



Writing and Being Interrupted

with Al Barrett and Ruth Harley

Ash Thank you Al and Ruth for sharing the [video](#) you have produced about your new book, [Being Interrupted: Reimagining the Church's Mission from the Outside, In](#) (SCM Press, 2000). I felt that video gave a fascinating insight not only into the content of the book but into the actual experience of writing.

It would be great to unpack this experience of writing.

Ruth, can I start at the end of the video and invite you to say a little bit more about intriguing uninterrupted / interrupted dynamic? It is one of the things, I think, that makes writing in the context of a TEI somewhat distinctive. At least in my experience, TEIs (at their best) should be intentionally frictional spaces. There is an interruption of the quietness of the academic space by the messy realities of the church (and the loudness of life) and v.v. It is never just academic study and never just church, but a much more muddled. I think this also relates to a point Al makes earlier that the book was never going to be 'finished neatly'. Is there something about theological writing that makes it always and necessarily in medias res (in the middle of things). I can't think of a single writing experience that hasn't been confrontation with my finitude.

Ruth To start by picking up on your questions about the interrupted/uninterrupted dynamic – I definitely recognise what you name about TEIs (at their best, and perhaps more in some models of theological education than others) being an 'intentionally frictional space'. I think the same is true of writing and researching from a parish ministry context, though obviously Al will probably have more to say about that. For me, as well as the friction between church and academy, there is another dimension here, which is the friction between both of those and the neighbourhood, which is certainly something we experienced in writing [Being Interrupted](#). The way those spaces and communities of neighbourhood, church, and academy, continually interrupt each other, and interrupt us

(separately and together) as authors was a defining dynamic of the process of writing the book.

The 'unfinishedness' is key, I agree. As we came towards the end of writing process, allowing the book to remain open-ended, to hold space for all the interruptions we have not (yet) encountered or engaged with, seemed important. In a sense, it reminded me of the mode of 'imaginative preaching' which Kate Bruce writes about in *Igniting the Heart*, and the need to leave space for people to insert themselves and their experiences and ideas into the gaps around the text of the sermon – which I suppose might be seen as a sort of invitation to 'interruption' of the preacher by the congregation (albeit a silent interruption).

For me, writing at the same time as training for ordination, I have been very aware of the formational dynamic of writing, and especially of writing in an interrupted way. I was listening to a podcast this morning in which I heard Sara Ahmed say 'Working out what kind of writing you want to do is not different from working out what sort of relationship with the world you want to have. I think they are continuous questions.' That really resonated with me. I think for me, becoming intentionally willing to both interrupt and be interrupted in the way I write has helped me both to reflect on what it means to interrupt and be interrupted in ministry, and also to form a habit of openness to interruption, which I think (and hope) will stay with me.

Both the willingness to be interrupted, and to interrupt, are for me expressions of a feminist way of writing (and living). Being willing to interrupt as a woman is, I think, an act of resistance against patriarchy. In the process of writing *Being Interrupted*, I greatly appreciated Al's willingness as a feminist ally to be interrupted by me, and to listen undefendedly to my critique when (admittedly rarely) he was writing from an unexamined male perspective, especially as we worked on the sections of the book relating to the #MeToo movement. But this was by no means a one-way process. Another thing I really appreciated about our collaboration was the way Al interrupted some of the ways that I have internalised a patriarchal culture in which women's interruptions are not accepted or encouraged. I remember a couple of particular occasions on which I hesitantly emailed a section of the text to Al, with a tentative 'if this is too much, I can tone it down' email, and he unhesitatingly replied 'It's not too much. You don't need to tone it down.' I hugely appreciated that interruption to my own internal gatekeeping, and I think that was an expression of the wider 'yes, and...' dynamic which was key to our writing process.

The 'yes, and...', which we picked up from the concept of 'overaccepting' in improvised theatre, has been really key for us in the process of writing *Being Interrupted*. It feels to me like the opposite of 'yes, but...' which is a defensive response to an interruption, whereas 'yes, and...' is an accepting (over-accepting) response to interruption, which continually opens us up to not only the potential but the inevitability of being interrupted, and to examining that interruption to discern the gifts it contains.

