

# Paul Tillich and the Pedagogy of Courage



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By

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	vii
Chapter One.....	1
Why Tillich?: A Personal Journey	
Chapter Two .....	9
Early Life and Education	
Chapter Three .....	21
The Boundaries of Paul Tillich	
Chapter Four .....	37
Tillich on Education	
Chapter Five .....	51
<i>The Courage to Be</i>	
Chapter Six .....	61
The Courage to Teach	
Chapter Seven.....	79
The Pedagogy of Courage	
Epilogue.....	95
References .....	97



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

After struggling for over a decade with my first book, *William James and the Birth of Modern Teaching*, this latest volume came together rather quickly. It began with some general notes and the reading of *The Courage to Be* during the summer of 2016, but remained in an amorphous state until June 2019. Once the decision was made to go forward, it came together in a little more than a year.

I am grateful to so many for their assistance and support in my writing of this book.

First of all, I wish to thank my sister and my brother in law, Susan and Richard Conklin. As she did with the William James book, Susan again lent her artistic skills to the cover image. Initially I charged her with the creation of an abstract painting representing Tillich's themes: Boundary, Eternity, Frontier, Abyss, etc. When she painted a picture of a lightning strike in our local waters. The photo itself is derived from a video taken by her husband, Rick Conklin (who also took the author photo on the back cover). It seemed to get right to the point. Tillich loved the sea, first contemplated eternity on the shores of the Baltic, and strolled the beaches not far from where this strike took place. Something about it just seemed to work. Thank you both. I love you.

I am also grateful to my colleagues and students at St. Joseph's College who unknowingly and with great patience assisted in helping me formulate my thoughts on the educational implications of Paul Tillich. Often the ideas expressed in this book were initially tried out in classrooms and in conversations.

Finally, I must thank the most important people in my life: my wife Jennifer and my children Kristopher, Scott and Kate for their patience and support throughout the several years of this project. As was the case with William James, Paul Tillich muscled his way into our family over the past few years, creating an additional presence in our home. If nothing else, I know how irritating my reminders of "this is the road where Paul Tillich lived" could be each time we drove down Woods Lane in East Hampton. I could not have written this book without you and I love you all.





## CHAPTER ONE

### WHY TILLICH?: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

*On a mid-September afternoon in 1933, a middle-aged man stepped onto a Berlin street. A Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Frankfurt, he had, in the past several years, witnessed the rise of National Socialism and personally detested everything for which it stood. Perhaps out of naiveté, perhaps out of concern for endangering his career, and certainly out of a desire to avoid politics while he focused on religious and philosophical questions, he had not consistently spoken out against the Nazis in the early days. But he had recently become a vocal supporter of his Jewish colleagues and students, and his recent book, "The Socialist Decision," had denounced Nazism once and for all. As a result, he was labeled an enemy of the state, and had been suspended from his job in April. Although his friends and his wife had been urging him to escape Germany for months, he had held out hope that Nazism would pass and that he would soon be reinstated. To date, he had heard nothing.*

*Having received an offer to emigrate to America and teach at some of its finest universities, he had come to Berlin to plead his case one last time and establish whether or not he should continue to hope for reinstatement. The building from which he had just emerged was the Ministry of Culture. During the meeting, he had made clear his opposition to, among other things, Nazi policies regarding Jews. Finally, the director advised the man that, although his case was not particularly serious, he should accept the teaching position in America and that he should plan to stay out of Germany for at least two years. The director also recommended that the man soften the political and social rhetoric of his works.*

*Upon stepping out of the building, the man might have paused to collect his thoughts, to breathe in the late-summer air, to adjust his horned-rimmed glasses. Such a pause would have given a curious passerby an opportunity to take stock of him. He was forty-seven years old. He was of average height and build. His head was large, his high forehead topped with bushy hair. He did not particularly stand out. One might say “there was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him, nor appearance that would attract us to him.”<sup>1</sup>*

*He certainly would have had mixed emotions as he started to walk down the street. Perhaps he experienced a sense of resignation, a sense of purpose, a sense of trepidation. His wife and a long-time friend were waiting for him at a nearby café. Before reaching them, he stopped into another building: That of Norddeutscher Lloyd, a German shipping company, emerging a few moments later with tickets to America. In spite of his hopes that all might be resolved, he had reserved them some time earlier.*

*Upon arriving at the café, he tossed the tickets onto the table without saying a word. His wife, Hannah, was so overcome with relief that she grabbed her purse and hailed a nearby taxi.*

*“Do you have children?” she asked the driver.*

*When he nodded his reply, she grabbed the bills in her purse and stuffed them into his hand.*

*“Buy them something with this!” she cried, “my husband’s life has just been saved” (May 1973, 11).*

*Her husband, Paul Tillich, was coming to America. Years later, he would reflect on the early days of the Nazi regime. “I stood,” he remembered, “before an abyss” (Tillich in Pauck and Pauch 1976, 131).*

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 53:2.

