



Making ourselves at home: Three Reflections

Making ourselves at home

We must be as religious cherishing a habit of at once jumping into our place and finding ourselves at home in it, just as much at home there as anywhere else. ...The religious life is not to be a dreamy dissatisfaction with the present state of things, it is not to be a mere not knowing what to do next, because things about us are as they are, but it is the consciousness of being able to make ourselves at home under all circumstances and able to turn everything that happens to account. This is what the religious should be — ready; ready but not fussy. Fr. Benson, SSJE

Richard Benson's Cowley Fathers did a lot of making themselves at home. They began in a time when the idea of Anglican monks and nuns was new and, in many circles, greeted with hostility. They left their England and took charge of parishes in Boston and Philadelphia, served under bishops who didn't want them, and began missions in Africa and India.

They found ways to make themselves at home in all circumstances. That was partly because they were grounded in the way of Eucharist, Daily Office and Reflection. Life had a shape to it, and they lived it wherever they were. The habits of forgiveness and mercy, mutual care, and self-offering were to be lived in all situations. They were not going to stop being who they were.

In these last months, how have you made yourself at home? What inner core of silence have you called upon? What humility has shown itself? What habits and practices have helped you be who you are?

For many it's an unfamiliar idea. It can be both empowering and frightening to hear that you can make yourself at home in all circumstances and turn it to good account. The idea that is up to me to make myself at home is new for many of us. It's a thought that many will never have on their own as they focus on the discomfort of new situations and conditions. But once they have the thought, once the possibility has entered, another step on the journey to new life has been taken.

Benedict shaping a community

Robert had been consulting with WomenRising for several years. The organization faced significant change when an election brought in a new administration with a different approach to funding programs to address poverty. There was a sense of turmoil and disquiet. The management team was angry and disoriented. They feared having to end programs that served women and their families, staff layoffs, and worst of all, the loss of their institutional integrity if they just went along with the new policies.

During the previous few years the management team had worked with Robert as they managed two similar polarities—between change and stability and between adaptation and institutional integrity and identity.

In the new circumstances those two polarities took on a new life.

How could they manage those polarities in the new situation? How were they to make themselves at home in this new, strange, hostile world?

Robert's a Benedictine; a professed member of the Order of the Ascension. Everyone connected to the Order takes the same Promise—"To seek the presence of Jesus Christ in the people, things and circumstances of life through stability, obedience and conversion of life."

He shared with the management team the third part of the triangle. He said something like this: "Most of you know I'm part of a religious tradition. I don't want to press that upon you but there's a way of living within it that may be useful in what we face at WomenRising. When managing the polarity between stability and change, the polarity between adaptation and integrity and identity, the starting point is to listen. It's a kind of obedience to Reality."

So that's what we did. We listened closely to what the new standards of the government were going to be. We listened to one another, to the board, to the entire staff. We gathered together community people from the business and nonprofit sectors of the city. We listened to everybody. And in time the organization found a way to live with integrity in this different world. New programs were established, new staff people hired. Some programs closed. And WomenRising continued to serve women and their families.

Benedict's wisdom is pragmatic and kind. It has guided communities for 1,500 years. It's been adapted to serve many religious traditions and types of organizations. There's no surprise that the behavioral sciences have discovered much the same wisdom in action-research. It has managed to make a home in each age and many societies.

Of course, for the Christian there is more.

For stability means that I must not run away from where my battles are being fought, that I have to stand still where the real issues have to be faced. Obedience compels me to re-enact in my own life that submission of Christ himself, even though it may lead to suffering and death, and conversatio, openness, means that I must be ready to pick myself up, and start all over again in a pattern of growth which will not end until the day of my final dying. And all the time the journey is based on that Gospel paradox of losing life and finding it...my goal is Christ.
Esther de Waal

The loneliness of the cross

Jesus made himself at home on the Cross. It took some doing.

On the Mount of Olives, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed. He wanted the cup to pass from him. He was agitated and in great distress. He threw himself on the ground. “His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.” John reports an earlier experience as the time comes near—“Now my soul is troubled.”¹

Being at home in this set of circumstances had no comfort in it, no hope of survival to offer. Alone at the trial. Alone when mocked and tortured. Alone in his suffering.