I think another dynamic about interrupted writing which appeals to me as a feminist is that it feels less hierarchical than many ways of working. One of the joys of this writing process has been the way we have collected and shared with each other various

unexpected interruptions along the way. The diversity of the sources of those interruptions – I am as likely to WhatsApp Al to say ‘I overheard this on the bus, and...’ as ‘I just re-read this chapter by Mary Daly, and...’ – has challenged any suggestion that ideas/information/knowledge should flow from the academy and/or the church, via the author(s) as in some sense ‘authoritative’ mediator(s) to ‘the world’. I think what we have attempted to do is rather to bring all the many and various interruptions we have encountered into conversation with each other and with the reader and their context, with ourselves as interrupted and interrupting facilitators of that encounter. We write a lot in the book about interrupting the flow of power within the church, and about alternative, more reciprocal models of ‘flow’. It has been important to also model that in the way we have written the book as well – while acknowledging the inherent limitations of the format of a published book as a vehicle for doing that.

Nicola I absolutely love what you have said here, Ruth. I have a piece in my [Fragments for Fractured Times](#) which picks up the metaphor of the gap in a range of ways, and there is a short reflection in it on gaps/interruptions in writing and how to think of them - whether as ‘problems’ or as an intrinsic part of the process. I think some of that might resonate. And you’ll see I’m very largely on the same page as you all in terms of valuing the messiness of the ‘flow’ and the ongoing interruptions/interactions between church, academy, neighbourhood, etc etc. I suppose the reflection on ‘multiple overwhelmings’ is another form of reflection on interruptions. Perhaps ‘overwhelmings’ is another metaphor for some of the same stuff...?).

However, I do want to raise a caveat/question which relates to the admission of ‘imposter syndrome’ in the video - which I think very many people experience (even Rowan Williams admitted to this in an interview sometime around when he was elected as Archbishop of Canterbury); but I do wonder if women aren’t particularly prone to it (and others who have not traditionally been part of the main/malestream) for all the obvious reasons, of self-doubt and so on.

I suppose the question is, are there interruptions to be resisted as well as those that must be welcomed and are simply part and parcel of messy, incarnational life in the midst? Is it ok (for women) to say, ‘No, I don’t want to be interrupted now; I’m doing something important here and it’s not to be put down for something or someone else’? Can we choose to resist the demands and interruptions of others? The answer is likely to be, ‘sometimes and sometimes not’. If a child needs feeding or its nappy changed, that’s an interruption that can’t easily or justifiably be resisted, at least not for more than a very short time; but if some manipulative and needy parishioner or student (sorry, this is a bit of a caricature, I know) knocks on the door or rings up expecting instant access, can we choose to ask them to come back another time? This may or may not be a feminist question, and may sound rather trivial - but I don’t think it is.

Like most things, it’s probably a question of balance; but also of power. Who gets the chance to choose whether to be interrupted or not, or whether to be able to choose, for instance, physical space and time, the room of one’s own? Of course, as the conversation on the video makes clear, the capacity to choose solitude or withdrawal is very often

predicated on privilege; but does that mean that we wouldn't want those who never have access to retreat/withdrawal/silence never to be able to do so? Just because someone has grown up in a household where they were never able to have 'a room of their own', doesn't mean I wouldn't want them to be able to know what it's like. In fact, I positively would want those who are most deprived - of physical space, educational opportunity and so on - to have the chance to experience the same. Jane Hirshfield has a wonderful poem, ['The poet'](#), in which she describes a poet working next door to her sleeping children, but having 'enough time, and silence, and paper to make mistakes and go on'.

Ash I am also wondering whether this 'imposter syndrome' in relation to writing might be worth taking a bit deeper? I remember from my tutoring days at Queen's that a version of the imposter syndrome is very much live and kicking when first setting out writing those early essays for Intro to Christian Doctrine, etc; and if Rowan Williams' experience is anything to go by, the feelings don't go away! I think someone like Williams would want to say that there is something theologically credible about the 'imposter syndrome' when it comes to a theological account of writing as it says something about the seriousness of theological writing and its difficulty: sometimes it feels to me that much of study skills rhetoric is designed to make study easier (and therefore to 'improve' and get better results). But what about an account of study skills that gives us skills and resources (virtues?) to dwell more comfortably in the intractable uncomfortableness of writing about (ultimately) God and divine things? Writing is difficult, and this has at least something to do with the difficulty of the subject matter. At least in one sense, we're all imposters, right, a first year Ministerial Formation student and a former Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity alike, when it comes to speaking about God?

Nicola To put this another way, how might we understand the virtue of humility in relation to writing? It has had rather a bad press from feminists, which I do get - but I think there are ways of reclaiming it as a virtue, if it is understood in terms of its root meaning of 'grounded', 'of the earth'. Writing requires a groundedness in the reality of one's own poverty (intellectual, spiritual) at the same time as a confidence and trust that one has something to say or to offer to others, however inadequate to address the mystery of the divine.

