

# WHERE SHALL WE SIT: THE VOCATIONAL DILEMMA OF THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR

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*A vocation is not a single narrative: it is a perpetually improvised dialogue. You can't know it like you know your part in a play or your position on a team. You know it the way that you know you have heard enough or that you have been down too long. You know it once or twice in a profound life-shattering way, but you know it again many times later as a refinement of purpose in a moment of despair, as a shift in attention or concern, or as the birth of a new perception or insight.* Robert Inchausti. Spiritual Spitwads: Classroom Teaching as Sublime Vocation. Bergin and Garvey, 1993: 150.

*...a teacher, someone who takes up his very life into speech so that others might do the same.* Inchausti, 141.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In setting the stage for a parable of Jesus, the writer of the Gospel of Luke evokes an image for these reflections on the vocation of the religious educator (14:7-11). The scene is a dinner party. The host had not designated places for people to sit. This meant they faced the dilemma of finding a place where they might enjoy the forthcoming event. Where to sit? That question comes into focus whenever we walk into a banquet hall. Most of us would not be inclined to follow the lead of the people the author of Luke describes scrambling for a place at the head table. We would more likely seek out friends or look for colleagues with whom we know we would have a lively conversation.

As a newcomer to the religious education banquet in the early 1960's, for example, my interest in several lively conversations heightened my dilemma about "where to sit." C. Ellis Nelson, one of my instructors, generously included me in his discussions of reformed tradition theology and sociology. Bob Lynn, another of my mentors, invited me into his conversations with Larry Cremin about the role of religious education in the American story of the transit of culture. Gene Laubach, my field education supervisor, introduced me to the discussion of National Training Lab seminar graduates on the interactions of teachers and students in the dynamics of God's relationality. Aileen Sanborn, national coordinator of Methodist teacher training programs, made room for me in the quest of Methodist professors and denominational leaders for ways to promote theological and educational standards for volunteer teachers. I wanted to join them all. Indeed, I tried to join them all.

As I reflect back on these and other conversations that have dominated my attention, however, I wonder if we could identify anything in them that we would describe as distinctively "religious education." Does it make any difference in faith communities or public life? What assumptions, methods, practices distinguish it from those in theology, education, or any of the social science or liberal arts disciplines that influence our thinking? I have typically resisted taking on these questions directly, but now that I am technically retired, the time has come. In the paper that follows I focus

attention on conversations in the field influencing the trajectory of my vocational journey as “religious educator.” If these thoughts evoke a responsive chord in others, perhaps they will be a catalyst to the larger conversation I seek on the shape and contribution of the religious educator vocation.

### **THE CALL TO TEACH**

I begin with an exploration of my call to the vocation of religious educator. About the character of my call, I have been clear most of my career. I was called to teach through the practice of teaching. In the interplay (a wonderful word explored early in my career by Gabriel Moran) of my experience as student with some teachers and my encounter as teacher with students, my attention was focused, my energies enlivened, my sense of purpose for living and being most fulfilled. When teaching, I had a keen sense my actions might make a difference. In the act of teaching I experienced most clearly confirmation of a purpose for my existence.

I engaged the practice of teaching at an early age. When 13 a good friend and I gave award winning 4-H demonstrations in county, state, and regional fairs on how to solve typical farm problems. My biology teacher asked me to teach the entomology unit to my sophomore class peers because, as he said, “You know more about bugs through your 4-H projects than I do.” When I was 16 our congregation’s Sunday school superintendent tapped me to teach the junior boys Sunday school class. I returned from a church youth leadership institute the summer before my senior year of high school to train my peers to adapt curriculum resources in planning and conducting our own youth fellowship programs. In college I frequently took seminars that gave me the opportunity to structure learning experiences for the members of the group. In each situation the mental challenges of creating events for learning exhilarated me.

During my senior year at Willamette University, Dr. Cameron Paulin, agnostic art history professor and one my most important mentors, stopped me one morning on the library steps to ask about my plans after graduation. I told him I intended to go to seminary. He shook his head, as if with some regret, and said, “Well, whatever you do, you will teach” and walked off. Although I saw no burning bush among the rhododendrons surrounding those library steps, that moment of being named into a vocation has been indelibly printed on my consciousness.

That next fall in seminary I participated in an experimental field education project that confirmed my sense of calling to teach. The program began with a weeklong laboratory school in which we explored the dynamics of teaching and learning, planned a series of sessions for teaching junior high youth, taught them, and then reflected back on our teaching in light of what we had learned about the practice of teaching and learning. The six seminary students in the project continued this conversational process in our field education placement each week through the rest of the academic year.