The loneliness wasn’t a new experience. For three years the disciples routinely failed to understand who he was and what his life was about. They argued over power. Judas didn’t see him as committed enough to the poor and so betrayed him. Peter denied him. Those closest to him would fall asleep when he was in anguish. And at the cross—not the 5,000, not the 70, nor even the 12—just the Blessed Mother, Mary Magdalene, and John the Evangelist.

Yet on the cross, what do we see? – forgiveness (Luke 23:34), mercy (Luke 23:43), caring for his mother and John (John 19:26-27), praying the ancient psalm (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34), an acknowledgment of his suffering (John 19:28), at the end he gives up his life and offers himself to the Father. (John 19:30 and Luke 23:46). Even death was not going to stop him from being who he was.

Henri Nouwen says that loneliness will often morph into hostility. How is it that Jesus doesn’t do that? How is it that Jesus makes himself at home in dying and death? Does it come to you how he did that, how in many ways “he set his face to Jerusalem?”² How does that play in your own life now?

The tradition is rich with guidance about making ourselves at home with dying and death. Benedict wrote that we are “to keep death before one’s eyes daily.” The collect for the Feast of Jeremy Taylor has us pray, “Make us deeply aware of the shortness and uncertainty of human life.” From Thomas Merton, “The more you try to avoid suffering, the more you suffer, because smaller and more insignificant things begin to torture you, in proportion to your fear of being hurt. The one who does most to avoid suffering is, in the end, the one who suffers most.” And from Esther de Waal, “Another way of expressing this truth would be to see it in terms of a continual dying and rebirth throughout my life. That I cannot have new life without death is the most fundamental and inescapable of all the tensions I have to hold onto.”

And He turned it to good account. Evelyn Underhill saw it. “Having roused the hostility of official religion by His generous freedom of love, he was condemned by a combination of political cowardice and ecclesiastical malice to a barbarous and degrading death; and made of that death the supreme triumph of self-abandoned Charity.”

In *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen writes, “It is a sign of spiritual maturity when we can give up our illusionary self-control and stretch out our hands to God. But it would be just another illusion to believe that reaching out to God will free us from pain and suffering.

Often, indeed it will take us where we rather would not go. But we know that without going there we will not find our life.”

¹ Matthew 26:36-46, Luke 22:39-46, John 12:27, John 18:1-11, Mark 14:32-42

² Luke 9:51-56



Making ourselves at home among the wheat and the weeds

Earlier this summer we heard the parable of the weeds among the wheat. As part of trying to make Zoom worship a bit more interactive, our parish is using a form of shared homily to respond to the Gospel reading after our priest gives his reflections. It's been illuminating to hear directly from laypeople about their approach to scripture, and to hear more than we usually do about how those interpretations apply to the challenges of daily life. It's also, at times, been both a source of connection and an underscoring of deep differences among members of the Body of Christ. Sometimes, I haven't felt quite at home.

There's also been quite a lot of commentary from clergy about the demands of faith in the current environment, both as we deal with the ongoing impact of the pandemic and address significant matters of politics, race, and justice. We've read quotes and reflections from several Episcopal priests who used the parable to highlight current events. Some of those comments leave me feeling not quite at home, as well.

²⁴ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' ²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

This particular parable seems to pull readers in specific directions. Two main kinds of responses stood out as I noticed my own thoughts, as well as those of other lay people and clergy:

The first kind of response is rather friendly—we're each a nice, country gardener with a comfortably disheveled patch of earth. Sometimes weeds are as beautiful as the flowers we planted. It's not up to us to sort anything – who are we to say to say there are bad weeds or good wheat? And all plants kind of look alike if you squint your eyes.

The second kind of response—and I heard this more frequently—is to assume we need to go

get those weeds! Weeds are terrible! We need to get in there and rip them out from the roots so we can burn them! Weeds seem to be an easy target for our wrath and if we direct our indignation rightly, we will conquer them. Often, it seems we can slide right into the role of the angry gardener.

