



A COLLAGE OF RESPONSES: AN INTERVIEW WITH R. MELVIN KEISER

R. Melvin Keiser with Paul Lewis

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, Mel Keiser, Professor Emeritus from Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, responds to questions from Paul Lewis about his introduction to, involvement with, and appropriation of the work of Michael Polanyi.



[Editor's Note: References to Poteat's works are cited as follows in the body of the article: *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Recollection (RTG)* and *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture (PP)*.]

Give us a bit of biographical information: where were you educated? How did you get interested in Polanyi?

I was born in the Women's Medical Hospital in Philadelphia, which trained women doctors in the latter half of the nineteenth century, to a Quaker mother, so I came forth into a feminist world—though I have had a lot to learn since. My German Reform (ethically, not theologically, inclined) father took us to Quaker Meeting in Germantown, Philadelphia (which in 1688 made the first public protest against slavery, which was tabled). Sitting as a little kid on the benches in Meeting for Worship, I learned the discipline of waiting in silence, opening to what will emerge from beneath ego of divine illumination of my own condition and guidance in my actions and thoughts.

I went to a Quaker boarding school, Westtown, outside Philly, and a Quaker college, Earlham, in Richmond, Indiana. With four others, including Beth, my future wife, I went to Yale Divinity School. I was there for four years getting a BD and STM. Beth left after two years and went downhill (literally) to get a PhD in medieval literature. I then went to Harvard graduate school in Christian Religion and got an MA. With its patriarchal and Cartesian bent, I was not appreciated there, so when I learned of Bill Poteat, I did a PhD with him in what I discovered later was called Religion and Culture. I had already started teaching in Religious Studies at (Quaker) Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, where Beth and I taught for thirty-six years, completing our PhDs in our first decade of teaching.

Tell me about your involvement with the Polanyi Society. When did you first connect? I know you have published in *Tradition and Discovery* and participated in some Zoom meetings, but how else have you participated?

I first connected with the Polanyi Society before it existed. Richard Gelwick came to a Society for Values in Higher Education meeting at Guilford College. He had read my essay to be given and met me with the greeting: “You’re one of Poteat’s students!?” It was a good first connection. I next saw him at an AAR meeting. He introduced me to these two “young guys,” Phil Mullins and Walt Gulick, whom he said were going to help create the Polanyi Society. I say “young guys” because, besides the fact that is what he said, I just discovered in correspondence with Walt that he is a few months older than I.

I have attended Polanyi Society meetings occasionally but not often—never a frequent attendee at any professional meetings. I was present at the Kent State University celebration of Polanyi’s one hundredth birthday and gave a paper, “Post-Critical Religious Thought as Theopoiesis,” over which Thomas Torrance and I had a little dispute. I was also present at the Friday night session with Poteat at the AAR in 1993. I did give Polanyian papers at the AAR in 1983, ’86, and ’88, but I don’t think they were Polanyian Society meetings. My involvement with the Polanyi Society was mainly as a subscriber to *Convivium* and *TAD* and as a writer about and using Polanyi. I am now currently on a monthly Zoom gathering of Polanyians led by Gus Breyspraak from Kansas City.

My first publication using Polanyi was “In Certain Ways” in the *Guilford Review* (spring 1975). My first publication about Polanyi was a review of Richard’s book, *The Way of Discovery*, in *JAAR* (March 1979). In Polanyian journals, I published first in the British *Convivium* (edited by a Quaker, Robin Hodgkin) two articles on Augustine on creation and time, exploring and substantiating Polanyi’s claim that Augustine was the original postcritical thinker, and in *TAD* a heart-warming interchange with Charles McCoy, his “Keiser’s Post-Critical Niebuhr: A Review Article,” and my response, “McCoy on Keiser’s Niebuhr: A Post-Critical Dialogue” (1997–1998); an audacious interrogation of Bill Poteat, “But Bill...?: Poteatian Meditations” (2009–2010); a slightly contentious interchange over whether Tillich was dualistic, “Polanyi and Tillich’s Critical Difference,” with Durwood Foster, Richard Gelwick, and Donald Musser; and a recent inquiry into Polanyi’s view of religion, “The Personal as Postcritical and Theopoetic: Exploring Religion and Poetry in Polanyi’s Tacit Dimension” (2023). In Dale Cannon and Ron Hall’s *Recovering the Personal: The Philosophical Anthropology of William H. Poteat* (2016), I published “Toward Postcritical Theology” and, forthcoming in a *festschrift* for Phil Mullins, “Springs of the Personal, Clues to Wisdom, in Polanyi’s Postcritical Philosophy.” I have a collection of my postcritical writings coming out in 2024: *Paths to the Personal: Thinkers on the Way to Postcritical and Theopoetic Depths*. Many of my publications in Quaker thought use Polanyi as well, as I explore similarities between the tacit dimension for Polanyi and Silence for Quakers as the basis of thought and action.