Ruth Nicola - thank you so much for bringing the question of power into the conversation in relation to whether interruptions are to be welcomed or resisted (and when, how, and by whom). This is something Al and I have talked about a lot over the course of the last couple of years, and I think is really key. One of my earliest 'interruptions' to Al when we first started writing together was to observe that being interrupted is not the same for him (as someone who has most if not all of the structural privileges we identify in the book) as it is for me (who shares some those privileges in some areas - eg. race, education - but not others eg. gender, sexuality, class). I think there are certainly times when interruption needs to be resisted, particularly when those with more privilege are interrupting those with less, although that's not always a straight forward thing to determine. But for me, I think I am less interested in the question of how we handle specific moments of

interruption, than in what it means to cultivate the habit of living, and therefore thinking and writing, in ways which are open to interruption as a general principle. Although, obviously, those questions are related.

I think also it is worth noting that, for women and others who have historically been - and still are - more interrupted, refusing to be interrupted can itself be a form of interruption. When I, as a woman, say to a room full of men, "hang on, I haven't finished what I was saying" that is certainly experienced as an interruption (and not, generally, welcomed as such!). I think the kind of interruptions we want to encourage are those which interrupt not only an individual or a particular train of thought, but also interrupt commonly held assumptions about power dynamics, and about where and who knowledge of God comes from and how it is expressed.

I think the point about a room of one's own, and the privilege of having access to space and solitude in which to think and write, is a good one. It is certainly one I feel strongly about on a personal level. I think I would want to say that there are (at least) two issues here - one is about who has access to that space (literal and metaphorical), and the other is about how that space is privileged as a superior location from which to 'do theology'. So I would want to say both that access to solitude, silence, space and all the other resources of 'a room of one's own' needs to become more equitable, and the present (and past) inequalities, particularly along lines of gender, class and race need to be recognised, and also that thinking and writing which does not emerge from that space, but from the messier, noisier 'bumping spaces' of the neighbourhood needs to be taken more seriously and allowed in some way to interrupt.

For me, this is related to a much bigger question (which we may or may not want to get into here) about education, and about the assumptions about what individuals from under-represented backgrounds need to 'leave behind' in order to enter academic space. Having spent a lot of time on the phone this last week with young people distraught about the A level results fiasco, it seems that for them as it was for me, the dominant narrative is that in order to enter an academic space and to be taken seriously as thinkers and writers, they will need to 'get out', to leave behind (at least some elements of) the communities they have grown up in. I think this is most obviously a class and/or race issue, but also a significant issue for women in terms of how much we are expected to conform to a very male culture - both in academic life and in the church. And I think a more interrupted mode of working would allow all the things we are encouraged to leave at the door - whether that's working class roots, family caring responsibilities, cultural heritage, traumatic experiences - to be acknowledged as interruptions which can and perhaps should inform both the content and the form of our writing, and the context in which it happens.

I seem to have wandered off the point (that's interruption for you, I guess!) but want to return to Ash's thoughts and Nicola's response about imposter syndrome and humility. I think I want to resist the idea that "we'er all imposters" - I see what you're getting at, Ash, but I think framing it that way ignores some of the inequalities which cause some people (women, working class people, black people...) to feel more like imposter than others, because we very often 'fit' less well with dominant narratives and are more of an interruption to those narratives. Imposter syndrome, to my mind, is something which

occurs when we are persuaded both that not fitting comfortably within an existing framework is a problem, and that the problem is located with us as individuals rather than with the framework. I think interrupting both those premises is important work.

I do take the point about discomfort though, and about the importance of writing and thinking from places that are uncomfortable. Again, I think that is heard and received differently by those who are habitually comfortable than those who are habitually uncomfortable in the church, the academy or both, and I think there is something to be drawn out about how that affects the power dynamics of uncomfortable spaces.

I found Nicola's question about humility a really helpful one, and especially that connection with the idea of rootedness. I think perhaps this brings us back to the theme of interruption in a round about way. In order for interruption to be experienced as generative or creative, I think the person being interrupted needs to be quite firmly rooted. Certainly there is a humility in being willing to be interrupted, but I think also a sense that it is our rootedness - in God, and in our sense of our selves - that enables us to live and to think in ways which are open to interruption.

Nicola What a fabulously rich and helpful response, Ruth! I agree with everything you say here, and you certainly raise some crucial questions about power, access, educational norms and culture, and a whole lot more.