This second response easily diverges into politically conservative and liberal versions. The exact words may differ, and the policy content surely does, but generally we'll know what our own tribe thinks of as "weeds." Sometimes it's subtle, and sometimes it's explicit. What's challenging is to recognize how easy it is for many of us to conflate our political views and our faith. Often, we can bend our faith to our politics, and somehow assume that either the Republican or Democratic party platforms are a new Creed, and obviously God participated in their drafting. What the religious life requires, though, is ensuring we've examined our politics—and the ways we express and advance our politics as we engage other human beings—in light of our faith.

I personally found myself going all directions—the friendly gardener, the angry gardener, the partisan gardener who is sometimes friendly and sometimes angry, but still partisan—before I'd taken some time to listen. It strikes me that all of these approaches illustrate how we can use the Gospel to reinforce our own bias. The parables are particularly good at this because they, by their nature, are contradictory and hold the seemingly unreconcilable together. In different ways, any of our tendencies to find "the answer" shows how we can choose to avoid what Jesus is actually saying. Or, more pointedly, to avoid what we need to hear.

"The morally conservative crowd don't like that he won't name sinners more directly or call out their sin; the political radicals want him to definitively state who the enemy of God's kingdom is and call for some sort of uprising against it."¹ It can be frustrating that neither of those is where Jesus goes.

He does seem to assume we know there's a difference between wheat and weeds, and that the difference matters. But I wonder if it's harder to see ourselves *as* the wheat, to see ourselves *as* the weeds, to recognize ourselves in the slave. We aren't the Master, and we're not the Reaper. We don't get to control everything. Enemies come; they may be us. We may look and feel like a vigorous stalk of grain and then find we are an invasive or toxic variety. There will be a reckoning, but it seems pretty clear we're not in charge of it and we may not like the results. There is uncertainty and mystery in all of it, yet also a call for continuing discernment. We can't rest easy.

We can find ourselves avoiding this. At times, we can't quite stay with the images. Maybe we move into our anger and judgment and search for the weeds to stamp them out, not quite realizing we're also stamping out the wheat. Maybe we start with the kind of righteous anger that has fueled all great quests for justice—a vision of how far we are from God's Kingdom, along with a clarity that the Kingdom is also here now and that we can harness our power to raise up the downtrodden and give comfort to the afflicted.

¹ From an article written by the Rev. Francis Delaplain and posted on The Anglican Planet: <https://anglicanplanet.net/wheat-and-tares/>

But we can also just find ourselves angry and judgmental and resentful, and basically comfortable with that because we're so *right*. Anger, judgment, and resentment can feel like home.

If a foundation of the spiritual life is to be at home in all circumstances, maybe we need to find a new home, or at least an expanded sense of what "home" is. It's not simply being comfortable, though sometimes it gives us comfort. We almost certainly need to be less comfortable with our anger and judgment and resentment, and perhaps more comfortable with our uncertainty and grief and hopefulness.

Being at home doesn't mean never being angry or never making judgments—our encounters with the complex reality of the world often involve both. Each of us is called to struggle for justice and truth, and it can be hard to face into that struggle when we aren't in control. It can be hard when we know how right we are and how wrong the "other side" is. Yet when the struggle becomes hostile, when we lose our sense of God's mercy and compassion, and of our own capacity to share in that compassion, our struggle is more likely to tear down and not build up.

"We are not equipped to judge the level of good or evil in another's heart. Nor do we know the end from the beginning. As people formed by Jesus' act of grace, we must act in grace. We must reach out in grace to those on the other side of our lines, for the cross reaches across our evil to us: it is grace in the face of your evil, that you may be healed, that you may be saved."²

For Episcopalians, our spiritual life and growth is grounded in prayer, including our common prayer in the daily Office and the Eucharist, as well as our own personal forms of prayer. Becoming more at home in all circumstances does seem connected with basing our prayer in what is. That includes recognizing God's grace and compassion, and recognizing where we are channels of that grace and compassion, as well as some of the places where we are not.