Long before I had a vocabulary to describe what we were doing, I now realize, we were engaged in contextual praxis learning. And I fell into religious education. Here the activity of teaching seemed to have most to do with what was happening in the lives of students. That this something happening in the lives of students had to do with the way they made sense of their relationship to themselves, each other, and ultimately to the mystery that lay beyond their experience made the possibilities in religious education even more appealing. During that first year of seminary, in other words, I accepted the

claim of education on my vocational imagination and discovered a focus for the ministry I anticipated in and through the practice of teaching. But what was it about teaching in religious education that captured my imagination? What does one “teach” in “religious education?” What conversations, in other words, nurtured my engagement with the field or discipline we call “religious education?”

### **“CALLED TO TEACH” GOOD NEWS**

As graduation from seminary loomed on the horizon the question about what to “teach” took on increasing urgency. Many of my peers who anticipated vocations in education had much greater clarity. They applied to graduate schools to be prepared to teach “church history,” “New Testament,” or “systematic theology.” Some were even audacious enough to be more specific—“Reformation History,” “Pauline Letters,” “soteriology. I did not share either their clarity about what to teach or their technicist view of teaching. So in contrast to the old saw that those who can’t preach—teach, I went to the parish because I did not share their clarity about what to teach.

Within months after graduating from seminary a conversation with my senior colleague in the congregation I was serving helped me realize, however, that I had organized my ministry to teach adult classes on Sunday and Wednesday mornings and two classes with children on Wednesday afternoons. I restructured the junior and senior high youth fellowship groups on Sunday evening into learning communities. On Tuesday afternoons I led a group of those same high school youth gathered in our living room in an exploration of theological themes in contemporary fiction. I conducted monthly training sessions and weekly planning sessions with teachers focusing our attention on the claims of what they were teaching on their own lives. Beyond the congregation I was conducting workshops and leading lab schools in the denomination for people seeking to become more effective teachers. My approach to the inevitable committee meeting was to organize them into policy and program learning communities. I preached, made pastoral calls, represented the congregation in community meetings, but the dynamics of teaching and learning dominated my imagination. Three years later I returned to graduate school, not to prepare myself to teach some subject—even religious education—but to work through a question raised in my teaching: “how does one teach religiously in a culture that both esteems religion and diminishes the quest to be faithful?” Metaphorically, I was looking for a different kind of conversation—one that centered on the transformative possibilities for teachers and students in their encounter with what I will call for the moment, the mystery of wholly otherness in the situatedness of their daily experience.

Within the vocabulary of my Christian heritage, I now realize that I was called to teach “good news” about human possibility and the meaning of existence. My vocation did have to do with leading others toward hopeful possibilities beyond our consciousness. The “what” of my teaching had all to do with our experience of that mystery—called by Jews Yahweh, by Christians God, and by a host of other names among those who live beyond the edges of these religious traditions. These conversations emerging from my teaching practice not only lit a fire in my belly, they shaped my thinking and action. And as I have attempted to identify and describe those conversations, I am increasingly clear about the trajectory of my religious education vocation.

## **TEACHING “GOOD NEWS”**

Three conversations, prompted by the interplay of formative texts and events, have consistently sustained, renewed, and at times, transformed my vocational consciousness as religious educator. The first centers on an exploration of teaching in the transformation of persons and communities. The language of transformation was a part of my religious education lexicon long before I had read Paulo Freire. Undoubtedly my own educational experience in school and church contexts--deeply indebted to the transformative possibilities, first of all, in Dewey's pedagogical method and later in his theoretical writings--heightened my sensibilities to the potential for personal and social transformation through the interactions of teachers and learners.

The language of transformation in my view of religious education may be traced back to my high school encounter with Paul's letter to the Romans, especially the first two verses of the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter. It is certainly one of his most familiar texts: "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...that you may discern the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (NRSV) This text inspired the first sermon I preached during my senior year of high school. Although at first, I tended to focus on transformation as the goal and the "renewal of the mind" as the means in the interplay of teaching and learning, the good news prompting transformation increasingly centered my attention on the quest for the good, the acceptable and the perfect—that which lies, in other words, at the heart of the intent of God.