Paul Tillich was one of the great theologians and philosophers of the twentieth century. He likely would have dismissed such as description, not because of a sense of modesty, although it might have been partly that. Rather, he saw at least part of his life as belonging to the nineteenth century, not the twentieth. Indeed, he was born at a time and place that still clung to its medieval past. After all, the Holy Roman Empire had collapsed a mere eighty years earlier. In fact, all but one of his grandparents would live until 1900 thus providing living links not only to the Holy Roman Empire, but to the Germany of Goethe and to the Napoleonic wars. Likewise, when he was five years old, his father was made superintendent of the Lutheran parish at Schonfliess, and the family moved to this town some 116 miles from that of Paul Tillich's birth. With its cobblestone streets, its horse market, and its old religious and municipal buildings, Schonfliess at the time could only have been described as "medieval." For the rest of his life, there would always be a longing for nineteenth century stability and simplicity.

Tillich died in 1965 at the age of seventy-nine. He was not terribly old by today's standards, perhaps, but when one considers the events to which he bore witness, his lifespan becomes quite impressive. Born before the advent of the automobile, he lived to see the launch of Sputnik, the Mercury and Gemini programs, and the dawn of the nuclear age. One of the key events in his early life was the First World War in which he served the German army as a Chaplain. He survived that war, and his early works grew out of the optimistic and creative zeitgeist that emerged in its wake. Before he turned sixty years of age, he had survived the Second World War as well. His later work, therefore, might be seen as a reaction to the pessimism and anxiety triggered by that conflict's atrocities and by technological advancements capable of extinguishing life on this planet.

One marvels at other advancements he lived to see as well. He was born fewer than three weeks after the death of Franz Liszt, and his early years overlapped with such notable nineteenth century composers as Johannes Brahms and Johann Strauss the Younger. He died after the rise of Elvis Presley, the Beatles' appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show, and the release of John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. Born during the lifetimes of Vincent van Gogh and Claude Monet, he would live to see the abstract expressionism of Willem de Kooning and Tillich's fellow East Hampton, NY resident Jackson Pollock.<sup>2</sup> In his work, there is something of a man yearning for a past that can no longer be recovered while traveling toward

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<sup>2</sup> De Kooning would also live in East Hampton, but arrived there after Tillich's death.

an unknown and, indeed, unknowable future; fearing death, but with the knowledge that death is what brings life to life.

I was slow to come to the work of Paul Tillich. In my early years, I more or less avoided him, proud to have one or two volumes of his books on my shelf, but making no effort to open them. There were several reasons why I avoided his work in my younger years, in none of which I take any pride. The simplest is that I am a psychologist while Tillich was a philosopher and theologian. In the American psychology of the latter twentieth century, during which I came of age, I found that there was often little room for “extra-disciplinary” reading and study. By the time I entered my undergraduate years and certainly by the time of my graduate study, the rift between psychology and philosophy finally had become complete. With the establishment of strict rules of specialization related to oversight by accrediting bodies, there was little room for non-psychological work in American college and university psychology programs. Anything that I picked up outside of my chosen field of study would have to be pursued by myself on my own time.

Fortunately, as an undergraduate, I had attended a school steeped in the liberal arts. Thus, I had at least some exposure to Tillich and his thought. But his work was daunting—an often impenetrable haze of abstract words and concepts. I will admit it; Tillich was difficult, and as I came to know him a bit better, I avoided him in large part on those grounds alone.

In addition to the difficulty of fitting Tillich into my professional training, there was another reason for my avoidance. I was born, raised, and remain to this day a Roman Catholic. Although I came of age during a more ecumenical time than did my parents, there was still a nagging, although never explicit, sense that reading too deeply into the works of a Protestant theologian might lead me into “error”. It took some time for me to overcome this prejudice, and to distinguish as much as possible between Tillich’s theology and his philosophy. Once I began to make that distinction, I found it much easier to proceed.<sup>3</sup>

Indirectly, one of the factors that brought me closer to Tillich was the work of psychologist Rollo May. May had studied with Tillich at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and there was a clear sense of mutual

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<sup>3</sup> I was helped in this regard by the discovery in my early twenties of C. S. Lewis. Lewis’s focus on “mere Christianity” helped me more clearly see the commonalities between faiths.

admiration between teacher and pupil. May's book *The Meaning of Anxiety*, would inspire Tillich's continuing reflection of the existential anxiety that all people confront in their lives. This reflection would ultimately result in Tillich's *The Courage to Be*. May himself would continue this mutual influence by titling his 1975 book *The Courage to Create*. Being and creativity were not mutually exclusive to May who wrote in the preface "[w]e express our being by creating. Creativity is a necessary sequel to being" (May 1975, viii). Having found a psychologist who could unabashedly speak of philosophical concepts, for the first time, I found myself better able to reconcile philosophy with my vocation. If I was still somewhat hesitant, the first barrier had been removed. A psychologist in the late twentieth century could, at least, read philosophy without shame or fear.