Waking early this morning, I had rise from my tacit dimension another connection I have with the Polanyi Society. I introduced Bill Scott to the thought of Polanyi, which led eventually to his massive biography for the Society. It all started this way.

We were close friends with Elizabeth Kirk at Earlham College and Yale. She preceded Beth in studying medieval literature and later became chairman of the English Department at Brown University. Our first year at Yale Divinity School, she introduced us to Ann Herbert, a fellow Quaker living in a basement apartment next door to Elizabeth’s third-story apartment. Ann introduced us to Bill Scott, a physicist visiting at Yale, whom she was getting to know and later married.

I remember that Bill and I, along with Beth and Ann, were getting to know one another standing on the edge of the bay of New Haven. He talked about his interest in the philosophical thought of Schrodinger, a German physicist. I had just encountered Polanyi in Niebuhr’s class and spoke of my own growing interest to

understand his claim that science was personal knowing. Bill said he hadn't heard of him but was fascinated with Schrodinger.

At the end of that year, Ann left town, Beth and I got married, and we moved in the fall into her apartment. During that first year Ann recounted stories about Niebuhr, with whom she had studied. One I remember was a time in his office when she was complaining to him that she wished she had a first-rate mind. Niebuhr's rejoinder in all seriousness was, "I wish I had one too."

Some years later, after Bill died, Phil (I think, though it might have been Richard) asked me if I would take over Bill's manuscript of Polanyi's biography to edit and shorten its nine hundred pages. I gave serious consideration to the request but decided I should rather continue my adventure exploring how Polanyi's postcritical approach could illumine and resolve various of my philosophical and theological issues. I saw Bill and Ann, with pleasure, last at the Kent State celebration of Polanyi's one hundredth birthday.

I am most familiar with your work on H. Richard Niebuhr. Where do you see his work intersecting with Polanyi and Potat? Where do you see tensions between their work? Are the differences complementary or contradictory?

With regard to H. Richard Niebuhr, I went to Yale chiefly to study with him. Later, as I read, reread, and taught *The Responsible Self*, I found affirmation of a postcritical way of thought, ethical action, and spiritual being: a dimension of unconscious depth amidst relatedness to selves, world, and my own self.

I became aware of him one day in the Earlham College Library as I glanced over the New Book shelf. Pulling *Faith and Ethics* off the shelf, a *estschrift* honoring him by his well-established former students, I discovered that Reinhold Niebuhr, who had made such a powerful impact as theologian and ethicist on American political life, and on me as I began to read him at sixteen in high school, had a still more extraordinary brother. I was struck in the frontispiece photograph by the wisdom and suffering evident in his lined face, by what I would later recognize as "a wise old man." Regaled by Joe Elmore, a former student of Niebuhr's (and Reinie's at Union), with accounts of his theological and ethical acumen, metaphoric play, and creative personal exploration of Christian life and thought, I traveled with enthusiasm to Yale in the fall of 1960. I took every class H. Richard Niebuhr taught my first two years before he suddenly died of a heart attack July 5, 1962.

Little did I know at the time how much of my subsequent intellectual life would be entwined with his, as I wrote on his ideas for an STM thesis with Robert Calhoun at Yale, the PhD dissertation with William Potat at Duke University, and then two books about his theological method and relational ethics.

I went to Yale reading his theological classics *Christ and Culture* and *The Meaning of Revelation*. As I sensed a depth in him fraught with meaning and witnessed his courageous search for truth beyond dogmatic confines, I was drawn to struggle with the import of these two books: that there are many kinds of heartfelt Christianities, multiple ways that Christ has been related to culture; that all our knowing is relative to our personal and historical situation; that revelatory meaning is always received by us from a certain perspective. As a Friend, I resonated with his affirmation of true knowing as inward.

Over the years I have reflected on the meaning embodied in his writings, his manner of teaching, and the impact he made on me (and on many others, since most of his books were considered classics upon publication). Slowly in my own writing of two books about him, the brilliance of his embodied thinking, theological and ethical, that plumbed the mystery of being became clear.