Perhaps given my Wesleyan heritage, one should not be surprised that the will of God articulated in this manner becomes the providential intent for all creation manifest most fully in those powerful symbolic representations of God's grace—creation and redemption as source and goal of life. The initiative of God, in other words, lodged in the reciprocity of the interactions of teachers and learners seeking the good, the acceptable, and perfect, leads us through transformations of reconciliation with self, nature, others, and ultimately with the mystery of God's intentions that lies beyond our comprehension. This seeking activity of God (the Wesleyan tradition has called it *prevenient grace*) pulls us toward and into its possibilities. Robert MacAfee Brown, a theologian in the Reformed tradition, introduced me to a vocabulary for exploring the pedagogical character of this historical and eschatological process in his definition of faith as the "creative appropriation of an open past taking form in our commitments to its contents.

My consciousness of the need for pedagogies of transformation had been sparked as a child by table conversations in my home about the pervasiveness of that which was not good, or acceptable, or perfect--injustices rooted in the economic inequities in the community where I lived, especially in the "migrant camps" of farm workers; prejudice and discrimination experienced by our Japanese neighbors, the specter of nuclear war intensified by Senator Joseph McCarthy's distinctive brand of national chauvinism. Nurtured at the same time, with a keen sense of possibility for humankind through my Wesleyan and progressive education heritages, the potential for human transformations toward that which was pleasing in the sight of God through cognitive shifts seemed like powerful antidotes to our collective and personal inhumanity.

In my teaching practice possibilities inherent in the notion of transformation through the renewal of such minds as those contributing to these and other horrors were tested and refined. One event continues to function paradigmatically for me as I consider

what it means to teach in a world beset with “wars and rumors of wars,” immune to the persistent presence of the poor, blind to pervasive injustice and oppression. It reveals the potential in teaching to challenge the realm of darkness hindering and diminishing the human questing for transformations toward goodness, acceptance, and perfection. While in seminary I qualified to be trained as a “leader” of laboratory education events for teachers and leaders of youth in the Methodist Church. The final step in the process involved co-leading a laboratory school with a powerful mentor and effective Christian educator—Aileen Sanborn, a member of the Board of Education staff of The Methodist Church.

The design of a lab school gathered teachers as leaders-in-training into an exploration of adolescent developmental readiness for faith quests, a critical assessment of possible teaching strategies, an introduction to strategies for adapting curriculum resources to the faith quests of youth, and finally and most importantly, planning, conducting, and evaluating a series of teaching sessions with young people. It was practice learning in the best traditions of Dewey, George Albert Coe, and Sophie Fahs.

The curriculum resource in this particular event was a unit on the creation narratives of Genesis. All the “leaders-in-training” had read the resource material for the session. We had posted pictures of creation images by artists through the ages on the wall. We introduced the session with a reading of Genesis 1:1-2:4. We moved the adults into small groups to identify questions from the text. We explored these questions through the lens of contemporary biblical scholarship. Then we gathered the teachers-in-training into an exercise to image God through the use of finger paints as practice preparation for a similar exercise later with a group of younger teens. These adults were soon down on the floor on their hands and knees with large sheets of paper in front of them and a variety of colors of paint we had made prior to the session. While listening again to a reading of Genesis 1ff, people started to dabble in the paints.

One woman soon caught our attention. With tentative movements, she began by dropping splotches of color on the paper, slowly adding large globs of blue, green, and purple, and gradually mixing them into dark tumultuous shapes. She then rubbed out her “picture” and started over with even more darkly aggressive shapes and swirls. Finally she cleaned her hands, dipped her index finger in the yellow paint and let a tiny drop fall from her finger onto the upper left hand corner of the paper.

Our intent had been to ask people to share their images in conversation with the group. My mentor and I checked with each other before deciding to proceed with these plans, now with the expectation that anything might happen. And it did. When the circle of sharing reached this woman, she raised her picture for the group to see, started to say something, broke into tears and ran from the room—my mentor racing after her. Now what was I supposed to do? I was new at this. I could resume as if “nothing” had happened, but “something” did happen. We had just been confronted with an image of chaos—an image of chaos erupting, as we later learned, from experiences of rejection, injustice, hopelessness, through which the glimmer of new creation penetrated with unusual brightness. The task of developing a teaching skill to “use” with young teenagers had just been transformed into an encounter with the possibilities of damnation or redemptive grace. The challenge before us had to do with the extent of our willingness to be agents of God’s providential intent for reconciliation and hope for this woman—and through this woman for each of us—and through us, for the world, as well. We were no

longer teaching about the mystery of creative love; we were confronted with the challenge of practicing the mystery of redemptive presence.