We can give some of our prayer to contemplation. To simply being present and aware before God, and enjoying that presence. Developing our capacity to seek and enjoy the presence of God helps us see him when we don't expect it, including in the people and circumstances that cause us the most pain.

We can steep ourselves in scripture through the Office and the Eucharist. We can read with the "ear of the heart," listening quietly, letting ourselves be shaped and inspired by its mystery and the ways it lets us enter more fully into our risen life in Christ. We don't have to solve everything, including our internal contradictions. Noticing they exist may be enough for this moment. We can listen for the Word God has for us today, even when it feels confusing, challenging, or uncomfortable. We can choose to be mostly concerned with the "log of weeds"³ in our own eye. Over time, maybe our home is less about the easy comfort of being right, and more about partaking of the comfort borne of joining in the expansive love of God.

² Ibid.

³ An image used by Matthew Cowden in his article Don't Pull: The Parable of the Weeds and Wheat.

<https://www.matthewcowden.com/2018/08/25/dont-pull-the-parable-of-the-weeds-and-wheat/>

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The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life

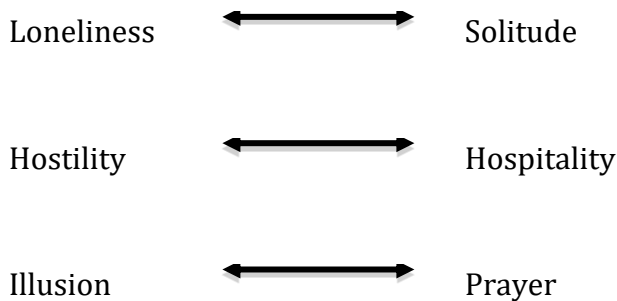
In *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, Henri Nouwen offers a model for understanding a central dynamic in the spiritual life. The quotes in this reading are from *Reaching Out* unless otherwise noted.

Our shorthand for understanding what he’s getting at is this: Loneliness and illusion will bring hostility; solitude and prayer will bring hospitality.

Let’s look at Father Nouwen’s three movements of the spiritual life. We’re going to come at this by emphasizing what we see as those aspects of his thinking most helpful in creating a model that we can recall and make use of.

The movement between poles

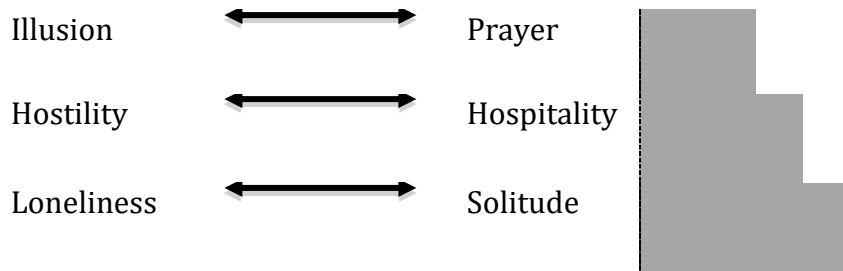
The spiritual life is that constant movement between the poles of loneliness and solitude, hostility and hospitality, illusion and prayer. The more we come to the painful confession of our loneliness, hostility and illusions, the more we are able to see solitude, hospitality and prayer as part of the vision of our life.



The movement toward growth

One way of conceptualizing spiritual growth is to see it as building blocks.

