring into the New Being”<sup>13</sup> - often with worldwide impact.

The goal of this research is to provide a theological and theoretical framework to define the intersection of pastoral practice and theory in the context of *partial* death experiences. As an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ serving a local congregation, I believe such a framework can revitalize our church communities by reforming the practice of ministry through transformed worship, Christian education, pastoral care, and fellowship. Similar to Anton Boisen (1876-1965), often defined as the father of pastoral theology and founder of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), who rewrote the hymns of his time based upon his findings,<sup>14</sup> much work can be done to incorporate understandings of *partial* death and salvation into our daily church practices. This framework is only an introduction for the dialogue to begin.

### **The Foundation**

The foundation for this research harkens back to a time before the three contemporary pastoral theological approaches were defined and returns to the approach Boisen utilized that can

be understood to be a combination of all three modern approaches: the liberal-rational approach; the neo-traditional confessional approach; and, the radical-liberationist approach.<sup>15</sup>

This research recognizes the liberal-rational approach by providing a rational methodological foundation through Tillich's theology and Bowen Theory. This provides a common framework for folks to give voice to their own lived experience understanding the power of salvation, healing that transforms *partial* death. Giving voice to these experiences and sharing them with others supports the neo-traditional confessional approach. Rather than one author writing their confession, which is common in the neo-traditional confessional approach, this proposal encourages churches to offer practical ministerial opportunities providing the confessional witnessing of their members through rituals, worship experiences, and small group gatherings that help folks share their death of self experiences with each other - learning to confess the healing power of salvation over the death of self.

Last, the radical-liberationist approach is emphasized as the sting from *partial* death is lifted – the potentially oppressive struggle between life and death is liberated when salvation, known as healing, saves us from the wallows of despair. Liberation from *partial* death is possible. The life and death struggle of *partial* death can be recognized as a religious experience that begins at birth and continues until the moment of our *complete* death – when the *partial* ends and the *complete* makes resurrection a reality. Death, *partial* or *complete*, need not be feared - the oppression and fear of death is lifted.

### **The Context: *Partial* Death**

*Partial* death, the death of self, is multidimensional and occurs as our emotional, physical, social, and spiritual systems face a transformative moment. Sometimes only one of these systems will undergo reformation, at other times a combination or all change at the same

time. Regardless, healing, known as salvation, is possible - healing the centered self so one can transcend the death of self into a new reality within one's historical moment in time. Salvation is fragmentary and centered healing is not always guaranteed; despair is ever present.

This healing occurs under all the different manifestations of life through the impact of the Spiritual Presence. An awareness of this salvation, of healing *partial* death, speaks to renewed and reformed ministerial opportunities. However, all too often, our churches miss the opportunity to minister to these events. Rather, we focus our ministries on death, *complete* death, with funeral rites and related grief rituals. Healing, the salvation from *partial* death is ignored. The Body of Christ, known as the church, is in a unique position to listen to the confessions of *partial* death and its salvation. To listen to how folks have experienced God's grace of healing.

Many church members are struggling trying to survive. Many suffer *partial* deaths related to physical and biological concerns: illnesses, disease, chemical imbalances, physical limitations, as well as the struggles related to aging as our physical bodies simply cannot function as they once did. Medical professionals offer to heal physical and biological illnesses and diseases – at other times the Spiritual Presence makes healing available through what we define as miracles.

Others face emotional and psychological *partial* death: depression, post-traumatic stress, as well as a host of other anxieties and mental tensions that minimize one's experience of life. Others struggle with social and relational *partial* death: in their homes with their families; with extended family members; with co-workers or other colleagues; with neighbors; with strangers; with churches, individual church members, particular clergy, denominational traditions; with political systems that oppress and limit voice; as well as relationships that turn sour in the many other systems one participates within. Pastoral counselors and therapists provide healing for

those struggling emotionally, psychologically, and socially through mental and relationship issues – at other times the Spiritual Presence appears gently bestowing peace and calmness while refreshing strained relationships.