Teaching for transformation locates the teacher in a paradoxical relationship to the mysterious pull toward and into that which is good, acceptable and perfect. I first caught a glimpse of the depths of this paradox in the text of a favorite hymn from my high school camping experience: “Make me a captive Lord and then I shall be free.” The notion of captivity for the blind writer of this hymn has to do with the focus of our attention on that small dot of yellow. It is not bondage, as Parker Palmer has observed, but the process of becoming obedient to truth. Another hymn writer has made the same point: “Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart, Naught be all else to me, save that thou art.” From this perspective the object of our teaching is not so much what we know but the extent and depth of our engagement with what we do not yet know.

When I teach therefore, I do not teach “religious education” as such, but instead teach that students and I may encounter mystery--the unknown--breaking through the fictional orderliness of our lives to invite us toward possibilities inherent in our selves, in our relation to the world, and ultimately in our relation to the source of those possibilities—the ultimate mystery itself that we call God. Creation, in other words, is the starting point of all pedagogical activity; the earth is the context of all pedagogical activity; the intimate in-breaking of mystery is the initiator and object of all pedagogical activity—whether in Methodist Christian religious education, Christian or Jewish or Buddhist religious education, or the religious education of the public. As religious educators we have no corner on creating events through which students might encounter and engage the mystery that calls us beyond our knowing. The teacher of scripture and theology, of ethics and evangelism, of anthropology and psychology, chemistry and mathematics similarly lead students to the abyss that lies just beyond their knowing to engage them in the quest for “good news” in the mystery of the not yet known.

From this perspective teachers share in common the quest for what Maxine Greene calls “wide awakesness,” for conscientization in Freire’s terms, for revelatory consciousness as described by H. Richard Niebuhr, to see through the mystifications that align not only our hearts and minds, but those of our students, with the ignorance, injustice and oppression that feeds the brokenness and hopelessness in our own lives and those around us and shutters our vision from the possibilities that lie before us. We teach, in other words, for the possibility of transformation—for the alignment of lives toward the possibilities in the good, acceptable and perfect.

To stand as an advocate of wide awakesness or revelatory consciousness against the mystifications of experience is a radical practice. Paul Tillich noted that it took “courage to be.” Rollo May similarly observed that to rebel against the gods dominating our lives requires courage. James Joyce caught the essence of the practice for the teacher in those audacious words of the young artist who welcomed in each day “the reality of experience” to forge “in the smithy” of her or his soul “the uncreated conscience of the race.” Because it is all too human to love those mystifications, teaching toward the capacities of wide awakesness or revelatory consciousness into that which is good, acceptable and perfect becomes for many an offensive practice—an insight made long ago by J. Stanley Glen in his discussion of the teaching ministry. In this regard teaching good news can be the impetus to rebellion, to resistance, to subverting that which denies truth, beauty, holiness in the providential intention of creation for shalom.

Teaching from this perspective is concerned with transmitting information, habits, sensibilities and practices across time to open up the past. But if teaching is also about changing student outlooks, as Maxine Greene has argued, toward what I have described as the “good, acceptable, and perfect,” we can neither predict nor control the outcome. I have always appreciated the orderliness and clarity of the pedagogical practices in Dewey’s articulation of the teacher’s role in sponsoring student learning. Similarly I have been drawn to the symmetry in the interaction of teacher and learner in Groome’s model of shared praxis. I want to affirm the importance of the contemporary quest for educational accountability in the teaching/learning encounter, but in pedagogical moments of transformative possibility, the element of surprise repeatedly shatters my efforts to order learning. It confronts me more often as a yellow spot shining out of a chaotic fingerpainting.

### **TEACHING “GOOD NEWS” IN COMMUNITY**

A second conversation that has shaped my religious education vocation focuses attention on “community” as context and agency of teaching. C. Ellis Nelson, Bob Lynn, Larry Cremin, H. Richard Niebuhr, John Westerhoff, Letty Russell, Edward Hall, and Victor Turner have each played a formative role in shaping the vocabulary I bring to this conversation. Another series of paradigmatic texts and events reveal something of the trajectory of my quest. The centrality of food in these texts and events points to the layered textures in the relationality of communities.

When I reflect back on my own Christian education experience I am aware that the congregational potluck supper significantly influenced my perceptions of Christian community, the habits and sensibilities that distinguish Christian identity, and the values and beliefs that shape Christian commitments. This may have been the case because the potluck supper functioned as the congregational extension of family meal practices. To be a Foster meant shared roles in growing and preserving much of our food, preparing meals, offering prayers of thanksgiving, developing “manners” to facilitate our eating together, sharing our meals with a wide variety of guests, and conversing intensely, and at length, on religious, political, and social topics and events. To be a Methodist Christian in the congregations of my childhood and adolescence meant sharing in the preparation of the food for community meals, singing (usually lots of singing) and praying before, during and after the meal, developing a set of “manners” to create an ambiance of hospitality, intimacy, and generosity, playing games that intensified intergenerational ties, and exploring issues reflecting the congregation’s deepest hungers and concerns.