As I have reflected on what and how I think, I realize how much I have internalized his way of working, or rather how well he articulates my approach. In his last writings he uses the metaphor of “responsibility” to understand the nature of self. The self both has interior depths and exists in relatedness to the social and natural worlds. Beneath conscious notice, the self is constantly responding to these multiple aspects of experience. The central ethical and theological question for him is, What is going on—in a given situation, in the world, in me—and what is the fitting response to it? “God” is a word for the mystery of being that impacts me amidst my relatedness to all of being. Whether my response is fitting existentially and intellectually depends on how I respond personally to divine mystery.

This expresses well my own Quaker approach that seeks to discern what is going on in my self and world in relation to the presence and guidance of divine mystery. I have a theory, which I cannot prove, why he articulates in his own different language a view resonant with Friends. In his early serious engagement with seventeenth-century Quakers in his first book, *The Kingdom of God in America*, after his conversion into his mature thought, I believe Niebuhr internalized the Quaker sense of divinity in us and came to articulate it in his own metaphors of “divine action” in our “inner history” (in *The Meaning of Revelation*) and God “acting on” each of us in our responsive relatedness in the world (in *The Responsible Self*).

I was as well influenced, or more accurately reconfirmed, by his Socratic manner of teaching. I had already experienced Socratic teaching in my Westtown mentor, Tom Brown, and my Earlham mentor, Grimsley Hobbs (a UNC-CH PhD in philosophy, and new president of Guilford, who lured Beth and me to teach at Guilford), and would later delight in Bill Poteat’s Socratic style. They each had a different style of questioning. Niebuhr carried on an irenic dialogue, asking himself questions throughout his lecturing. Poteat’s dialogue was a sharp Socratic dialectic getting at students’ contradictions. Hobbs’s dialogue was a persistent questioning of students from the perspective of the philosopher’s text being discussed. Brown’s dialogue was electrifying as texts were interrogated while chalk dust rose from vigorous writing on the blackboard, and sometimes chalk sailed across the room to illustrate a point.

Contrary to neo-orthodoxy, which dominated YDS, Niebuhr was interested in what truth could be discovered through the various cultural uses of our human capacities, such as literature, science, and philosophy, and thus modeled interdisciplinary pedagogy before the approach came into prominence, which I was already embarked on as a Philosophy and English double major at Earlham. He was open to students’ use of literature in theological explorations. Beth wrote on Charles Williams’ fiction in Niebuhr’s Seminar on Sin, and on Dante in his Seminar on the Religious Emotions. In his own writing he explored and used metaphor in developing his theological ethics of responsibility.

With regard to Polanyi, I must say my first encounter was shocking. Reading a chapter on commitments and intellectual passions in his *Personal Knowledge* for my first course with H. Richard Niebuhr, “Faith as Virtue,” at Yale Divinity School, I was stunned and uncomprehending how scientific knowing could be personal. My disorientation erupted into a passion to know what in the world he could mean by that, for there was nothing personal in science as I studied it, although I felt personally connected with the earth beneath and the starry sky above that science studied.

Being introduced to Polanyi’s thought about “personal knowing” was one of Niebuhr’s gifts to me, which I pursued the next year by attending Polanyi’s Yale Terry Lectures, later published as *The Tacit Dimension*. Excited at the time, I had no idea how important both Polanyi and Niebuhr would become as life-lines and transformative of my intellectual life. I incorporated *The Tacit Dimension* into my teaching various courses

and began to use his postcritical approach in my explorations of theology, ethics, interdisciplinary work, and Quaker thought.

It was much later that I connected with Poteat. After six years in graduate school, and the end not in sight, Beth and I accepted teaching positions at Guilford in Religion and English from my former philosophy mentor at Earlham, now Guilford's new president. In the spring semester of 1968 I took off from Guilford to return to Harvard to take my General Exams. I recognized definitively that I was neither appreciated nor wanted at Harvard when they failed me, precipitating a crisis in faith and self-reflection on my worth and career and ongoing painful wondering why this happened. Returning to Guilford with assurances from my Harvard professors that I could successfully retake the exams, I learned from a philosophy colleague about his supportive and challenging dissertation advisor at Duke University.

