

# EMBRACING NEW PERSPECTIVES CAN LEAD TO TRANSFORMATION

**H**ave you ever experienced a moment when firmly held beliefs were challenged, and you saw the world through a different lens? In theology, this transformation is known as a “hermeneutic of experience.” It involves gaining new insights that allow us to interpret our experiences in a more accurate way. Theologian Bernard Cooke describes a hermeneutic of experience in his seminal book *Sacraments and Sacramentality* as “a set of principles, insights and critical judgments that equips us to interpret our experience in a more accurate and more profound way.”<sup>1</sup> For Cooke, we encounter not only ourselves and other people through our experiences, but more importantly, we encounter the divine.



**NATHANIEL  
BLANTON  
HIBNER**

Through these real-world experiences, we better understand our reality as well as the Holy Spirit’s involvement within it. Experiences — much like the official sacraments of the Church — reveal to us God’s participation in our world. As ministers of Christ’s healing presence today, we can learn not only from Jesus’ example in scripture, but just as importantly, we can learn through the experiences of healers through the centuries. By reflecting on the encounters of those who work in health care, we gain better insight into the extraordinary work of the healing ministry.

## SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

The transformative power of a hermeneutical experience can be better explained through two real-life stories that highlight how individuals’ perspectives can evolve over time.

During a conversation over coffee, a friend shared an experience from his practice as an oncologist. He narrated the story of a once-prominent business leader and philanthropist who had been battling cancer for several months. Initially, the patient demanded aggressive treatments, hoping for a cure. However, as medical interventions

failed repeatedly, frustration and anger began to fill the patient’s heart. Soon, there were no more treatments to be tried. As days progressed, the patient began valuing different aspects of life, such as time with family and telling stories to his grandchildren. This shift in mindset, which my friend had witnessed in other patients as well, revealed a deeper realization: that success was not solely measured by worldly possessions. This shift demonstrates a hermeneutic shift.

After the conversation with my friend, I went back through articles which I return to often. One is written by Ann Naffziger about working in a parish ministry in Oregon in the 1990s. She describes an experience she had while shopping for groceries with a Latina mother and her baby in her article in *America: The Jesuit Review* magazine:

“As I sat on the bench outside the Safeway store holding close the dark-haired, dark-skinned baby boy, I was conscious of the long stares I was receiving, the questioning looks of incomprehension shot at me by the mostly Anglo shoppers. What was I, a young white woman, doing rocking and cooing to this Hispanic boy and playing with his two-year-old sister next to us, their mother and father nowhere to be seen?”<sup>2</sup>

Initially, Naffziger never envisioned working with undocumented immigrants, despite her fa-

ther's legal career providing pro bono assistance to immigrants and asylum seekers. As a child, she experienced a sense of unease toward the people her father helped, feeling that their route was unfair to those who followed legal immigration processes. However, when Naffziger began her ministry work in Oregon, her perspective on immigration took an unexpected turn. The mother in the story was a client of Naffziger, who, like the hundreds before, helped change the way she viewed immigration and those who crossed our borders to seek a better life.

Encountering undocumented immigrants in her role as coordinator of the emergency assistance office at her parish — which offered community members help to meet basic needs — opened Naffziger's eyes to their hardships and struggles, transforming her initial feelings of unease into empathy and gratitude. These individuals became her teachers, helping her recognize the goodness and generosity that could emerge from even the most challenging circumstances. Her hermeneutic of experience shifted from judgment to love, as she discovered the potential for transformation and growth that existed within herself.

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Naffziger's evolving perspective led her to reflect on the biblical notion of helping "aliens," re-framing the term "alien" to encompass the shared experience of being strangers in a foreign land. This reinterpretation helped her embrace a more inclusive and compassionate outlook on immigration issues. The once-unsettling word "alien" now symbolized the commonality that binds all human beings, our ability to transcend borders and to overcome differences.

#### **UNLOCKING PERSONAL GROWTH**

The power of a hermeneutic of experience lies in its ability to shape and reshape our worldview. Both the oncology patient's journey and Naffziger's transformation serve as reminders that encountering diverse experiences can lead to profound personal growth. As we become more open to understanding the perspectives of others, we gain a deeper appreciation for the diversity and interconnectedness of humanity.

Embracing a hermeneutic of experience that values our journey through life will reveal to us a better understanding of who we are and how we participate in God's creation. Beyond the truths uncovered in the great works of theology and philosophy, Cooke and these stories remind us that God became human. In knowing the human experience more deeply, we can also know God more deeply.

As we continue to work in the ministry of health care, we are invited to pause, reflect and discern on the experiences we have each day. What happened today that might expand our own knowledge? What encounters this week revealed something new? It is in these questions that we can grow and become closer to our Creator.

**NATHANIEL BLANTON HIBNER, PhD**, is senior director, ethics, for the Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

#### **NOTES**

1. Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994), 33.
2. Ann Naffziger, "Transforming Work," *America: The Jesuit Review*, June 21, 1997.

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