Only much later would I discover a pedagogical framework for this activity in the eucharistic passages of the gospels and the writings of Paul. An example occurs in the story of the followers of Jesus who talked about the events of what Christians now call Holy Week as they walked from Jerusalem toward the village of Emmaus (Luke 24:13ff). A stranger joins them, listens to their story and then “beginning with Moses and all the prophets,” interprets their experience. Not until they sat down to eat and break bread together did they recognized the identity of their conversation partner.

Note how the teacher comes as stranger—another insight of Maxine Greene’s. Note how tradition illumining experience enlivens attention—a major theme in the writing of Mary Elizabeth Moore, Jack Seymour, and Tom Groome. Note how the sense

of mutuality is intensified around a table--an insight of Letty Russell's. Note how the mystery of transcendent intimacy revealed in breaking bread leads to "fashioning peoplehood"—an insight of Maria Harris. Around the table learning occurs through the practice of conversation at the juncture of experience and tradition. That conversation can be unbelievably and intensely intimate. Hearts burn. Minds race. We sense the imminence of unanticipated possibilities. Something is shared/broken and we "see" meaning from the realm of possibility in our experience that lays a claim on our consciousness and conscience. Our attention is molded and perceptions are shaped. We are compelled to share those discoveries with others.

The formative dynamics in this eucharistic pedagogy illumines the sociality of all teaching and learning. It begins in community at a mother's breast. It occurs in community. It is extended through community. This insight of the Deuteronomist (see chap. 6) long ago, was renewed in Horace Bushnell's observation through the organic influence of the family the faith of a child is nurtured, and still later in Ellis Nelson's reminder that religious faith originates in a community of faith.

At the same time the diversity in the human family shatters our pretenses of controlling or limiting this socializing process. This has been both an exhilarating and painful insight. In the 1970's I began to probe the influence of human diversity in teaching and learning with Ethel Johnson and Grant Shockley as my primary mentors. In one of the first courses I taught to take on these concerns, class members shared stories of their cultural heritages. We pondered the rich diversity of our experience and wondered about the future of diverse societies. I drew on biblical and social science traditions to provide interpretive frameworks for our explorations. But the dynamics of our teaching and learning were transformed during a potluck meal. Each of us brought a dish that represented for us something distinctive about our cultural heritage. In the breaking of bread, the theological, social, political, economic and educational implications of the stories we had been telling took hold of our imaginations and would not let us go.

An African American woman reminded us of the continuing mark of the experience of slavery on her way of seeing and being by bringing a dish of boiled chitlings prepared that week in the dormitory kitchenette. The aroma during the three days of preparation precipitated deep hostility toward her—and me. Despite a course requirement that we each sample every dish, several students resisted. Others rebelled. A woman, from what was then called Zaire, prepared a dish with smelt, "the smallest fish she could find in the supermarket," through which we encountered consequences of colonialism on her life and in her society. A European American woman from Iowa brought corn because "corn grows in Iowa." With little sense of her cultural heritage she could not think of anything else to bring. A profound sense of newly awakened loss accompanied her offering.

This potluck banquet generally had an air of festivity. But food had also become the means through which we encountered each "other." We bumped into the incommensurability of our different cultures and histories. We could no longer presume we could establish a common pedagogical framework adequate to the task of exploring the variety in the mystery in human experience. Through the sharing of food we encountered the superficiality of our life together and the promise of a sense of mutuality we could not fully fathom. Through confrontations with our particularity, in other words, we were also discovering something of the depth and range of the mystery of God's



providential intent for human community. We discovered in “breaking bread” together not a sense of unity, but rather, the possibility of inclusiveness that exists beyond our brokenness. It has the character of liminality, an insight of Victor Turner—the juxtaposition of estrangement and intensification of relational experience.

As a pedagogical strategy a meal does “fashion” a people. Since the meal is a repeated and typically ritual process, the fashioning never ends. And yet in a real sense, community, especially in explicitly pedagogical settings, can never be assumed. Our circumstances shift like wind-whipped sand. The composition of the group changes from term to term. Learning for wide awakeness, for revelatory consciousness, differentiates as well as assimilates. The dynamics to be found in the encounter with our differences challenges our efforts in fashioning or creating learning communities.