Still others suffer *partial* death spiritually: falling into despair when doubt outweighs faith; when one feels drained by church services and participation rather than feeling filled by the ecstatic joy of the Spirit; as well as when God, one's "ultimate concern,"<sup>16</sup> is replaced by life's many idols resulting in the focus on a "preliminary concern"<sup>17</sup> that has risen to the importance of ultimacy. Pastors and spiritual directors offer spiritual healing helping folks to refocus on the ultimate concern rather than being tempted by preliminary concerns – at other times the Spiritual Presence breaks through reawakening us from our spiritual slumber, something like scales fall from our eyes to see anew.

Being aware of *partial* death and its related healing offers churches the opportunity to create practical ministerial opportunities that encourage folks to discern God's call individually and in participation with community, as well as help individuals to "do" their life, reforming into the new realities of existence within the church community.

### **The Theological Method**

The theological method employed in this research is based upon the theology of Paul Tillich. Unlike Hiltner<sup>18</sup> and Browning<sup>19</sup> who revised Tillich's "method of correlation"<sup>20</sup> for their pastoral theological foundations, this study draws on Tillich's "four principles determining the New Being as process."<sup>21</sup> The four principles include: "first, increasing awareness; second, increasing freedom; third, increasing relatedness; fourth, increasing transcendence."<sup>22</sup> For Tillich, these principles serve as a "criteria for a future doctrine of life under the Spiritual Presence"<sup>23</sup> and in their totality unite religious and secular traditions to "create an indefinite but

distinguishable image of the ‘Christian Life.’”<sup>24</sup> A life that is a continual process of increasing awareness, freedom, relatedness, and transcendence that once again returns to awareness.

Increasing awareness is to become “aware of the answers to the questions implied in this situation”<sup>25</sup> – our finite historical situation in which transcendence to a new reality is possible.

The questions raised by *partial* death experiences are answered by the Spiritual Presence through salvation known as healing. A Christian Life is aware that from the moment of conception one is dying to self, dying to past realities that are transcended and reformed into new realities - aware that these life processes are a religious experience to be embraced, lived, and shared.

Increasing freedom is our destiny as individuals and as community, as church. Freedom recognizes that we are free from the law of the past as well as its content. “Freedom from the law is the power to judge the given situation in the light of the Spiritual Presence and to decide upon adequate action, which is often in seeming contradiction to the law.”<sup>26</sup> Freedom from the law of *partial* death allows one to judge the given situation. To determine whether they desire to fall into despair caused by *partial* death – or decide upon adequate action able to recognize that *partial* death need not be experienced as *complete* death. “We are not unfree to receive or accept”<sup>27</sup> the gift of healing, of salvation from the Spirit in whatever form it may appear.

“Relatedness implies the awareness of the other one and the freedom to relate to him [or her] by overcoming self-seclusion within oneself and within the other one.”<sup>28</sup> This implies awareness of how actual situations manifest in our relationships. How our *partial* death experiences influence our relatedness with others - as well as awareness of how *partial* death in others influences our relationships with them. Breaking through our own self-seclusion, as well as helping others to break through their own self-seclusion, is understood in terms of being in

relationship with others and with the Spirit – both increasing understandings of identity that lead to salvation, to healing.

Transcendence, also defined as “self-transcendence, . . . is identical with the attitude of devotion toward that which is ultimate,”<sup>29</sup> with God. Grace from the Spiritual Presence, either through the relatedness of others or directly, makes new realities possible. Grace in the form of healing that is salvation from the Spiritual Presence allows transcendence from the death of self, from *partial* death. With an awareness and attitude of devotion to that which is ultimate, increasing transcendence from the death of self is our destiny. Transcendence allows reformation to occur in our lives and in our communities. Transcendence of one reality, being healed, saved from one *partial* death experience requires a renewed sense of awareness – starting the entire process once again.