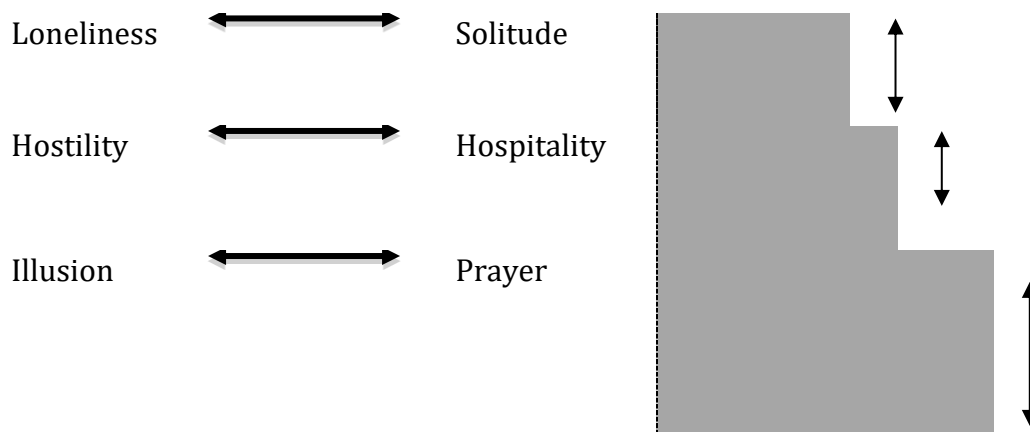
As the person, or parish, increases a capacity for solitude, what Kenneth Leech called “an inner core of silence,” that provides a base for growth in hospitality. And as our hospitality increases, that provides a base for deeper prayer (and connection with more reality). That foundation allows for our encounter with “Reality.” It is the path to our deepest self and our most profound connection with God in community.



To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude...The movement from loneliness to solitude, however, is the beginning of any spiritual life because it is the movement from the restless senses to the restful spirit, from the outward-reaching cravings to the inward-reaching search, from the fearful clinging to the fearless play.

In Nouwen’s discussion on prayer he brings forward another image.

The movement from illusion to prayer undergirds and makes possible the movements from loneliness to solitude and from hostility to hospitality and leads us to the core of the spiritual life...When we do not enter into that inner field of tension where the movement from illusion to prayer takes place, our solitude and our hospitality easily lose their depth.



There is movement up and down the map as well as between the poles.

The paradox of prayer is that we have to learn how to pray while we can only receive it as a gift.

If we are to grow, we need to place ourselves in the pathways of grace. We need to develop a spiritual discipline, a Rule of Prayer. As we do that, we will experience that relationship with God (Prayer) is a gift to us. It comes by God’s initiative into our longing heart.

Creating a space

Nouwen uses the phrase "creating a space for strangers" to capture what he means by hospitality.

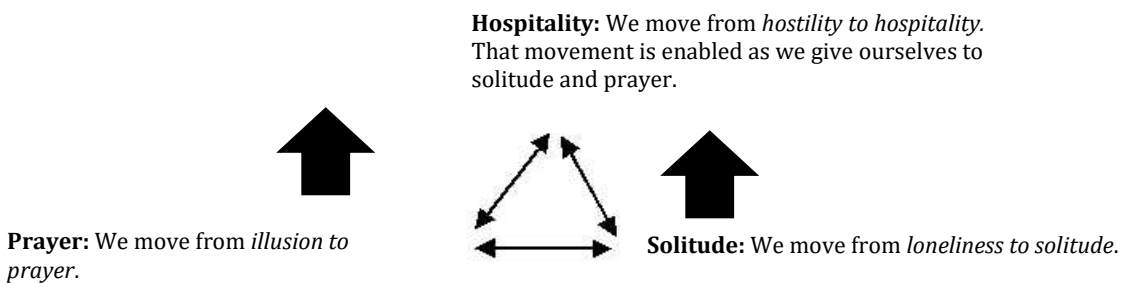
In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found.

That is our vocation: to convert the 'hostis' into a 'hospes', the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.

To convert hostility into hospitality requires the creation of the friendly empty space where we can reach out to our fellow human beings and invite them to a new relationship. This conversion is an inner event that cannot be manipulated but must develop from within. Just as we cannot force a plant to grow but can take away the weeds and stones which prevent its development, so we cannot force anyone to such a personal and intimate change of heart, but we can offer the space where such a change can take place.

Faithful action rises from faithful prayer

This is yet another way of placing Nouwen's ideas in a framework.



This way of diagramming Nouwen's model offers us the understanding that faithful action rises from faithful prayer. It shows an interdependence, a synergy, among solitude, prayer and hospitality. Growth in one may activate growth in the others. And, it also demonstrates the traditional understanding of the relationship between prayer and action.