At first I thought that differences of race and gender posed the most difficult challenges to my teaching efforts. Then I taught a class with a student whose recurring epileptic seizures became an intermittent part of the rhythm of our common life. In another class I became painfully aware that my teaching style prevented some students from learning as they were able. Then I went through a phase when I was convinced that class differences were the most difficult challenge facing the teacher. Gradually it became increasingly evident that in most of my efforts to create learning communities—to fashion a learning community safe enough to risk our personal and collective ignorance and/or prejudice—my intentions consistently had more in common with those ancient builders of Babel whose quest to be godlike led them to try to dominate the world around them than with that small group of disciples praising God in the many languages of the known world at Pentecost.

This insight shifted the focus of my pedagogical efforts—from seeking to establish learning communities in our own image to creating conditions conducive to the inclusion of all. That calls, C.A. Bowers has suggested, for an ecological rather than a unified view of the learning community. In the “transmission of culture” in the ecological embrace of our differences, Bowers goes on to suggest, teachers shape the future of cultures by first being responsive to the cultures and learning styles (and I would add world views) students bring to the classroom experience. Responsivity to diversity in our teaching and learning becomes, consequently, a primary source to the conditions of relationality that nurture wide-awakeness. The character of that responsivity leads me to a third conversation influencing my growing consciousness of my vocation as a religious educator.

### **TEACHING GOOD NEWS “FOR COMMUNITY”**

I was also introduced into this third conversation during my childhood. My parents engrained into my subconscious a deep sense of my responsibility for my context and relationships. When we went on a picnic the grounds should be left cleaner than they were when we arrived. When we participated in a group, our effort should both contribute to and strengthen its goals or mission. When we saw a neighbor in need, we should leave what we were doing to be helpful. We saw our practices of compassion and care as contemporary extensions of the injunctions of Jesus and the disciplines of care among the members of Wesley’s “Holy Club.” As a newly minted clergyperson in the 1960’s, the juxtaposition of my seminary education and the Civil Rights Movement expanded my awareness to the social and political dynamics in these relational

responsibilities. For the teacher it involves living in the tension of awe and compassion, praise and morality, worship and justice.

Living into this tension is not easy. As a seminary student, for example, I took seriously the mandate of prophetic texts proclaiming God's hate for feasts and religious observances that do not challenge social and economic injustices such as the practice of selling debtors into slavery for the price of a pair of shoes during the time of Amos. Peter Berger, Gibson Winter, Ralph Morton and others documented for me the contemporary extension of Amos' inditement of religious peoples. With an eye trained to see hypocrisy in congregations, I thereby, approached my first pastoral assignment prepared to render judgment. Instead I was chastened by the revolutionary agenda of a congregation seeking to live into the possibilities of what H. Richard Niebuhr had described as "Christ transforming culture." Only a few years before this congregation would have exemplified all that Berger, Winter, and Morton described as being wrong with the church. Now under more visionary pastoral and lay leadership, a significant number of its adult members participated in covenanted study groups. Many of these groups engaged missional objectives that would ultimately lead to the improvement of conditions for migrants, new housing for the elderly poor, and recreational facilities for youth. Others challenged the city's deeply entrenched political machine that--among other things--deprived basic social services to significant portions of its population.

In this congregation the center of the renewal effort could be found in the interplay of formational practices of worship and learning. The quest to wonder before the mystery in and through which the possibilities for human existence might be discerned was experienced as the shared responsibility for living into those responsibilities. The complementary experience of standing in awe before what I have been calling the providential intent of God in creation was taking responsibility for living into that intent. The gospel writer Matthew makes the point. We see the invitation to engage the mystery of creative and redemptive activity in anyone who hungers, thirsts, seeks comradeship, is sick or imprisoned.

The pedagogical character of living responsibly into the providential intent of God began to become clear for me during and after an incident in the youth ministry of that congregation. This was the 1960's. And we had a coffee house. The idea of a coffee house grew out of a discussion with the youth about the fact that in this community of some 40,000, young people had no place "to go." No MacDonald's, no "Y," no gym to play ball, literally nothing. I am sure in retrospect, that the idea of the coffee house could be traced to singing Civil Rights songs, to the bible study of the prophets we had conducted, to the general conversation in the congregation about its missional responsibilities in the community, and to the reports of people who had visited the Church of the Savior's "Potter's House" in Washington, D.C.