### **The Theoretical Method**

Bowen Theory, the theoretical foundation for this research, is a systematic framework for understanding the complex interactions that exist within the emotional unit known as the family. Bowen Theory and related family therapeutic models have been used in several pastoral theological works. In his attempt to define a pastoral theology for the family, Anderson has woven elements from Bowen Theory and related family therapeutic models throughout a number of his writings.<sup>30</sup> Poling has written about the importance of congregational history understood through the multigenerational understandings suggesting “it is impossible to understand our own lives apart from our family of origin, whether biological or adopted. The same thing is true for congregations.”<sup>31</sup> Wynn explored the role of the Pastor as family therapist and defined the relationship between pastoral theology and family therapy.<sup>32</sup> The theory has also been used in the writings of pastoral counselors. Friedman defined multigenerational emotional processes

within congregations.<sup>33</sup> Richardson encouraged pastors and churches to explore and better understand the emotional functioning they are a part of.<sup>34</sup> Steinke explored the emotional processes of the church family, the congregation.<sup>35</sup>

Bowen Theory has eight interlocking concepts which help to define the family as an emotional unit, namely: triangles, differentiation of self, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, sibling position, emotional cutoff, multigenerational transmission process, and societal regression. Bowen also defined several related ideas: anxiety binders, emotional shock waves, genograms, life forces, and the process of differentiation. No one concept or idea by itself defines Bowen's theory. Rather by exploring the interplay between the concepts and ideas one can begin to better understand the family's, or group's, emotional responsiveness and influence (togetherness force) over an individual's functional position (individuality).

Recognizing the fluidity of the eight concepts and related ideas allows one to think "of the family as a fluid, ever-changing, functional system"<sup>36</sup> – an organism which individual family members are a part of. With time folks become "system experts"<sup>37</sup> able to understand their emotional responsiveness and functional positions while being capable of readjusting systematic functioning as new stressors appear without the assistance of an outside expert. Folks become capable of recognizing *partial* death experiences and aware of the potential stress certain experiences can create before they occur – thus minimizing emotional reactivity.

This research specifically utilizes Bowen's understandings of emotional shock waves and the process of differentiation that results in predictable responses from the family when one attempts to differentiate into a new being.

"The 'Emotional Shock Wave' is a network of underground 'after-shocks' of serious life events that can occur anywhere in the extended family system in the months or years following

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serious emotional events in a family.”<sup>38</sup> These shocks are created by life events such as the threat of death or death of a family member or significant family friend, an addition to the system such as a wedding or birth, or the loss of a family member as a divorce occurs or someone goes to college. When the life event creates an emotional shock wave, a wave of anxiety flows through the various family members resulting in a number of symptoms that seem unrelated but when viewed systematically are related to the event which raised the anxiety. The same can also occur in churches, workplaces, and other social groups. The resultant symptoms can occur throughout the multigenerational system and include “physical illness, emotional illness, or social misbehavior.”<sup>39</sup> Some may become physically ill resulting in a cold, aches and pains, broken arms, or other ailments. Others develop emotional illnesses such as feeling blue, depressed, or other psychological symptoms. Others act out socially with inappropriate behavior or turn to alcohol, drugs, or sex. Symptoms flow through the system based upon the uniqueness of each individual.

As individuals attempt to differentiate from past realities, as one becomes a new being with a new reality, a shock wave can occur in the broader system resulting in predictable responses. Defined as “the process of ‘differentiating a self,’”<sup>40</sup> Bowen Theory defines two required steps in order to achieve change, namely: developing personal relationships and changing old patterns through detriangling. The first step, developing relationships helps to make the existing relationships more alive, helping one to see the old patterns that are underground or that have faded from view. As relationships are reestablished one attempts to change the old emotional patterns through detriangling - the process in which one learns

to stay in viable emotional contact with the two most significant family members, usually the two parents or two spouses, and [s]he can be relatively outside the emotional activity in this central triangle, the age-old fusion between the family members will slowly begin

to resolve, and all the other family members will automatically change in relation to the two parents in the home setting. This is basic theory and basic method.<sup>41</sup>