Through Donald Millholland, I met Bill Poteat, who invited me to sit in on a class for two semesters. While teaching full time and coaching men's soccer, which I had started upon my arrival, I commuted to Duke in 1969–1970. Poteat was a supportive, evocative teacher employing a Socratic method that engaged students to think for themselves and be reflective on the process as they wrestled in dialogue with a difficult philosophical text. I was ecstatic to discover someone teaching in a manner by which I had already been captivated by my high school and college mentors, Tom Brown and Grimsley Hobbs.

Poteat established a human and humane space for creativity not conformity, trust not fear. While there had been good lecturing at Harvard, Poteat's teaching was a "drawing out" (the etymology of education: *educere*) from the inchoate fissures in students' being. I decided in the light of my experience with him that year to switch my graduate study from Harvard to Duke. I took a leave from Guilford and spent 1970–1971 in residence at Duke in solitude, dialogue, and creative exploration, while Beth continued teaching at Guilford and, with the help of several students, created a commune for our two-year-old daughter in our house to which I would return on weekends.

With Poteat I read much more deeply into Polanyi and immersed myself for the first time in *Phenomenology of Perception* by Merleau-Ponty, whom I learned about initially as well through studying with Niebuhr. Their focus, from different angles and with different styles, on how the body thinks, how the body as we live it contributes creatively and indispensably beneath explicit consciousness to our knowing and perceiving, gave articulate structure to what I was discovering in reflecting on my living and teaching.

Caring about expanding my mind and making progress towards a successful completion of my graduate work, Poteat guided me to study myth and symbol in Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and the history of religions with Harry Partin at Duke, and also Ludwig Wittgenstein—whom I had already encountered with Paul Holmer at Yale—in Virgil Aldrich's philosophy of ordinary language at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. And I immersed myself in Poteat's ways of integrating and going beyond Polanyi, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein. Returning under Poteat's wise guidance to Niebuhr's thought for the dissertation, I used all these thinkers to discern what was going on in Niebuhr's theology and ethics of responsibility at the end of his life. Involved in students' intellectual and spiritual lives, eliciting discovery within and without, Poteat drew what was aborning in me into greater clarity and coherence, into freedom to explore and be as creative in my thinking as I could be, and onto completion of my PhD at Duke.

I feel deep gratitude for his dialogical Socratic teaching. Brilliantly and caringly, he opened students to our own deep selves by connecting head and heart. Through the maieutic art of transformation, he sought to draw us out of the deracinate world of Enlightenment dualism to reflect on the ground of all knowing: our mindbodily being in the world. In doing so, he restored us to ourselves in our bodies, in the world,

among our fellow incarnate beings. His loving, witty, circumambulating provocations caught me up into the postcritical dance with word and body, not to mention guided me through to completion of the PhD.

His writing is a challenge—complexified, sporadic, flowing, bending back upon itself, moving forward, using unfamiliar words, personally engaged and engaging. His career, however, was not theological critique and innovation nor elaboration of a philosophical world. He was focused on the “how” of our knowing and being, not the “what” (to use Kierkegaard’s distinction). Like Socrates, he left a method of reflection in his students’ mindbodies as well as in his writings. Others of his generation were similarly focused on methodology, on the “how”: Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, Hopper, Heidegger, Marcel.

Like Kierkegaard with his pseudonymities and Merleau-Ponty with his page-length involuted sentences, Bill throws the reader back onto his or her responsibility to reflect on what the logos of his or her own body would bring to presence in living words. In my own Quaker tradition, Polanyi and Poteat’s challenge is put by the founder, George Fox, in non-philosophical mid-seventeenth-century English in confronting publicly the soon-to-become mother of Quakerism, Margaret Fell: “You know what Christ and the apostles say, but ‘what canst thou say? ... what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God’” (Garman et al. 1996, 252)?

Perhaps the real value of his *oeuvre* is the radical question to us his readers: Have we been sufficiently transformed so as to be returned to our own mindbodily being in the world beneath our “critical” dualisms to play our Plato to his Socrates? By this I mean not the ideas of Plato but his dialogical (even if in writing) effort to say what reality looks like after Socratic liberation from enchainment to the objective world and our Cartesian framework. Can we, can I, step forth to say what we (I) believe and thus engage with Polanyi’s declared project: “The principle purpose of this book is to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false” (*PK*, 214)? In saying what I believe, can I find a way to say it passionately that is persuasive to others but especially to myself, so as to disarm my own “critical” embarrassment of saying empirically unfounded things that express those deep-lying tacit commitments I hold to be true?