So the youth developed a proposal for a coffee house, presented it to the church board, and after much discussion were given permission to proceed. That proposal, with the insistence of the adult counselors, required the youth to work through each decision. The adult counselors would inform, guide, supervise, but not do for them. So youth went to the city offices to obtain the requisite permits. With increasing skill and confidence they transformed an old carriage house on the church grounds into a safe and clean place for this venture. They planned the menus, recruited the entertainment, and developed work schedules for all members of the group. Concurrently we studied together Christian

perspectives on hospitality and welcoming strangers. And the incident I want to describe centers on one of the critical incidents they faced in that regard soon after it opened.

A teenager who had been drinking rather heavily slipped past the adult and youth hosts. At some point in the evening he jumped up on one of the cable drum tables and began to swing from one of the wagon wheel light fixtures hanging from the carriage house rafters. The supporting hook gave way and the wagon wheel came crashing down barely missing a couple of young people sitting at the table. The immediate reaction among several of the congregation's leaders was to shut the coffee house down. Injuries, liability insurance payments and lawsuits haunted their imaginations. The counselors to the youth group insisted, however, that the youth must first work through the ramifications of this event and propose a resolution for the church board to consider.

The next evening some 35 subdued teenagers showed up at the church to discuss what they should do. Some were frightened; others angry. And some among the group argued they should continue the coffee house no matter what church adults thought. One of the counselors laid out the legal and financial issues the incident raised. The youth rehearsed the story about why they had worked so hard to create the coffee house. They returned to some of the texts--biblical, theological, and contemporary social commentary—they had worked through as they explored possibilities for the coffee house. The discussion continued long past the usual closing time for youth meetings. Parents were waiting more or less patiently in the hallway. But the counselors insisted that the crisis was sufficiently serious they could not rush through the discussion.

Eventually the group decided several things. It was as irresponsible to close the coffee house as it would be to continue it without attending to some of the issues the incident raised. The coffee house ministry must be continued. Issues of safety needed to be taken much more seriously. They appointed a group to visit the police to talk about ways to be ready for the possibility of future incidents. They also decided that a specific witness needed to be made to the young man who precipitated the crisis they were facing. So they appointed a delegation to call on him, to invite him back but with the stipulation that he would not be welcome if he were drinking. And they agreed that the young woman who was the president of the group should present their recommendations to the church board meeting the next evening.

In a sense the outcome of the story is not as important as the practice of discipleship these youth engaged. She did make the presentation to the church board—with the realization that most of its members were ready to close the coffee house down without discussion. But her presentation made clear the theological motivations behind their recommendations and the ethical sensitivities that informed their proposals to limit the possibility of similar incidents in the future. After a long discussion the board voted to accept the recommendation.

Although this seemed like a major event at the time, in the course of history it is only a small incident in the life of one congregation. And yet it illumines the vocation of teachers engaging students in the providential intent of God for all creation. Three observations I would emphasize. This "coffee house ministry" created a space for youth (and adults) to practice disciplines and develop habits of piety, thinking, and justice long enough to experience consequences of their commitments. Through this apprentice practice of discipleship, these young people were responsible for each decision. Their adult mentors would not let them make a decision until they had enough information and

skill to make that decision. When something went “wrong” that was an occasion for teaching and learning. When something went “right,” that was again an invitation to locate their celebration in narratives of grace. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra have brought our attention to this long ignored pedagogical principle. We do learn by doing. We become by repetitively practicing that which we seek to be.

A second insight centers on the political character of all teaching and learning. It cannot be otherwise. Learning involves change—even when that change seeks to minimize the variation in the human experience. Little, consequently, can be described as neutral about a vocation that centers on the practice of teaching—especially when the purpose of teaching centers on creating experiences for student engagement with the mystery that lies just beyond their knowing. Henri Giroux, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor, bell hooks, and Michael Warren have brought these issues powerfully to our attention in recent years. Cognitive shifts in learners require humanizing changes in the interplay of the learners’ self-awareness and their social locations to sustain their journey toward justice, freedom and hope in the shalom of God’s providential intent in creation.