In the last few years, however, I found myself becoming more interested in existential topics-particularly as they applied to educational philosophy. As this interest grew, I felt it was a topic to broach in writing. In spite of my reluctance to approach Tillich, I enjoyed other existentialist writers. I have read Camus' *The Stranger* several times over the years and his short story "The Guest" is required reading in some of my education classes. Likewise, I have read Sartre's *No Exit* and "The Wall" multiple times each. Yet while I found these authors to be helpful and enjoyable in a general way, I was put off somewhat by their atheism. Living in a country such as the United States, where it is not uncommon for people to define themselves (at least outwardly) by their faiths, I felt that my audience, be they parents, teachers, students or other readers, might disconnect if they noticed atheism creeping into their education. Camus's and Sartre's views of freedom are helpful, but if the audience is repelled, they will reject the rest of the message.

I turned then to Kierkegaard, an avowed Christian and existentialist writer, but this too was a dead end for me. Since my undergraduate days, I have loved Kierkegaard's ideas when presented by another author or speaker, but as a writer, he lies completely outside of my sympathies.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps one day I will find a translation that will finally provide the key to the Great Dane.

As I struggled with this, I finally turned to Tillich. Still hesitant, I took *The Courage to Be* from its place on my shelf, and began reading. After

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<sup>4</sup> I am embarrassed to admit that for many years, I have occasionally read "The Sickness Unto Death" on nights when I have trouble sleeping-I don't believe I have ever made it past page six.

some initial confusion over his terms and his style, I slowly began to grasp the fringes of his writing. I read more by and about him: sermons, essays, biographies, memoirs, and so forth. As I did so, certain words and concepts kept emerging—perhaps not so much from the surface content of his formal writings, but from his descriptions of his own experiences and from the memories of those who knew him well. The words that struck me most forcefully were “boundary”, “borderline”, “frontier”, “abyss” and “void”. These words, while not necessarily being of central importance to his philosophy and theology, nonetheless were crucial for understanding the source of that philosophy and theology.

It took time, but as I reflected, and as I continued to consider these concepts, a picture began to emerge. Tillich’s experiences of the borderline reflected, in some significant way, the boundaries navigated by educators and students. These boundaries may differ from person to person, from location to location, but whatever they may be, they must be navigated in an authentic way. To exist on the boundary is not to play things safe, to sit on the fence, to avoid taking sides. Rather it is to courageously confront those boundaries, taking criticisms from all sides always with the knowledge that our convictions and decisions might be wrong. How well the students and teachers navigate these boundary situations may well play a role in their mental health, their experiences of anxiety, how effectively they teach and learn, whether they turn to maladaptive means of coping with these anxieties, and whether they will live a life truly worth living.

In this book, I endeavor to examine Tillich’s experiences of the boundaries, how these experiences might be experienced in modern education, and how these boundary situations might be confronted. I do not intend to provide a summary of Tillich’s philosophy or his theology. In fact, his theological perspectives will not be described in an overtly religious way. If Tillich longed for a day when religion and culture might be unified, it seems clear that such a time has not yet come. Yet, while I intend to leave the reader to his or her own faith or lack thereof, there are certain concepts and terms that are unavoidably religious and specifically Christian. I do not wish to proselytize, and I trust the reader to see these concepts in a broader context—religious, if one chooses, but also secular.<sup>5</sup>

There can be, I think, a temptation to psychoanalyze Tillich’s life events. The early death of his mother and the authoritarian tendencies of his father, and his marriage to and divorce from his first wife, “Grethi”,

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<sup>5</sup> I suspect, however, that this approach would not be to Tillich’s liking.

certainly could provide grist for a Freudian mill. These events, however, have little to do with this book's purpose. Therefore, I will not deliberately pursue these aspects of Tillich's life at any length. The events I describe in regards to Tillich's life will serve as examples of the boundary situations he navigated. Whether these events caused his later experiences, whether they became habits into which he fell, or whether they simply inoculated him for life in a world full of boundaries is, finally, beside the point. There is simply the world as Paul Tillich experienced it.

Once we finally reach the application chapter of this book, I will provide examples of existential questions and anxieties I have either experienced or observed in my students, along with what I believe to be modern education's failure to address them. The examples are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather may be used as springboards from which others might reflect on their own boundaries. In the final chapter, Rollo May will emerge as providing some direction in applying Tillich's ideas in a therapeutic setting. Although the focus will shift to May, Tillich will remain lurking behind May's ideas. From there, we will reinterpret May's application to therapy in an educational context.

Finally, as I mentioned above, this is not a philosophical or theological work. Rather, it is an attempt to formulate an approach to modern education using Tillich's work as a guide. I have interpreted Tillich in a way that makes sense to me in an educational context. Whether or not these interpretations are "correct" philosophically or theologically is not important. Others will, no doubt, make other interpretations and develop different approaches from them.

If I have one hope, it is that the writings here might open the door to Paul Tillich so that those who, like myself, are in a state of either ignorance or reluctance might come to probe the frontiers of his life and work. In so doing, we may well find a man whose life, sermons, books and essays provide a sympathetic comfort to modern educators and students.