Recently rereading Bill and remembering many moments with him, I realize ever since studying with him how I have been attending to his teaching and writing. I find my current writing about meaning and my religious way and language being interrogated by Bill. What would he say about my ownmost self and emergent thinking? Speaking from inwardness is what I am trying to do as I write on the nature of religious language and reality. Now, reimmersing myself in Poteatian thought, I find myself being interrogated by Bill on whether I am succeeding, really, in getting beyond the Enlightenment mythos to speak as this mindbodily “I” that I am.

While I have been very clear about the life-saving, soul-engendering, intellectual-spiritual-quest-inspiring way of his teaching’s impact on me, I have been caught up in the questions raised in *Tradition and Discovery* by my Duke colleagues, those with whom I shared Bill’s classes in 1969–1971 and those whom I have met or only read but who have been similarly touched by his incendiary pedagogical self. While being interrogated by Bill, I not only reflect on my own tacit orientation and emergent expressions but respond by interrogating him in his writing, in my “But Bill...?: Poteatian Meditations” (2009–2010).

Why, Bill, did you not go further, say what you saw about reality philosophically and theologically from the ground of your first-personal mindbody perspective? As you are “exercising” your “critical” (see *RTG*’s subtitle) acumen on me, Bill, given all that you say, how can you say what you do about the Nicene Creed, wanting simply to recite the Creed when asked about your theology? Yes, the creed is myth. There are, however, several Christian myths. Why do you choose the orthodox one, and how do you handle its

problematic character? How, moreover, when you stress the spontaneity and novelty of speaking, drawing out from our mindbodily tacit dimension, can you, Bill, repair to a fixed formula and one written down? What would you do with most people who would misunderstand you to be asserting factual truth, who get hung up on the form as objective truth detached from the dynamism of mindbodies dwelling in the world, and some who would be willing to kill for that truth?

Can you say more of what your experience of “standing before God” is, how and what you hear in dialogue (like Abraham and Yahweh) with God (*RTG*, 91–94, 123–128)? What does it mean in your mindbodily experience that God is speaking, that Christ is actually present in the Eucharist, that resurrection is a structure in the world as you stand before God? If mindbody is the ground of all our knowing and being, what is its ground? Okay, “Being.” Can you reflect on what you mean by “Being”? How do you, does anyone, speak of these matters beyond dualism?

When you write of the Eucharist as deeper than belief, as the “*presently actual* body and blood of Jesus Christ; and that, if they are not, then the Son of God has nothing to do with the concrete person I am in *this* time and place” (*RTG*, 135; his italics), I am with you on the “real presence” of Christ in sacred space and time beneath belief, or as we Quakers would say “the presence in the midst,” but, Bill, can you reflect on and say what in the world this means for you in your mindbodily existence? What are the clues of such presence? How do you know?

Among the nuggets that Jim Stines draws from your letter to Wally Mead is your talk about the resurrection. Since many Christians affirm the resurrection in a dualistic manner, can you, Bill, show how your affirmation is postcritical? What does it mean when you say “I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting” is “*enacting and identifying...one of the features in the structure of the one and only world in which I actually live and move and have my being, insofar as I recognize it as existing before God*” (*RTG*, 141, his italics)? Can you reflect on and say what this structure is? I also love Paul’s phrase, the whole in which “I live and move and have my being” (Acts 17:28, KJV, referenced in *RTG*, 23, 31 46, 55, 60, 80, 85, 89, 91, 94, 115, 137, 150, 151, 164), but what does it mean? Since many theologians have affirmed that they “exist before God” amidst dualisms of mind/body and spirit/matter, how do you mean it in a postcritical way? And what after all do you mean by “God”?

Is there really such a monolithic divide between the spoken and written? Your own Wittgensteinian panache should suggest multiple uses of both the spoken and written. Are there not forms of speech in which the creativity of the word-maker is not especially evident: a lecture, especially one that is read, a memorized recitation, a ritual repetition, scripture reading? Among the varieties of written language, some are especially powerful in making visible the reality that these are someone’s words that they have drawn forth and crafted through their mindbodily creativity: poetry such as Eliot, Hopkins, or Donne; autobiography such as Augustine’s *Confessions* or John Woolman’s *Journal*; dialogue such as Plato’s (while he is reaching for the eternally permanent, his dialogical form has a dynamic of people interacting in whose written speech the truth may in a particular moment and in a particular place be glimpsed); political writing such as Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from the Birmingham City Jail,” and Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence.” In fact, Bill, your three meditative books do a very good job of making visible your own inimitable creative crafting of words.