AI There's so much that I simply want to say 'Amen!' to, in what has already been said. I'll try to limit myself to a few places where I might add something extra and/or distinctive - to do what Ruth describes so helpfully as the 'yes, and...':

So, yes to an honest, critical analysis of power differentials, multiple differences and intersectionality - in relation to the power dynamics of being interrupted, interrupting & resisting interruption. And yes to attending to the habits and/or dispositions of being open to interruption: an 'undefendedness' that seeks to practise 'over-accepting'. And also a need to attend to the difference between interrupting individuals and interrupting organisations / systems (although neither can be disentangled entirely from the other), and between interrupting speech, action, process, structure, imagination, etc... and between the temporary nature of 'interruption' and the lasting effects of 'disruption' - asking 'what remains?' is a question both for those interrupting, and those being interrupted.

I've been conscious in the process of writing the book, of the difference between:

- noticing when we've been interrupted (past)
- embracing interruptions when they come (present)
- intentionally opening ourselves to interruptions to come (future)

It strikes me all three tenses are a necessary part of what we're talking about.

Yes to attending to both the importance for all of us of having 'a room of one's own' (however unevenly distributed that experience might often be), and to doing theology also from 'bumping spaces', 'frictional spaces' and 'uncomfortable spaces'.

I'm conscious that the emergence of the language of 'being interrupted' for me roughly parallels the arrival of young children in my life. I've mentioned (in my dialogue with Ruth) how significant Bonnie Miller McLemore's book [In the Midst of Chaos](#) was for me at that time. The possibility of doing 'spirituality' and 'theology' precisely 'in the midst of chaos' (rather than in some mythical 'quiet space') was liberating for me. I'm also conscious that while the 12 years of parenting that Janey and I have shared cannot be held up as the epitome of feminist equality of labour, I have been quite intentional from the earliest days of parenthood to attempt to be a different kind of dad: one whose work, study/writing, etc. are not 'locked away' in some kind of space 'protected' from the demands of family/domestic life, but where the boundaries are much more porous - something that COVID lockdown has tested somewhat!

Which I think is related to Nicola's humility/rootedness point, and picking up on my comment about 'sustained conversation' too. I think I can genuinely say at this point that living in a constant state of interruption has both been theologically generative, but also (at its most overwhelming points) detrimental to my mental health in ways that are hard to paint overall as positive. Alongside the labour of responding to interruption is the labour of 'picking up where we left off' - that I recognise as one of the vital skills of good supervision and psychotherapy, and at its best is a shared/communal process: 'where were we?'. Something here about weaving the thread that sustains, but includes and is transformed by the interruptions that are woven in. Or perhaps 'weaving the web', to use a less linear, more lateral, image?

I think there's something here too about a difference between 'interruptions' and 'overwhelmings'. On both the 'delivering' and 'receiving' ends, I understand the former as smaller, more piecemeal, more tentative than the latter. Interruptions can be more easily resisted, overwhelmings less so. The former can accumulate and become the latter (as I suggested above), but the labour of noticing, as well as responding to the former requires something akin to other practices of attention, I think.

I think it's important to trace the 'flows' of interruption - that for most of us in terms of power, privilege, status, etc we are somewhere 'in the middle' - we need both to be interrupted by some and to interrupt others, and that even as a multiply privileged white, middle-class, straight, non-disabled male priest in the Church of England, there are contexts in which I am called to be the bringer of interruption and disruption, as well as the many other places where I am summoned to be radically receptive to the gifts and challenges of my human siblings and creature-kin.

Finally, as a slightly theoretical coda...

I guess the heart of my PhD thesis emerged when reading the work of radical democrat Romand Coles, who reads a 'teleological' MacIntyre and an 'ateleological' Derrida and concludes that he is seeking 'ethical modes of learning how to live that are stretched

between the need for teleological directness ... and ateleological receptivity to the otherness beyond the horizons of our teleologies (or eschatologies).'

Coles helpfully puts both sides of it, I think. He also frames it as a necessarily 'tragic sensibility' which 'stretches its listeners between calls to the importance of articulating, mediating, and striving toward the highest values of a community, on the one hand, and painful evocations of the unacknowledged suffering often wrought by a community's ideals (or constitutive failure in light of them) and the inextinguishable need to be transformed through receptive engagements with those a community marginalizes and subjugates, on the other. Tragedy thus informs and energizes political judgment and action by situating us at the crux of this tension.'