## CHAPTER TWO

### EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

#### Early Life: Starzeddel

It may be said that Paul Tillich struggled with existential crises for his entire life. He was born at 12:30 am on August 20, 1886 in the then Prussian Village of Starzeddel<sup>6</sup>. Complications arose, and his first hours saw him teetering between life and death. Three times that night his parents gave up hope that he would survive, and three times the infant rallied. From his first moments, he experienced a boundary situation-particularly the boundary between life and death.<sup>7</sup> This experience of the life-death struggle would continue throughout his life. The anxiety of death would be a near constant companion.<sup>8</sup>

He survived this infant crisis, of course, and was baptized by his father, Johannes, the local Lutheran minister. His family history can be traced back as far as the thirteenth century, and is notable for the number of talented people it produced. There were, according to Pauck and Pauck (1976/2015) “musicians and manufacturers as well as monks and ministers” (3). At least some of these monks belonged to pre-reformation religious communities.<sup>9</sup> Many of Tillich’s ancestors were skilled in more than one activity. Johannes, for instance, was a gifted pianist, composer and lyric-writer.

Tillich’s mother was an important figure in his life, and Tillich adored her. She exuded a peaceful calm, but was, according to May (1973) “the power behind the [family] throne” (37), often being the more inflexible

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<sup>6</sup> Now Starosiedle, Poland.

<sup>7</sup> Coincidentally, and on a less severe level, his birth shortly after midnight forced him to experience the boundary between one day and another. Later in life, Tillich would find the hours between 11pm and 1am to be the most inspiring and productive of his day.

<sup>8</sup> As indicated earlier, the temptation to psychoanalyze Tillich is considerable.

<sup>9</sup> His father, in fact, was the family’s first Lutheran minister.

parent (Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015). Little is remembered of her, however, as she died when Tillich was just seventeen years old.<sup>10</sup>

His father lived until 1937, although Tillich would never see him again after the son's flight from Germany in 1933. In his early years, there was great love for, respect for, and occasional fear of the father by the son. Tillich described him as "conscientious, very dignified completely convinced" (May 1973, 77) and remembered the philosophical discussions between himself and Johannes as among his happiest moments. There were also moments of jealousy-such as when Paul received an honorary degree before his father did-and there seemed to be a certain competition between them. But there was also love, and Tillich would forever cherish his memories of Johannes (May 1973).

Tillich's birth meant that part of his life "belonged to the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (Tillich 1967, 23). By belonging to that century, he remembered a relatively peaceful early life-the storm and stress surrounding his birth notwithstanding. This peace existed alongside revolutionary impulses, spiritual disintegration, aesthetic ugliness and a Christian Humanism that rebelled against the "inhuman systems of the twentieth century" (24). Throughout his life he would long for that stability in spite of the coexisting radicalism.

At age six, Paul Tillich entered a grammar school not far from his father's church. Here he would receive his earliest formal religious study and, according to Pauck and Pauck (1976/2015), many of his later preoccupations began to emerge at this time. Yet Tillich said very little about his early childhood education. His earliest religious and philosophical contemplations came from his extracurricular activities. At age eight, for instance, he had one of his earliest experiences of the infinite as he stood on the shoreline of the Baltic Sea while vacationing with his family.<sup>11</sup> As might be expected of a minister's son, religion was woven into the very fabric of Tillich's life, but there were other experiences as well. An early, close friend, Eckert von Sydow, would teach him to play chess and introduce him

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<sup>10</sup> May (1973) analyzes Tillich's relationship with his mother in the context of his later life and loves-interesting and even provocative, to be sure, but well beyond this book's scope.

<sup>11</sup> The sea would always be a source of inspiration and contemplation for him. After coming to America he would eventually purchase a home in East Hampton, NY no more than a mile from the Atlantic Ocean.

to the works of both Freud and Darwin.<sup>12</sup> But in terms of how his early school experiences played a role in his development, Tillich is, essentially, silent.

### **Gymnasium: Königsberg**

From 1898 to 1901, Tillich attended a “humanistic” gymnasium in Königsberg where, as preparation for his university career, he began to study Latin and Greek in earnest. In 1901, the family relocated to Berlin and his studies continued at the Friedrich Wilhelm Gymnasium. Again, he recorded very little about his time there. One might assume that his silence was a result of several factors, including his move from city to city, his move from school to school, and his relatively unspectacular academic performance. He says little about his friends and activities, but he seems to have relished his Latin and Greek training. Later he would take great pride in how well he mastered these languages (Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015, 10). His adolescence seems to have been full of the emotional tumult common at that age, and Tillich developed an imaginary world into which he would retreat. He found himself identifying with literary characters, notably Hamlet, and it is here that we see how he was distinguished from other, more typical, adolescents: his inner, romantic imagination would, eventually, evolve into a philosophical one (Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015, 11).

His tendency toward philosophy was strengthened during his final year at gymnasium where he was introduced to the works of Kant, Schwegler and Fichte. Through reading the works of these authors and through his discussions with his father, he developed the philosophical skills that would later serve him so well. In spite of a career and life trajectory that was moving him toward the ministry, a strong desire to become a philosopher had also gripped him.