Your argument, Bill, that our mindbodies are the ground of all empirical, scientific truths as well as of all philosophical and theological truths is powerful, too, but how do you handle these different language games where evidence is required in one and not (at least that kind of evidence) in the other? How do we discern

truth in our irreversible reasonings (the ones without explicable premises), in what rises from the depths of our tacit commitments without empirical evidence? How do you discern the truth of God speaking to you? What in your mindbodily being in the world distinguishes the true from the false? Is it distinguishing our ego speaking from God's speaking, or how would you put it? Perhaps there is a clue in Kieran Cashell's suggestion to "feel its truth" (2008–2009, 56). Your mentor, H. Richard Niebuhr, was talking about religious feeling as central to the meaning of our lives at the end of his life. Feeling, however, is not something you pursue, even though taking feeling with ontological seriousness would transcend Cartesianism.

If my mindbody is the ground of all my knowing and being, and Being is the ground of me, what is Being and how are we aware of it? Is it through feeling, tacit awareness, sensing reality within, and enviroing the creative act of speech? In your lucid criticism of criticism's abstracting, totalizing, and monistic grip on things, you speak of "the penumbra of one's own mindbody" (*RTG*, 150) that Cezanne seeks to recover which shows there is more to reality than criticism can ever apprehend. Is this Being? What of its nature is shown forth in your mindbodily existence? Is this the silence of the background of mystery we dwell within, or how would you speak it into form?

Other questions arise for us in our postcritical liberation. What are appropriate criteria for discerning truth in first person speech that distinguish it from subjectivism? How can we speak responsibly to others when critical thought still prevents an "equilibrium" between scientific and religious truth? With what kind of reason do you argue for equilibrium: "critical" or "postcritical"? If "critical," how can critical reason achieve a postcritical perspective (*PP*, 42)? If "postcritical," how does it work differently?

In our conception of knowing, how can we take account of the divided self in which ego dominates heart, which is a moral as well as an epistemological reality? What are the implications for moral consciousness in establishing that scientific reason and religious thought are of "the same order"? Is there a difference between "critical" and "postcritical" decision-making and action?

How can we incorporate feeling into our understanding of the roots of our knowing, doing, and being? Why did you not engage with the thinkers in your time, from the late 1960s on, who were turning to first person religious speaking, such as feminists and liberationists, and how should we engage them from our recovered ground?

How does embracing our personal knowing overcome our alienation from the world and transport us into feeling at home in being?

Answers will only emerge, I think, if we actually explore our inwardness and share what we are finding in first person dialogue. You are beckoning. The ground is prepared. The calling is clear, at least for me, to say what I can.

Oh, I speak with unfettered audacity, in ways I never would have dreamed of when an apprentice. Yet you, Bill, sought through your own writing to elicit our first-person mindbodily reflective life. My probing, therefore, in this dialogical form feels fitting. I ask questions because I do not know and want to know. I ask with passion because these questions matter, at least to me. In asking, you lodged in my mindbody may emerge as discovery of what you would say and of what I deep down want to say. Too late to engage you in dialogue? Perhaps, and yet: "What the dead had no speech for, when living, / They can tell you, being dead: the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living" (Eliot 1971, 51, Lines 49–50).

How hard it is, especially in our Cartesian world (whether called "modern" or "postmodern"), to discover our deepest commitments. To carry on colloquy with Bill, who is part of me, of my embodied background

(the “retrotensions” of my mindbody memory), is to solicit my own depths to speak. Perhaps, in my brash inquiry, others may feel similar questions stirring in their depths that can emerge in authentic ways to speak from their mindbodies of the real beyond dualism.

I do not think, Bill, that what you would want is for us to repeat, if we can understand it, your own colloquy about mindbodily speaking and being, but for us to stand forth as the elusive “I” that each of us is “to find a new kind of discourse that can show forth the derivation of [all our concepts]...from the logos that informs our as-yet-unreflected mind-bodily sentience, orientation, and motility, anterior to duality...” (RTG, 167). At least this is where you have brought me with your brilliant life-engendering teaching. Your dialogical challenges have drawn me down and opened me up to dwelling in the logos of my body (stressing beyond Polanyi the bodiliness of the tacit dimension). You have left me, and many others, poised to begin to speak philosophically and theologically (whose separation you rightly reject) what we see and hear as we live and move and have our being as mindbodies in the world—grounded in Being, before God.