We are fond of Evelyn Underhill's way of expressing it:

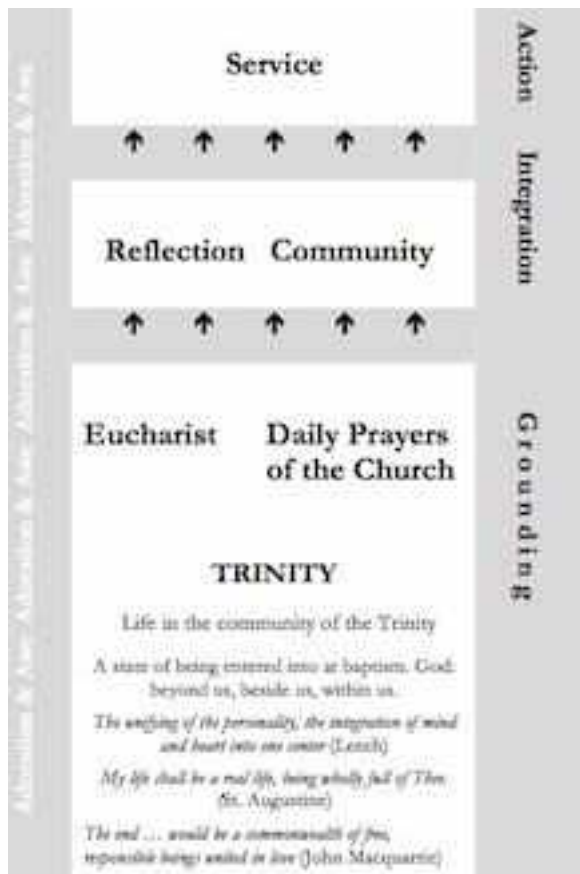
One's first duty is adoration, and one's second duty is awe and only one's third duty is service. And that for those three things and nothing else, addressed to God and no one else, you and I and all other countless human creatures evolved upon the surface of this planet were created. We observe then that two of the three things for which our souls were made are matters of attitude, of relation: adoration and awe. Unless these two are right, the last of the triad, service, won't be right. Unless the whole of your...life is a movement of praise and adoration, unless it is instinct with awe, the work which the life produces won't be much good.

Saint John of the Cross made the same point this way:

But without prayer, all they do amounts to nothing more than noise and uproar; it is like a hammer banging on an anvil and echoing all over the neighborhood. They accomplish a little more than nothing, sometimes absolutely nothing at all, and sometimes downright evil.

Martin Thornton points to it in *The Rock and the River* and in his description offers a process and systems perspective: "Moral action only flows from doctrinal truth by grace and faith, that is through prayer." Thornton describes the organic nature of the spiritual life with an image—"divine transcendence which bubbles over into life." He describes Holy Fear as "the joyous expression of an habitual recognition of divine transcendence which bubbles over into life as that exciting awe and reverence so aptly described...as 'numinous'...It is that exhilarating, terrifying, dynamic insight into the glory and majesty of God which inspires a sense of wonder in all creation together with a calm recollection and faith in Providence.

In Your Holy Spirit



We have incorporated the same view as the others in the "In Your Holy Spirit model."¹

The "map" we offer includes five elements. At the base there are two practices: one weekly, one daily; a rhythm common to many religious and spiritual traditions. These elements have to do with living in the habits and ways that keep us grounded in what is most real. In Anglicanism they take form as the Holy Eucharist and Daily Office.

On that base there are two more elements standing side-by-side—Community and Reflection.

The final element is Service. We are called to serve in ways that fit our gifts, personality and circumstances.

We ground ourselves in the Blessed Trinity in Eucharist and Office. We integrate and deepen life through community and reflection. And all that shapes the service we offer the world. The Holiness "bubbles over into life."

¹ See the In Your Holy Spirit books. Michelle Heyne's *In Your Holy Spirit: Traditional Spiritual Practices in Today's Christian Life* and Robert Gallagher's *In Your Holy Spirit: Shaping the Parish through Spiritual Practice*. Ascension Press, 2008.