Resonances between
Arthur’s Call and Entry Point
I read the first book Frances Young wrote about her life with Arthur (Face to Face, 1985) long before child theology (CT) was invented, and I was deeply moved and instructed by it.

By the time Arthur’s Call appeared in 2014, 10 years’ work on Entry Point had filled my mind with child theology. I was by then equipped to see CT when it was coming at me in disguise. I value the resonance I pick up between Arthur’s Call and Entry Point. It is enriching, stimulating and encouraging. Resonance does not imply close similarity, and certainly not identity or perfect agreement. Resonance opens up new thinking rather than thickens opinion into ideology.

Entry Point is intentionally an essay “towards child theology”. Frances Young had no engagement with child theology, as it had grown up from 2001 and as it came to be presented in Entry Point and the Child Theology Movement (CTM) generally. Her book is about “a journey of faith in the face of severe learning difficulty”. Yet I could not read it without seeing that, through telling how she has lived as a thoughtful Christian theologian with her son Arthur, significant aspects of CT are expressed without that label. Her work helps CT because it deploys the learning, sensitivity and vision of a major theological scholar. It unintentionally brings to the CTM something it has always desired and found too little: the engagement of good academic theology.

More than that, it does not speak in terms of the generic “child”, which always runs the risk of being abstract, but rather in narrative and reflective ways of Arthur, one living person in significant relationships. It can therefore be read, if one has the eyes and desire, as an essay of lived child theology. All that CT can say, when it is faced with this book, is that it finds itself rooted and growing in life. It is not voiced as a theory, but comes out through the story. Unless theology lives in that way, unless its thinking is salt in the sea of action, it is dead and deadly.

Arthur is Frances’s first child, born in 1967. He was profoundly disabled from birth, cannot talk or do anything for himself. Frances and her husband, Bob, cared for Arthur themselves until he was 45, and his parents were in their seventies. Since then, he has been in nearby residential care.

Here I find the first resonance with CT. Jesus said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.”1 In Entry Point, chapter six explores the meaning of reception. Arthur is a massive example of reception. Receiving a person cannot be time-limited. All babies need to be received if they are to survive and thrive: some may go on needing the kind of reception babies get when they are much older; Arthur will never get beyond it. A parent is a person who becomes committed to a life of receiving particular others for as long as it is needed. What the receiver does will change over time. Reception needs to be age-appropriate, but into old age it is necessary to life. Reception often becomes reciprocal and mutual, between parents and older children. With Arthur, that change to interpersonal reciprocity was not possible.

Reception exposes us to depths of challenge and vulnerability. Here we find a second resonance with CT as presented in Entry Point.

Frances writes:

Loving my baby, I thought I’d accepted him. But at a deeper level acceptance was hampered by the fact that I simply couldn’t understand what had happened. It wasn’t just Arthur. He focused my perception of the much bigger problem. If this world was created by the loving purposes of God, how could this sort of thing happen at all? If God intended people to grow to maturity in faith and love, how about those incapable of doing so?

It was one thing to accept Arthur; it was another to come to terms with the great iceberg of suffering and tragedy he represented. This seemed to resist all attempts at justification. The problem of believing in a good God in the face of the tragedy and evil of the world was posed in a sharper way than before.

Frances, in consequence, spent several years in the wilderness, as she calls it. Through it all she cared faithfully for Arthur. So she can say,

The tragedy was not so much Arthur as my sense of abandonment, my inability to accept the existence and love of God at those deeper levels where it makes a real difference to one’s life.... my experience

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2 Matt. 18:5 and Mark 9:37 (ESV).
was of an internal blank where God should’ve been. I had no hope for the future. Despair was lodged deep down inside…  

It took years before she began to climb out of her black hole with the help of friends and theological experiences of various kinds. *Face to Face* was written at the time when the light was only just beginning to shine for her. It is not surprising that it is subtitled *A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering.*

Her story thus began with desolation and the problem of theodicy. That topic too is important for *Entry Point,* but it appears in the final chapter. That is partly because the book is shaped by the text of Matthew 18, and the tragedy of evil appears in vv 6–10. We concentrated on v 10: “Do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you their angels always behold the face of my Father in heaven.” We are confronted with the despising of little ones, which is not just the abuse of children, or the scorn of superior people for the underclasses. Human beings, we suggest, are despised through their vulnerability to the impersonal world we exist in, by its indifference to the value and fate of persons. The breadth and depth of despising is symbolised in actuality by death, which operates unfairly, wastefully, universally.

Under the pressure of this despising, we look for hope and salvation. If God is, it should not be like this. Since God is, why is it not different? The text says, we should not despise, or give way to despising, because the representatives of the despised ones always see the face of the Father. God does not despise: God is for them. That is offered as comfort, but the question nags at us: what good is it that, while we are treated like rubbish on earth, our angels see the face of the Father? We need action now, not a referral higher up the ladder of irresponsibility, which is often all that the despised get from earthly rule.

Here we are confronted by more than the intellectual weakness of theodicy. We are confronted by the problem of the distance and inaction of God and by the challenge of letting God deal with it in his own way. It is not surprising that some people are impatient with God and choose to do without God. It is painful to live with God, to wait for God.

What alternative is there? Frances says, “The only answer, the only thing that makes it possible to believe in God at all, is the cross.” In the end, Jesus didn’t wait away the darkness of the world, all its sin and suffering and hurt and evil, with a magic wand. He entered right into it, took it upon himself, bore it, and in the process turned it into glory, transformed it.

