

## Chapter 1 'Shaping Holy Lives'

### Summary:

In this first chapter, Williams focuses on the monastic community as a workshop in which each person develops the tools which allow the community to function as a whole. Much of the work to be done is basic, mundane and repetitive. It is the cultivation of daily habits of self-control and self-restraint, of seeking to live for others before ourselves.<sup>1</sup> It is the work of 'common or garden faithfulness to one another'<sup>2</sup> which lays the foundations for communal and individual flourishing. Building the kind of communities in which we can 'grow without fear'.<sup>3</sup>

The key themes are transparency, peace-making and accountability. Running alongside these are threads relating to commitment, time and attention. Long term commitment appears foundational to the life of the workshop and its stability. A challenge in reading this chapter is to understand how this translates into our contemporary context, in which many of us build our lives and work upon temporary commitments.

### Themes & Questions:

1. *Commitment:* At the heart of the stable community lies an enduring commitment to living with others. Williams suggests that the Benedictine life calls for a radical acceptance of 'otherness'. There can be no conditions imposed beyond which 'we reserve the right to say our that our terms prevail after all.'<sup>4</sup>  
Williams likens this commitment to a long marriage, over time these relationships develop a settled ease which provides a stable foundation for life. The vision he sets out is perhaps attractive but challenging, it can be difficult to see how these long-term communal relationships can be cultivated in a highly mobile world in which time is always pressing. (p11-13)

#### Questions:

- Can we cultivate a similar sense of unconditionality in temporary relationships?
  - How do we cultivate the kind of long-term commitments and stable communities Williams talks about within the church, the university and academia more widely?
2. *Transparency:* Williams' understanding of transparency includes aspects of honesty and humility. It focuses on resisting self-deceit, admitting wrong-doing and ill feeling. It involves being aware of one's own mortality.  
For Williams, Benedictine habits of sharing inner thoughts with wise brothers and sisters are essential in cultivating these qualities. Through speaking inner thoughts aloud Williams suggests that we can break open our 'obsessional, self-enclosed' loops of thought where our 'own preference rules unrestricted.' In disrupting our inner monologues, we 'prop open the door of the psyche' which allows both God and others in. (p13-16)

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Way of St Benedict* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020), 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, 12.

**Questions:**

- What are the challenges in seeking to cultivate this kind of honesty, humility and transparency?
- Do we have the kind of relationships which enable us to become more transparent?
- How do we cultivate (or model) transparency within academic communities where others do not share our commitments?

3. *Peace-making:* We might think that peace-making begins with a drive to reconciliation, but Williams warns that we need to be cautious about a push for peace that can leave resentments unacknowledged and people feeling anxious or censorious.<sup>5</sup>

Williams suggests that paying attention to the currency of the community is perhaps the best place to begin. What is it that we give to others in our conversation and interactions and what do we receive in return? Quoting Donald Nicholls, Williams suggests that in the university the currency is grievance. 'If you put in grievance, you will get back grievance.'<sup>6</sup> A continuing exchange of grudges seems unlikely to lead to peace or stability and so it is in tackling this exchange that we might stem a tide of conflict.

Williams sees a second threat to peace in the temptation to avoid transparency through 'the staging of emotional turbulence in which the unexamined ego is allowed to rampage unchecked.'<sup>7</sup> Perhaps one of Williams' most counter-cultural suggestions is the call to pursue emotional honesty (in contrast to repression or 'uncritical indulgence') for ourselves and for others. (p18-20)

**Questions:**

- Where do we see a need for peace-making within the university?
- What are the currencies we use in our personal and academic lives and how might they be changed?
- How can we begin the difficult work of emotional honesty?

4. *Accountability:* For Williams we are accountable to God and to the concrete other.<sup>8</sup> He suggests that there are both individual and communal aspects to accountability. We need to take responsibility for seeing others as they are and as all that they can be. We are, to varying degrees, all accountable for each other's formation in Christ-likeness. We are also accountable for building and sustaining the common life, doing the work of 'mending vices and preserving love'.<sup>9</sup>

This understanding of accountability, which aims at individual and communal flourishing, stands in contrast to a culture of auditing. It suggests practices of listening, explanation and discussion. It rests upon a form of humility, the knowledge that each person stands alongside the other, answerable to Christ and living in hope of mercy.<sup>10</sup> (p20-26)

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<sup>5</sup> Williams, 17f.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, 24.

**Questions:**

- Who do you feel accountable to personally and within your academic context?
- How does Williams' understanding of accountability differ from our own, or that of our wider culture?
- How do we move away from auditing one another and move towards a sense of mutual accountability?