Coles finds in Gloria Anzaldua: 'a "nepantlist generosity": a generosity that elaborates itself – internally and in communities with others – in dialogues torn between different sensibilities and visions of the future; a generosity torn between, on the one hand, the pursuit of what appear to be among the best political directions, principles, and practices that have been illuminated thus far ... and, on the other, its sense of the radical need to listen attentively to the voices and visions that come from places it cannot or has not yet illuminated.'

And Coles helpfully asks of us these questions: 'How much and what kinds of human organization most engender responsiveness to others? What levels of disorientation and disorganization open us to otherness? How might we entwine these? What levels and types of disorganization might provoke individual and collective forms of closure? What levels and which types of ambiguity disrupt egoisms? Which allow it to run wild? Always required, as Derrida puts it, is "a complex and constantly re-evaluated strategy."

Nicola 'Gosh' and 'huge thanks' indeed, to AI for adding to what had already become a very rich conversation.

I need to think about a lot of this a lot more! I am conscious that, as for all of us, I respond to the whole theme of 'interruptions'/'disruptions'/'overwhelmings' out of my own particular personal, socio-political, economic etc etc context. As someone who is not a parent and lives with an able-bodied partner, has a good income and secure job etc etc, I have a lot of race and class privilege to organise my life very largely as I like, and I know that I do that in a way that often excludes interruptions! I have a long way to go before I am as open to the creativity of interruption as I hear the rest of you. At the same time, I'm aware of coming from a chaotic and dysfunctional large family in which interruption was pretty constant; both religion and education provided me with spaces where I could experience relative order, calm and clarity of thought, and I often say that, combined, they have been my salvation. So openness to interruption can, to me, still feel dangerous and on the edge of a kind of unsettling, disruptive anarchy that tips me over into a place of radical dispossession. This is simply an acknowledgement that there is probably never any ultimate disentangling of the complex threads of privilege/power/disempowerment that we are all caught up in.

Ruth Al, thank you as ever for your 'yes, and...'s. I think the point about different types of disruption (and the distinction between disruption and overwhelming) is really important, and I appreciated your honesty about how your own experience of that has played out. I think I would want to add to that the observation that - as is becoming evident in this conversation - interrupted writing (and interrupted living) is, by its very nature, messy and not easily susceptible to being expressed in terms of theoretical frameworks. There is necessarily a degree of ambiguity about how interruption works, and what sorts of interruptions, in what sorts of circumstances, may be generative and creative parts of a theological process, and which might not. That makes it all the more important to be attentive to the power dynamics in that ambiguous space, and also to approach it from that place of humility and rootedness - both for the interrupted and the interrupter.

Nicola, thank you for drawing out the importance of our own contexts in this conversation, and how we approach interruptedness. That has made me reflect more on how my own context - which is in some ways similar to yours, but in other ways quite different - has shaped my understanding of interruption, in writing and in life. I also come from a family background where space, solitude and uninterrupted time were virtually non-existent. I still remember vividly the feeling of relief when I closed that door of my room at university and knew, for the first time, that I could not be interrupted - bliss! But for me, I have experienced the uninterrupted parts of life as a brief interlude among the interruptions. For a long time as a young adult, heavily influenced by a particular model of 'uninterrupted' academia, I believed that if I couldn't find uninterrupted space to write, then I couldn't write, or what I wrote would not really be worth anything - certainly that it would be somehow 'less' (less good? less polished? less meaningful? less 'proper'?) than writing produced in uninterrupted circumstances. Well, goodness me, life has certainly proved that assumption wrong! It took me a long time to realise that waiting for the 'ideal' circumstances was not a viable option - the choice was write interruptedly or not at all - and even longer to realise that that was not actually second best, that the interrupted circumstances in which I was (and am) writing, and the interruptions themselves, could be (although, as we have noted, not always) generative and life-giving in themselves.

I have had conversations around this a lot during lockdown - especially with female friends my age, many of whom are juggling work, childcare and a disproportionate amount of domestic labour, even more precariously than usual. One of the themes that has emerged from those conversations, and which may be helpful here is the different possible responses to those interruptive circumstances. There is a significant difference between writing around the disruptions - snatching what uninterrupted time you can in between other things - and writing in a way which allows the disruptions in and lets them influence our writing and our theology. And, as ever, it's messy, it's not an either/or choice, and there are all sorts of ambiguities involved. I think if I wanted to look for an image to sum it up, it's the difference between writing theology in the kitchen, and writing theology which acknowledges and draws on the experience of being in the kitchen as a theological resource and a valid lens through which to approach God.

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