

The Question for Thin Places Section One: *Deconstruction*

Today we begin a new series informed by Dana Hicks' book, *The Quest for Thin Places: How To Find Spirituality After Deconstruction*. CrossWalk is one of a growing number of churches globally that is quite comfortable with the deconstruction process, seeking to help people ask the questions they have not felt comfortable (or allowed) to ask. Over the next six weeks, Hicks' book will help us frame the process, taking us through the following movements: deconstruct, clarify, remove, quest, reconstruct, and cultivate. Biblical examples of these movements are numerous, which we will explore along the way.

Why would a person deconstruct their faith? The reasons vary, but Psychiatrist Stanislav Grof notes that "organized religion, bereft of its experiential component, has largely lost the connection to its deep spiritual source and as a result has become empty, meaningless, and increasingly irrelevant in our life. In many instances, live and lived spirituality based on profound personal experience has been replaced by dogmatism, ritualism, and moralism" (*The Cosmic Game: Explorations of the Frontiers of Human Consciousness*, 245-246). For those in the United States, Hicks suggests that "American Christianity is not very helpful in making the world a better place, and often, it is actively making the world much worse. In this regard, my story is like countless others: we left the church because of our fidelity to what is good, true, and beautiful, not because of our abandonment of it" (33). Hicks continues: "Maybe you received a way of seeing God and the world that once seemed to fit neatly together, but now it doesn't work for you anymore. Yet your old way of seeing things still has a gravitational pull on you. Maybe important people said you would suffer if you believed anything else. Or maybe you grew up in a calm, cool, rational world of evidence and data where only facts can be trusted. Maybe physics and complex equations make sense, but you've had experiences that don't fit into your nice, neat, modern categories" (27).

Question: What motivates your deconstruction?

Despite the observations above, many still struggle asking challenging questions about their faith. Hicks wonders if this is in part explained by Western culture's lacking rites of passages that were once commonplace in other cultures. "We in the West have few rites of passage. So, the rhythm of deconstruction and reconstruction, death and rebirth, or Jenga-crashing and Jenga-restacking, is mostly unfamiliar. We disdain a space of vulnerability, openness, and receptivity, where we are stripped of familiar patterns, certainties, and attachments" (Hicks, 34). The process can feel like a game of Jenga – remove one more piece and the whole tower might come crashing down. In addition to a lack of cultural traditions that encourage critical paradigm shifts, Catholic and Protestant Christianity have leaned heavily into a definition of faith that requires belief even when unsupported by facts and experience. For example, to not embrace the five beliefs core to Christian fundamentalists is, for them, to ensure one's special place in hell. That's a pretty strong motivation to keep your mouth and mind shut!

Question: What has hindered your deconstruction process?

It may be helpful to keep in mind that every person everywhere is in process, as are all the systems in the world. Nothing is static. Even after living things die, change continues. As statistician George Box noted, "All models are wrong, but some are useful" (15). Rochard Rohr noted that God is always bigger than the boxes we build for God, so we should not waste too much time protecting those boxes" (*Everything Belongs*, New York: Crossroad Publishing, 25). These two quotes remind us of the temporal nature of the constructs we create to make sense of the world. And yet, both Box and Rohr recognize the value of our flawed constructs, which means thought is required to determine what to keep and what to let go. Naturally, over time, the things we may keep now we may let go of in the future, and some things we let go of we may bring back in refashioned, nuanced form.

Questions: What have you kept from the past that has been helpful? What have you let go? How did you decide? What models or boxes are you evaluating now? What is that process like for you?

The Bible itself bears witness to this process, with many characters sorting out what they retain and what they discard. The word "God" itself requires reflection. Hicks explains why he uses the term "The Divine" in his book: "Any

book about spirituality must discuss ultimate reality, even though it is beyond mere words and phrases. By “ultimate reality,” I mean the most fundamental, absolute, or ultimate nature of life from which everything else arises. In the tradition I grew up in, our word for ultimate reality was God... When I use the phrase “The Divine,” I am referring to the notion that our lives matter, that everything in the universe is ultimately connected to everything else, and that history seems to be slowly enticed toward better outcomes” (18). There are hundreds of names for God used throughout the Bible, yet many people settle for a handful: Heavenly Father, Spirit, Almighty God, etc.

Questions: What names have you used for God throughout your life? How has your language for God changed over time? Why? What was involved in that process?

Lao Tzu once quipped, “When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.” Like other truisms, this is correct (for better or worse). Sometimes our identity with a particular way of seeing the world is so powerful that to let the label go makes us feel unmoored. If we grew up Catholic or Mormon or Muslim or Jewish or... and then decide to no longer identify as such, the experience can be equally freeing and anxiety inducing. Yet this is part of the human experience, to continually wonder who we really are and what we really believe. The Jewish myths of the Creation and the Garden of Eden found in the Bible were a shock for other cultures to read because they depicted a deity who actually cared deeply for creation and humans. (Note: Some people reading this might feel unnerved by labeling these stories as myths because they have been told that believing them to be factually and historically accurate were critical to faith and maintaining God’s favor.) In the Flood myth, Noah was invited to build an ark in the middle of the desert. Appreciating the literary meaning, what was required of Noah to get to work on such a project? Running for his life after ripping off his brother, Jacob had a vision of a ladder extending to heaven, with angels ascending and descending – a portal for the Divine. What models and boxes did that destroy? Moses experienced his call to be a liberator via God’s voice emanating from a burning bush – what did that represent for him? Walt Whitman advised his readers, “Re-examine all you have been told in school or church on in any book, and dismiss whatever insults your soul.”

Questions: Beyond the names you use for God, how has your understanding about the character and nature of God shifted? What brought about those shifts?

We live in a part of the world that demands certainty, yet life and faith really don’t work that way. Instead of viewing the deconstruction and reconstruction process as a threat, perhaps we need to appreciate the process for what it is – beautiful and wonderful. Hicks reminds us that this is part of our faith history: “If we do it right, we remain in a never-ending cycle of deconstructing and reconstructing. During the Reformation, the Protestants declared they were “ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda” or “reformed and always reforming.” In other words, the process of deconstructing, clarifying, reconstructing, and cultivating was an ongoing cycle and never-ending process of growth for them” (15). Hicks reminds us that the Twelve Steps that have been so profoundly helpful for millions in recovery are meant to be repeated over and over again because that’s how the process works. We are all addicted to something – many things, perhaps. Yet how many of us are comfortable perpetuating the process?

The Church has created a lot of “Holy Cows” over its history – ideas, traditions, and objects that are deemed untouchable (with sometimes severe consequences if “defiled”). Consequently, the Church has been extremely lethargic in evaluating these contemporary golden idols that God condemns. As a pastor, I have barbecued many such Holy Cows, always with some people very unsettled and others liberated. That’s just the way it goes. Deconstruction and reconstruction are not meant to be exceptional, but rather central to faith and life. With wisdom and reflection, this is a good thing to embrace! Life, Love, Wisdom, The Divine impel and compel you to perpetuate the process. You are invited!

Questions: How does knowing that this process is normal and valued change how you feel and approach your own deconstruction and reconstruction process? What Holy Cows are you ready to barbecue?

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes can be found in Dana Hicks’ book, *The Quest for Thin Places: How to Find Spirituality after Deconstruction*. (SacraSage Press, 2024).