The process is difficult at best and leads to a predictable “three-stage verbal and nonverbal message: (1) You are wrong. (2) Change back. (3) If you do not, these are the consequences.”<sup>42</sup> These messages can be contained in angry exchanges, hurt feelings, or subtle sulking – or all at once. The person attempting to differentiate can respond in one of three ways. First, they can internalize the response by taking the other person’s anxiety within themselves. Internalization often results in an emotional, psychological, or physical illness. They can also withdraw their differentiating attempt and meld back into the family togetherness, silently withdrawing to the pressure of the family’s togetherness. Last, if the individual can withstand the togetherness pressures they may differentiate – changing themselves and the system. “In broad terms, a differentiating step requires long and careful deliberation to define a life principle secure enough to become a firm belief that can be stated as such without anger or debate or attack – all of which are emotional stimuli.”<sup>43</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This proposed framework provides an understanding encouraging the liberation from *partial* death experiences and the confessional witness of salvation, of healing, in our church communities. As individuals and communities increase awareness, freedom, relatedness, and transcendence, new personal relationships are formed requiring a change from old patterns. Detriangling offers a method to reform old relationship patterns into a new transcended reality. However, always present are the predictable verbal and nonverbal messages from the systems we attempt differentiation from: “(1) You are wrong. (2) Change back. (3) If you do not, these are the consequences.”<sup>44</sup> Yet hope is possible, salvation known as healing can occur and bring folks

into a new reality aware of their call – aware of the emotional shock waves which they are part of and other shock waves that they create.

Imagine as St. Paul differentiated – becoming aware, experiencing freedom, learning new relationship patterns, transcending into a new creation. It could not have been easy for him to detriangle from past relationships. Undoubtedly he heard from those around: “Saul, you are wrong! Saul, you better change back! If you don’t, well Saul, these are the consequences...” Yet he persisted, reforming existence and creating an emotional shock wave that continues to this day. The same can be said of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and countless others who have not only been healed, saved from their *partial* death experiences, but also confessed and witnessed – actively “doing” their life in participation with the Body of Christ known as the church.

Much work is needed. This is our moment in history to become the confessional witnesses future generations will look at for discernment, understanding, and inspiration. Awareness of a possible new pastoral theology has been raised. Through it freedom from past forms is possible, new ways of relationship can emerge, and the capacity to transform, reform existing practical ministry in new and bold ways that address *partial* death can become a reality. That is our challenge, as we end where we began:

Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come.  
We have only today. Let us begin.<sup>45</sup>

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Teresa, 2004a.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:9-10, New Revised Standard Version. (Meeks, 1993, p. 2158).

<sup>3</sup> Tillich (1957, p. 166) defines that: “with respect to both the original meaning of salvation (from *salvus*, “healed”) and our present situation, it may be adequate to interpret salvation as “healing.” ... In this sense, healing means reuniting that which is estranged, giving a center to what is split, overcoming the split between God and man, man and his world, man and himself. Out of this interpretation of salvation, the concept of the New Being has grown. Salvation is reclaiming from the old and transferring into the New Being.”

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:13, Meeks, 1993, p. 2157.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:4, Ibid., p. 2158.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 9:18, Ibid., p. 2075.

<sup>7</sup> King, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Nobelprize.org, 1964.

<sup>9</sup> See, Campbell, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Teresa, 2004b.

<sup>11</sup> Tillich, 1963, p. 363.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Tillich, 1957, p. 166.

<sup>14</sup> Boisen, 1950.

<sup>15</sup> See for example, Pattison and Lynch, 2005, pp. 415-421.

<sup>16</sup> See, Tillich, 1951, p. 11-15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Hiltner, 1958.

<sup>19</sup> Browning, 1991.

<sup>20</sup> See for example, Tillich, 1951, p. 8: “‘method of correlation’ ... a way of uniting message and situation. It tries to correlate the questions implied in the situation with the answers implied in the message. ... It correlates questions and answers, situation and message, human existence and divine manifestation.”

<sup>21</sup> Tillich, 1963, p. 231.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>27</sup> Tillich, 1965, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Tillich, 1963, p. 233.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>30</sup> See: Anderson, 1984, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1995.

<sup>31</sup> Poling, 2004, p. 230.

<sup>32</sup> Wynn, 1982.

<sup>33</sup> Friedman, 1985.

<sup>34</sup> Richardson, 1996, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Steinke, 1993.

<sup>36</sup> Bowen, 1978, p. 159.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 502.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 375-376.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 217

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>45</sup> Teresa, 2004a.

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