“CT… sees the child placed in the midst of the disciples discussing a theological question, in order to help them to be on the way to enter the Kingdom of God. So the child placed by Jesus and received in the name of Jesus gives access to the deepest truths of Christianity.”

In her book, Frances shows how living with Arthur has done that for her. Arthur did more than force her to go through the wilderness and only find rescue from it in the way of the cross which is transformed in glory. He did more than commit her to a lifetime of caring, observing, speaking and acting for him. She did indeed speak for him, as he needed, but she was also listening to him. What was to be heard through listening to Arthur? If there was anything to be heard here, how is it spoken and what is being asked of the
hearer, if he would truly hear? Arthur can say nothing audible or intelligible, yet he is “telling the glory of God” as do the heavens. That telling is without speech or language, yet with a voice to be heard through all the earth. If Arthur has a message, it presents itself to us in a strange, alien, tongue. It is not heard if it is left alone, in itself. It calls for and depends on interpretation. Arthur has his interpreter in Frances, and only so has he an understandable word for us. He speaks because he is given voice by another and can do so out of her listening and learning.

An interpreter in this sort of situation does not displace the Strange Speaker. An interpreter is not an expert who distils what is essential in the original raw material to pass on the useful intelligible bits. And even more, he is not one who corrects and improves on the original. It does not get lost in or superseded by the translation. Rather, the original is encountered in its irreplaceable integrity, in its solitary peculiarity. The interpretation. Rather, the original is encountered in its irreplaceable integrity, in its solitary peculiarity. The interpreter serves to place us in the presence of God in the reality of the mysteriousness, not to spare us fear and trembling.

One aspect of Arthur’s Call, simply as a literary achievement, is that it does not use Arthur to write another mother’s story, although the mother’s living is indispensable to it. The interpreter is not to get in the way of what is there, calling out for interpretation, but to serve it. So long as we keep it in proportion, it is right to read this book looking to learn something about the ministry of the interpreter as well as learning to hear what Arthur, in his own way, is saying. When Jesus placed a child in the midst of the disciples, he pushed them out of the central place of “greatness” they were seeking and rather required them to become apprentice interpreters of a sign that was not obviously intelligible. The child in the Gospel story did not speak for herself – as Entry Point says, she is not the model twenty-first-century western child. Rather she is a reminder that we all, as human beings, are always dependent on and vulnerable to interpretation. We are interpreted by parents and educators, experts and exploiters, friends and enemies, sensitive and insensitive, constructive and malicious people. We are located in social and cultural situations (the “powers”) that prescribe interpretations, fit us into stereotypes and make us want to flee into the desert, paying drastic costs simply to be ourselves. And finally, fundamentally, we human beings are created, judged and recreated by God, whose judgement is more than inquisitorial assessment of good and evil deeds. Rather it is God’s decision and action about what and who we are and shall be, a judgement for us already declared in Jesus Christ and to be fully revealed at the last.

So the book has the title Arthur’s Call. It affirms and argues that Arthur has a vocation, which is akin to the one given to Frances as both a Christian minister and a theologian. But he carries out his ministry in his own way. What then does he say that we can hear? What is the “privileged access to the deepest truths of Christianity” that Arthur enables?

“Arthur’s vocation” is summed up in the final chapter. Too much is lost in any summary: it needs to be read, in the light of Arthur’s story. I will report the headings, but only as a pressing invitation to read and ponder the chapter.

Receive Arthur as a prophetic sign, pointing beyond himself. Each of his five fingers point to “various aspects of human existence and its meaning”:

- Pointing to “truly human values”, away from competitive independence, towards mutuality in needing and asking for help;
- pointing the way to the desert for us, because we meet the desert in his being: there we meet God, in truth and solitude; there inner demons can be cast out as they are exposed;
- indicating the presence of Christ and the imaging of God: “there are aspects of the Body of Christ which can only be properly represented if persons with profound disabilities are incorporated into the Church’s life”;
- pointing to the Beyond: “a life with sound but no word” reminds us that worship goes beyond words;
- pointing to the mystery of grace: that Arthur receives grace is not only to be believed but can be seen in his participation in church and in life. But how it is received and what it is for him is beyond us to know. The mystery of it is essential truth for all of us: we “can invest too much in what we are conscious of”, “Arthur reminds us that often we may well receive grace without being fully aware of the fact, and there is much more to receive than we can know.”

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8 Cf. Ps. 19:3–4 (NRSV).
9 I Cor 14:5, 13, 27–29.
11 Arthur’s Call, 142–158.
“More to receive”: here is a final resonance, for Jesus said, there is the Kingdom of God to be entered, beyond all the greatness we can imagine or grasp, but only when we humble ourselves and turn into the way signed by the receiving of a child. “Just to be is to respond to the One who made us, redeems us, loves us. Arthur calls us to that humbling awareness. Thanks be to God.”

Professor Haddon Willmer taught theology at the University of Leeds for over 30 years. After retiring, he supervised doctoral students at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, was a trustee of Pace (Parents Against Child Sexual Exploitation) and of the Child Theology Movement, wrote Entry Point with Keith White, and started painting again. He has special interests in politics and forgiveness, and in Barth and Bonhoeffer and other theologians who think from the heart of the gospel to the realities of the world and vice versa. He admires and loves Hilary, who has been a creative social activist in Leeds for decades, and together they have three children and eight grandchildren.

12 Ibid., 158.