It is within this mystery, as it comes to presence in Bill Poteat’s first person Socratic teaching, as he irrepressibly elicited, flagrantly provoked, caringly midwived my embodied reflective self, and lovingly recovered and nurtured my career as a dialogical teacher, that I want to express in this transient temporal moment, as the “I that I am” with my memories and anticipations, my eternal gratitude for the irrefragible embrangement of Bill Poteat in my life—the little bit of him that I knew through the grace, wit, brilliance, and irrepressible speaking and listening that was Bill.

You have integrated your Quaker convictions into your scholarly work. Take us through that process: What motivated you? What have you gained? What yet needs to be done?

While students were unaware of what I was going through after my return from Harvard, I reentered Guilford to participate in initiating intellectual ferment and creative engagement in curriculum and teaching, developing and co-teaching the first Honors Program and first interdisciplinary course. Amazingly, disoriented about self, religion, career, I was plunged into a fertile environment that nurtured my personal wrestle with meaning.

I had been reading Michael Polanyi since encountering him in Niebuhr’s class. As I returned into this creative dance that Guilford was becoming, I thought I would pay attention to my own tacit dimension. Polanyi made a powerful case for meaning and creative powers of integrating meaning lying beneath the surface of scientific, and all kinds of, knowing. Awash in a sea of meaninglessness, with career and identity uncertain, I would not try to fix it but rather attend to what meaning there was in me beneath the surface as I lived and taught each day vigorously embarked on my teaching career. I would not think my way out but reflect on what was happening in me beneath my ordinary noticing. While this approach profoundly resonated with early Quakers’ experience—to wait in silence for insight and guidance to rise into consciousness—I was not able to recognize this, since it was my self-constructed tight Quaker theological system that had gone smash.

Slowly I came to realize that the sea on which my little bark was cast after fleeing the destruction of my fortified city was a sea of darkness and meaninglessness that was held and illumined by the Light within. Put another way, the darkness itself was radiant, as the inward eyes of my soul began to open. Coming from my deepening commitment to Polanyi’s postcritical and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological thought, I was realizing how their insights paralleled Friends’ experiences. Along with other secular thinkers, these philosophers plumbed unnoticed depths in our knowing and perceiving beneath explicit

consciousness—beneath belief, idea, and word. I found in them a striking commonality with Friends’ affirmation of a mysterious dimension of creative silence in our depths beneath all knowing, acting, and being.

In this convergence of philosophical thought and Quaker spirituality, historical and contemporary, with all these other aspects of poetic, bodily, relational explorations, I was beginning to realize with gratitude that my childhood Quaker commitments—to God being real in human hearts and desiring peace—were being drawn up into a mature reconfiguring of my religious identity as a Friend to be open to and guided by the Mystery beneath all words and forms.

As I began to teach Quaker thought and history, alongside of teaching Polanyi and Merleau-Ponty, sometime after my collapse of belief and watching meaning active in my depths, it dawned on me that my experiment of opening to meaning underlying my activities was a form of Friends’ classic waiting in silence for appearance in inwardness of the Light’s illumining and guiding. I came to see that this approach in my own experience and in historic Quakerism is similar to Polanyi’s postcritical approach to emergent personal knowledge and to Merleau-Ponty’s description of reflecting.

My involvement with Polanyi, Merleau-Ponty, Niebuhr, and Poteat—as well as thinkers Hopper, Wittgenstein, Eliade; poets T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens; and Quaker thinkers and practice—was very personal, seeds for selving into mature religious identity, teacher, writer, and relational (rather than encapsulated) being.

What do you think is the most important untapped resource in Polanyi for Christian Ethics?

In *Freedom of the Will* Jonathan Edwards says, “the will is as the greatest apparent good.” In this Platonic affirmation that we are always oriented towards what appears to us as good, Edwards is recognizing that our decision-making always arises from our affectional being. Postcritical ethics starts there, in the tacit dimension, where we are oriented amidst all the unconscious relations we are committed to in our being in the world.

H. Richard Niebuhr describes western ethics as mostly rule-based (deontological) or goal-seeking (teleological). His alternative, ethics of responsibility, is a postcritical positioning of ethics grounded in God acting on us in the present amidst our relatedness at many levels to being, and our responding positively to this divine action, enabling our decision and action to be fitting in the given situation—or not, as we ignore or deny such divine action in us.

Decisions arise from our tacit orientation in life. While Sartre may think he can just choose—and that is the ethical act—whatever we choose is an emergent from our tacit commitments, integrated into our explicit choice.