### **University and Doctoral Study: Berlin, Halle**

In 1904, he began his studies at the University of Berlin where he found himself given great freedom to pursue the specialization of his choosing. As a result, he found himself studying not only at Berlin, but also for one semester at the University of Tübingen and for two entire years at the University of Halle. He studied at Halle beginning in the winter term of

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<sup>12</sup> It was von Sydow who was accompanying Hannah Tillich at the café when Paul made up his mind to leave Germany.

1905. It was here that Tillich encountered two of his most influential teachers: Martin Kaehler and Fritz Medicus. Kaehler was a professor of theology who, according to Tillich, “in his personality and theology combined traditions of Renaissance Humanism and German Classicism with a profound understanding of the Reformation and with strong elements of the religious awakening of the middle of the nineteenth century” (Tillich, 1948, xiii). Kaehler was often dismissed by historians of theology as simply a “theologian of mediation” (Tillich 1943, 11). But Tillich defended him on the grounds that “*the task of theology is mediation*”—between eternal truths and individuals’ ever-changing experiences. Medicus was a philosopher who, in addition to stimulating Tillich’s interests in German idealism, would also remain a good friend and supporter of Tillich until his own death in 1956.

He attended the University of Halle in 1905, a school where a pietistic tradition existed alongside a rationalistic one. Once again, Tillich found himself on a boundary. From his earliest days, Tillich believed in a mystical relationship and participation with nature. He attributed this to his communication with nature, the impact of poetry on his life and his Lutheran upbringing which caused him to believe that “the finite is capable of the infinite and consequently that in Christ there is a mutual in-dwelling of two natures” (26). It comes as no surprise, then, that one of his favorite pastimes during these years was exploring the surrounding countryside, and he often seemed more focused on his walks about the local woods and hills than on his class work. He spent hours among the flowers and sites of the natural world. He did so not as a natural scientist, but rather as a contemplative.<sup>13</sup> Tillich knew the names of the mountains and trees, but never pursued his knowledge of them beyond that. While the sea, to him, represented the border between finite and infinite, “his emotional life was interwoven with landscapes, earth, weather, fields of grain, forms of clouds and sound of wind, the smell of flowers in spring and potato plants in the fall, the silence of the woods” (Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015, 17). Throughout it all, however, the death of his mother and its resulting melancholy hung over him.

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<sup>13</sup> It is this sense of the contemplative life that kept him from thoroughly enjoying the works of Goethe, whom Tillich found to be too scientific in his thinking. That is, Goethe was not sufficiently on the boundary.

## Doctoral Study and The World War

During October 1907, Tillich returned to Berlin where he completed his coursework, began preparing for his ministerial examinations,<sup>14</sup> and began taking courses toward his doctorate (Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015, 28). He put these plans on hold temporarily to become a pastoral assistant at Lichtenrade, a town some fifteen miles from Berlin (Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015, 29). In addition to reading and writing about Schelling,<sup>15</sup> he met many friends, and perhaps more importantly for our purposes, began teaching young boys at the parish schools. Although he found the children rambunctious, he was playful with them and this, ultimately, led to his success.<sup>16</sup>

It was customary for German doctoral students of the time to work independently and submit their dissertation to a professor. The professor would examine the paper and, if he approved it, would pass on a recommendation to the faculty. Tillich submitted one dissertation paper to the University of Breslau and was granted a Doctorate in Philosophy. This degree enabled him to take a university position in philosophy. He submitted a second dissertation to the University of Halle. Based upon this work and his passing of his final Licentiate of Theology in 1912, he was now qualified to teach both philosophy and theology at the university level (Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015).

Later that year, he was ordained and took a position as an assistant preacher in Berlin, a position he would hold for two years, but in reality, he had decided that a professorship was the career for him. As such, he began the three-year process of application to join the University of Halle's faculty.<sup>17</sup> Shortly thereafter, he met the woman who would become his first wife, Margarethe Karla Mathilde Katherine Maria Weaver, also known as "Grethi". They were engaged in January 1914 and married on September 28. In between, of course, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated and Europe was driven into the bloodiest war it had ever seen. Three days after

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<sup>14</sup> Passing the first of these would advance him to candidacy while passing the second would allow him to be ordained.

<sup>15</sup> He had decided to write his dissertation on "Mysticism and Guilt Consciousness in Schelling's Philosophical Development".

<sup>16</sup> He even went so far as to purchase firecrackers for them to set off on special holidays.

<sup>17</sup> To do so, he was required to write a qualifying thesis. This he wrote in his spare time.

the wedding, Tillich volunteered for service. He was made Chaplain of the Fourth Artillery Regiment of the Seventh Reserve Division, and sent to the Western Front. His early church services were held under fire, and he was awarded the Iron Cross during the first week of December 1914.

The War changed Tillich, as it did so many young men and women of his time.

Together with my whole generation, I was grasped by the overwhelming experience of a nationwide community-the end of a merely individualistic and predominantly theoretical experience. I volunteered and was asked to serve as a war chaplain [...] [t]he first weeks had not passed before my original enthusiasm disappeared; after a few months I became convinced that the war would last indefinitely and ruin all of Europe. Above all, I saw that the unity of the first weeks was an illusion (Tillich 1967, 38-39)

In addition to his role as a pastor for the soldiers, Tillich also became a gravedigger. He comforted the wounded and the dying. He buried the dead. He even served as a conflict mediator when some German soldiers he was with encountered French civilians while on leave from the front. If Tillich's earliest philosophical training was as an idealist-particularly of the German type, his experiences of the war in general, and of the Battle of the Marne specifically, changed all of this. While watching wounded officers being carried from the battlefield on stretchers, he was "transformed". "All of my friends were among those dying and dead. That night, I became an existentialist" (Tillich cited in May 1973, 18).

Following a conflict with a superior officer, Tillich was transferred to the medical corps. He remained there until the end of the war. Released from military service in early 1919, he attempted to return to the University of Halle as a Privatdozent<sup>18</sup> of Theology, only to find that the seminary was dissolved during the War. He was, however, able to find employment at the University of Berlin. Finally, he was able to develop his skills as a lecturer and scholar.

## The Postwar Years

The war left Tillich a changed man, but in the immediate postwar years, "the spirit of the nineteenth century still prevailed" (Tillich 1964, 11), and with it a spirit of German classical philosophy. With Tillich's discovery of

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<sup>18</sup> Privatdozent is a position analogous to an Instructor in the American system. He had received an appointment to this position in 1916.

Schelling, his break with German idealism became complete, and he began to absorb the works of Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. These thinkers “became decisive for the destiny of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” (11).

Additionally, Tillich found himself in sympathy with the German revolution that followed the War and the abdication of the Kaiser, particularly that of religious socialism. Tillich speculated that “perhaps it was a drop of the blood which induced my grandmother to build barricades in the Revolution of 1848, perhaps it was the deep impression of the words of the prophet against injustice and the words of Jesus against the rich” (12).

## **The University of Berlin**

Tillich lectured on a number of topics as Privatdozent of Theology at the University of Berlin including a treatment of what he called the “Theology of Culture”. The zeitgeist of the time was supportive of such teaching. As psychoanalysis grew in popularity, people became conscious of previously repressed realities. Society’s structures, such as education, the family and authority, were in a state of chaos in the post war/post-revolutionary world, and this chaos provided Tillich with much inspiration for his theology (Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015).

In 1924, he took a position at the University of Marburg, and he once again struggled on a borderline. As an Associate Professor, he would make more money than he would as a Privatdozent, and the opportunities for promotion were greater than would be the case at Berlin. Unfortunately, he was not enthusiastic about moving to what he saw as a provincial town, leaving behind the bustle and freedom of the big city (Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015, 94-95). He would find that “cultural problems were excluded from theological thought” (Tillich 1964, 14). Yet the move suited him in some respects. Heidegger was lecturing at Marburg, and Tillich thus crossed paths with twentieth century existentialism for the first time.<sup>19</sup>

In 1925, after three semesters at Marburg, he went to the Dresden Institute<sup>20</sup>, finding himself at home in the social and artistic circles of that city. His reputation as a scholar and teacher grew with the publication of his

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<sup>19</sup> Although, according to Tillich, “It took years before I became fully aware of the impact of this encounter” (14).

<sup>20</sup> He remained at Dresden from 1925-1929 and between 1927 and 1929 was also an adjunct professor at Leipzig.

book *The Religious Situation* in 1926.<sup>21</sup> In 1929, the University of Frankfurt offered him a professorship of philosophy. “Frankfurt,” he wrote,

was the most modern and most liberal university in Germany, but it had no theological faculty. So it was quite appropriate that my lectures moved on the boundary line between philosophy and theology, and tried to make philosophy existential for the numerous students who were obliged to take philosophical classes” (Tillich 1967, 43).

His fame grew further during his time at Frankfurt. He thrived in the progressive zeitgeist of the city, and the ease with which professors of the different disciplines interacted with each other brought him into more intimate contact with scientific, philosophical and political discourse. He would later, for instance, incorporate the insights he gleaned from biologist/neurologist Kurt Goldstein into his three-volume magnum opus *Systematic Theology*. The boundary situation once again emerged as well. He “was in the unique position of being the only theologian on the faculty of the university, a Christian Scholar teaching philosophy in a secular setting.” (Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015, 118). These “secular years”, as Tillich referred to them, were special to him and he delighted in the landscape, nearby villages, museums, restaurants and salons of Frankfurt. This boundary situation, “together with many public lectures and speeches throughout Germany, produced a conflict with the growing Nazi movement long before 1933” (Tillich 1967, 43)

Unsurprisingly, Tillich produced the vast majority of his German publications between 1919 and 1933. The years prior were interrupted by the War, those after by his exile to America. If his output tended to be more in the form of essays than books, Tillich remarked that this was not only to be expected, but it was also beneficial: “I spoke or wrote when I was asked to do so, and one is more often asked to write articles than books” (Tillich 1964, 15). In addition, he wrote that

speeches and essays can be like screws drilling into untouched rocks; they try to take a step ahead, perhaps successfully, perhaps in vain. My attempts to relate all cultural realms to the religious center had to use this method. It provided new discoveries-new at least for me-and, as the reaction showed, not completely familiar to others (15)

But if there were benefits to this approach, there were also drawbacks.