While Polanyi does not talk about ego’s impacts in knowing, in my postcritical approach our ego is always involved, whether in life-enhancing or death-dealing decisions. Deontological and teleological ethics do not recognize the tacit dimension and the role of ego to dominate or nurture. Ego can insist on what appears good to itself—to inflate one’s own self-image or demean and destroy others’. The good that appears to ego can be the good of others and the denial of self, measuring one’s virtue in terms of how much good you intend towards another and how much one’s own good is denied. (See certain views of Christian sainthood!)

Postcritical ethics recognizes one’s own self is affected by decisions about others. We are “modified” (à la Polanyi) by every explicit emergent from the tacit dimension, whether in thought or action.

Reflecting on what is happening within oneself (whether put in religious language of divine action or in secular language of the stirring within of passionate commitments) is essential to an ethical decision and act. Reflecting is essential as well to ask what is happening in the situation in the present moment, shaped by events. Interpretation is the first act in ethical decision-making.

For me, as a Quaker, decisions and interpretive thoughts emerge out of silence that surrounds and pervades us, which we understand to be the Silence of God, the presence of divine Light, Spirit, Inward Teacher, Truth. In his action metaphor, H. R. Niebuhr speaks of God acting on him. We Friends speak of God as divine presence illumining and leading us in our waiting in Silence.

Rules and goals are helpful guides, but our action is neither obeying nor striving but is letting go of ego (ideas, plans, worries, fears, principles) to sink deep into silence and wait for what arises. It's in feeling that we know it is genuine or a product of ego domination. Seeing if it expresses our ideals or goals can help, but the current divine leading could transform our dearly held principles. Sharing my leading with others is very helpful if they will also descend into Silence and discern whether my leading feels authentically Spirit-led.

Religious language, Quaker language, is not necessary. This process can happen within a secular understanding. This is what I take Polanyi to be doing in tacit knowing with its potential for ethical decision-making. While he does embrace religion (specifically Christian) as ritual and contemplation (descent into the tacit dimension, in which we experience the sacredness of the whole world and the presence of God through *via negativa*), he does not explore the depths of the tacit dimension as divine presence.

The Cartesian ethicist will see this as wallowing in subjectivism, which has no certainty as does our adherence to principles and goals, which they believe are independent of our own personal involvement and creativity. Yes, there is no absolute, rational certainty, only the confidence of something arising from deep that is beyond, beneath, my own self-serving or self-denying, intention I can't recognize in myself as I adhere to rules and goals I think of as independent entirely of me.

I did a paper once for John Smith in Yale Philosophy on *Kant's Grundlegen* and showed how for him the "ought" exists independent of any feeling, which made no sense to me. Later as I read more deeply into *PK*, I saw this exemplifies the Cartesian split and denial of the personal. Ethical decision-making is personal. Obeying a seemingly non-personal ought is not separate from my body orientation and cultural context in which I conceive oughts. Yes, humans experience oughts, whatever they call them, but Kant understands them (would you believe it?) as critical. They need to be understood postcritically as rooted in our personal being in the world.

Given the ways that COVID has exposed the dysfunctions and fragility of so many areas of life in the last few years, what wisdom do you take from your work for adjusting to these changes? I think especially of the failures of neo-liberal capitalism, political polarization/the rise of authoritarianism, and debates over DEI/"woke-ism."

What does my postcritical approach offer in our current national trauma, the battle to save democracy? Strident opposition to justice and everyone's civil and human rights is borne of fear of uncertainty and losing one's identity and of ignorance of our history—of racial, colonial, and environmental oppression. Such frameworks to protect one's own identity and to dominate, and destroy, others' identity are the result of tacit commitment and creative integrating parts of self and world, denying other parts of oneself and our intrinsic relatedness to all being.

Reason usually cannot dislodge someone from such a narrow and desperate fixedness. Descending into silence, letting go of ego, can bring recognition of what is going on and open us to transformation, where good of the whole, and not just mine, can be pursued because we belong to one another and to the natural world. How to persuade the self-serving morally rigid, I do not know. Beyond reason, I think we need something that is more attracting than angry assertive defense of self-identity. Image and story occur to me as ways of drawing people beyond themselves. I don't know what they would be. I thought the image of earthrise from the moon would elicit affirmation of our oneness with others and world; it didn't work except for those of us already inclined. Postcritical thought does not provide answers, but it does offer a setting in which clues may appear towards solutions if we recognize our tacit dimensions and allow a good to appear in our depths that enacts love of being.

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