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<sup>21</sup> This work was begun during his time at Marburg.



There is [...] a certain inconsistency and indefiniteness in terminology; there is the influence of different, sometimes competitive motives of thought, and there is a taking for granted of concepts and arguments which have been dealt with in other places (15).

Although he made his political views known through radio addresses, lectures, and public speeches, and in spite of his repugnance with Nazism and its tenets, he was initially slow to sense the growing dangers of National Socialism. He could not imagine that the Nazis should ever come into power. This was likely due to his focus on religious socialism from a philosophical perspective rather than that of practical politics. By failing to seek out the practical applications of his work, he failed to take an active part against the Nazis in the early days of their rise to power.<sup>22</sup> He unenthusiastically joined the Social Democrats in their opposition, but it wasn't until his 1932 book, *The Socialist Decision*, that he directly rejected the National Socialists. The book first appeared in print in late 1932, and was banned almost immediately upon Hitler's becoming dictator. Thus, while it provided a good sense of Tillich's political views, it failed to reach a wide audience. Its influence, therefore, was minimal at best (Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015).

Over the next several months, as Nazism took further hold in Germany, Tillich began to finally sense the new reality in which he was living. He was branded an enemy of the state due to his socialist writings and speeches as well as his defense of his Jewish colleagues and friends. After helping one of his students who was beaten up by a group of Nazi supporters, he became more direct in his denunciation of Nazism and in his support of Jews making these points in both his class sessions and public speeches (May 1973; Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015).<sup>23</sup> For a time, he considered leaving the Social Democrats, but opted not to as he still held out hope that the nightmare would soon end. Increasingly, his friends urged him to leave Germany at the earliest opportunity—a sentiment shared by his second wife Hannah.

Finally, on April 13, he found himself suspended from university teaching, out of a job, and waiting to see what would happen next. As fate would have it, however, a door was opening for him some six thousand miles away. In May of 1933, officials and faculty members of both Union

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<sup>22</sup> He would later admit that his failure to do so diminished his theory.

<sup>23</sup> According to Pauck and Pauck, Tillich once drove away a German official who had asked to see a Jewish-born, but Protestant-raised friend whom Tillich was visiting

Theological Seminary and Columbia University in New York, were devising a plan that would provide Tillich with a one-year post to get him away from Germany. In the depths of the great depression, the faculty agreed that each member would donate five percent of his salary to fund Tillich's stipend. Professor Reinhold Niebuhr was tasked with investigating the Tillich matter. Aside from his book *The Religious Situation*<sup>24</sup>, little was known of Tillich and his work in the United States. Niebuhr cabled Tillich with the invitation in July of 1933 and, it seems, Tillich finally began seriously contemplating emigration for the first time. By September, he had accepted the offer, but continued to act as if he had not quite reached a firm decision. He requested permission to leave Germany from the Ministry of Culture in late August, and received tacit permission to do so in early September. By mid-September, he had returned to Berlin, and had made an appointment with the Ministry in a last-gasp attempt to determine whether he was or was not dismissed from his position (Pauck and Pauck 1976/2015).<sup>25</sup>

Tillich and his family arrived in the United States in early November 1933. Union "took me in as a stranger [...] Union Seminary was not only a shelter in the sense of giving a position and an apartment; it was also a shelter in the sense of affording a community of life and work" (Tillich 1964, 16-17). He enjoyed the camaraderie among the Union faculty as well as the ongoing conversations that occurred "across Broadway" with those at Columbia.<sup>26</sup>

Still, "[e]migration at the age of forty-seven means that one belongs to two worlds: To the Old as well as the New into which one has been fully received" (Tillich 1964, 19). He was again, on the boundary maintaining contact with the Old World through other friends who had left Germany as he had, and through his work with Self-help for Émigrés from Central Europe. This organization, of which he was chairperson, provided advice to those who, like himself, had fled Europe. This not only kept him in touch with his homeland, but also broadened his experiences. It

brought me into contact with many people from the Old World whom I never would have met otherwise, and it opened to view depths of human

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<sup>24</sup> A book translated by Niebuhr's brother Richard.

<sup>25</sup> Thus setting the stage for the scene with which this book began.

<sup>26</sup> Broadway is the New York City thoroughfare that runs between the two institutions. Separated at their nearest points by a matter of meters, Union is on the west side of the street, Columbia on the east.

anxiety and misery and heights of human courage and devotion which are ordinarily hidden from us (Tillich 1964, 19).

Finally, he was politically active by virtue of his membership in the Council for a Democratic Germany.

“The New World grasped me with its irresistible power of assimilation and creative courage” (Tillich 1964, 20). He was struck by America’s lack of authoritarianism in families, schools, politics, religion or administration. Even more striking was

the American courage to go ahead, to try, to risk failures to begin again after defeat, to lead an experimental life both in knowledge and in action, to be open toward the future, to participate in the creative process of nature and history. I also saw the dangers of this courage, old and new ones, and I confess that some of the new ones have begun to give me serious concern. Finally, I saw the point at which elements of anxiety have entered into the courage and at which the existential problems have made an inroad among the younger generation in this country (20-21).

Although he would again travel abroad after the end of the Second World War, Tillich would become an American citizen in 1940 and the United States would remain his home for the rest of his life. He would teach not only at Columbia and at Union, but later at Harvard and at the University of Chicago. Yet if Tillich had become increasingly comfortable with his “Americanness”, he continued to straddle both the New World and the Old. As this short introduction to his early life has shown, it is clear that he had become comfortable in his existence on the boundary lines, on the frontiers, and in his contemplation of the infinite, the void. We now turn our attention more closely to those boundary situations in an attempt to understand how they helped shape Paul Tillich and his work.



## CHAPTER THREE

### THE BOUNDARIES OF PAUL TILlich

Reading the brief introduction to Paul Tillich's life presented above, one can already see that he lived his life on a boundary. From the first hours after his birth, he struggled between life and death. He experienced both the urban world of, say, Berlin, and the medieval town life of Starzeddel. He lived for many years in both Europe and North America-if not literally, then intellectually and culturally. We see that he always seemed more comfortable when he was in what he called "a boundary." "The boundary," he wrote, "is the best place for acquiring knowledge" (Tillich, 1973, 297). In his autobiographical sketch "On the Boundary," published posthumously in his book *The Boundaries of Our Being* (1973), he wrote,

I thought that the concept of the Boundary might be the fitting symbol for the whole of my personal and intellectual development. At almost every point, I have had to stand between alternative possibilities of existence to be completely at home in neither and to take no definitive stance against either. Since thinking presupposes receptiveness to new possibilities, this position is fruitful for thought; but it is difficult and dangerous in life, which again and again, demands decisions and thus the exclusion of alternatives. This disposition and its tension have determined both my destiny and my work (297).

Such a boundary existence is not an easy one, but rather "full of tension and movement" (Tillich 1987, 289). As we exist on the boundary, on the "frontier" as he sometimes put it, we do not remain static. Rather we cross over, return and cross again from one side to the other. One's boundary experiences produce anxiety-the anxiety of the possible and of potential. Thus, we are forced to choose between falling back within our boundary or pushing forward to transcend ourselves. To choose the former is to return to a relatively calm pre-existence, but one which has changed. In Tillich's words, "a thorn remains" (240). But in order to restore ourselves to our prior existence, we find ourselves repressing and suppressing until, finally, fanaticism results. This happens, according to Tillich, when one experiences one's own potential, but lacks the maturity to handle it. Fearful of what

resides on the other side of the boundary, the individual reacts aggressively against those who have realized the potential from which one has retreated.

When applied to groups, this call to border-crossing is seen when people “are confronted by the possibility of getting out of their national or cultural boundaries” (Tillich 1987, 242). They, too, are confronted by the anxiety of potential and cannot bear the sight of their own nation’s limitation. In seeing those limitations overcome in others, they are repulsed and turn back. They cannot risk moving beyond what they know because of the anxiety that occurs when they reach the frontier. Thus, they fail to realize their own possibilities.

From this description, one might draw the conclusion that Tillich advocates a fence-straddling philosophy of life—one in which a person takes no side, remains neutral, fails to commit. This is decidedly not so. To live on the boundary is to commit to the boundary—to open oneself fully to attack from both sides. For Tillich, this seems not to be a position of moderation, but rather an almost militant attempt to accept one’s place and the loneliness such acceptance might well produce. We might imagine that his experiences in World War I vividly clarified this idea to him. It is not hard to imagine the boundary crossing as analogous to a soldier in “no man’s land,” probing the opposing lines, retreating to relative safety, advancing again—all the while exposed to the withering fire of one’s adversary as well as, perhaps, the so-called friendly fire of one’s comrades. It is much easier to remain ensconced in the safety of one’s own trench where the risk of accidental or deliberate wounding is reduced. Wars, however, cannot be won that way. In the same way, no one can experience what it means to truly live. One must take risks. The wounds are real, but the reward achieved through such risks is nothing less than a full acceptance of one’s own existence.

In his book *The Boundaries of Our Being* (Tillich 1973), Tillich outlines no fewer than thirteen examples of the boundaries of his life. Each of them bears discussion so one can fully grasp the extent to which they played a role in Tillich’s life as well as the extent to which they provide a model for living our own. The boundaries of Tillich’s life and work may not perfectly match those we encounter as educators, or indeed as individuals, but in many ways his example can help us find authentic boundaries in our own lives and work.