The story of the coffee house does not end with that incident. These youth heightened community attention to the needs of youth. And many of these young people chose careers in social service or justice. But not all consequences were positive. “Principalities and powers,” Paul observed, counter the providential intent of God. Social systems contain webs of resistance and forces subverting our quest to live into the implications of our transformation. We “fall” into “dis”-grace. The year I left that congregation to return to graduate school, mainline Protestant denominations began a massive dismantling of youth and campus ministries. The ecclesial support structures for this congregation’s youth ministry vanished. As these young people moved into college, most found more congenial outlets for their emerging commitments in the peace and civil rights movements than in the congregations they visited. One young man distraught by ethical issues he faced in Viet Nam committed suicide. A young woman--caught up in the peace movement--was murdered by her boyfriend during a bad drug episode. Most of these youth left the church, in part, because they felt abandoned by the community that had opened new possibilities to them. Teaching for transformation—for wide awakeness, I discovered, can be risky. The chaos of unprincipled powers subverts the goals we set and thwarts the outcomes we seek. We hope into rather than foresee or control the consequences.

A third insight builds on the second. The wide-awakeness or transformatory consciousness we seek through our teaching may occur through explicit pedagogical strategies for social, political, economic, or religious change. In this regard Saul Alinsky and the various freedom movements reshaping the contemporary social landscape influenced my vision of my role with the youth developing that coffee house ministry. In recent years, however, I find my attention increasingly shifting to the influence of our pedagogical practice in cultural transformations. These youth participated in a congregation where the dominant conversation centered on responsivity to the initiative of God in the transformation and healing of the world. They, in turn, helped shape that conversation. Their efforts functioned as catalyst to a conversation beyond the congregation in the larger community around the needs of young people. Horace Bushnell once referred to this process as the dynamics of “unconscious influence” originating in the “organic” interdependence of the human experience. This

interdependence is experienced in our relationships with each other. It may be even more evident in our relationships across time. The future becomes open, Robert McAfee Brown, has argued, in so far as we become increasingly conscious of the influence of the past we have inherited in our contemporary decisions. From this perspective I am increasingly attracted to the image of “leaven” as an appropriate description of the permeating and transforming influence of our teaching and learning on public consciousness and action. We teach and learn in social and historically located contexts identified with particular traditions (in our case religious traditions) to deepen our participation in the mutuality of conversation with “others” for the “common good.” In this regard, the vocation of the religious educator is not only rooted in the particularities of our religious and ethnic communities, but in the mutuality of our responsibilities for the well-being of our shared public life. This observation brings me to the concluding section of the paper.

### **THE VOCATIONAL JOURNEY: The teacher as religious educator**

As I reflect back on my vocational journey, I realize it has taken the form of a holographic helix. A helix is to begin, a “three dimensional curve around an axis.” The point for me, however, is the holographic movement taking place among the curves of the helix. The boundaries of the curves appear both distinctly and as integral components of each other. The practice of teaching to introduce and nurture children, youth, and adults into the “good news” of the providential intent of God for all creation from a Methodist Christian perspective in a culturally and religiously diverse world has been the constant—the axis—in the unfolding of my vocational journey. The impetus to my seminary teaching originated in the teaching I did in congregations. The test against which I assessed what and how I taught in the seminary occurred in the exchange I had with children, youth, and adults in congregations. But even more, the primary focus of my teaching in the seminary classroom had more to do with creating environments for students to encounter the mystery of existence as the springboard to engage the subject matter of any given course. To teach for transformed relationship with the earth, each other and the mystery behind and beyond “creation” is why I teach. In this regard the old priest Eli has modeled for me the responsibility of the teacher when students encounter the providential intent of the mystery that exists beyond their knowing (I Sam. 3). By encouraging the boy Samuel to be responsively open to that mystery, he created the conditions for Samuel to engage the pull of that mystery toward some vocation or purpose neither of them could see at the time.

The curves of the helix make explicit three different dialogical functions in teaching: the practices of teaching “good news,” the practices of teaching others to teach “good news” (including practices of constructive reflection and training in equipping others to teach good news), and the practices of living responsibly into the consequences of our teaching and learning for the well-being of creation. My teaching has been in Christian ecclesial settings primarily in the United States but occasionally in other parts of the world. The primary partners in my teaching have been the students who have chosen to share this journey and colleagues who have been willing to risk their knowledge in that same quest. When teaching is viewed strategically as leaven in the loaf of life, then religious education, even in the particularity of its Christian form, has a global perspective and a public conscience.

Here we can begin to see clues to the shape of the field of religious education in my thinking. Located at the boundaries of knowledge, it engages us in practices of teaching and learning with mystery beneath, beyond, behind our knowing. From this perspective religious education is an inherently theological practice—faith seeking to understand the mystery we call God in and through our communal pedagogical practices. It emerges from the engagement of teachers and students in particular religious traditions at the edges of our ignorance of what is possible—what is good, acceptable and perfect--and at the intersection of our various religious traditions. So as religious educators, I would contend, we are concerned with the transmission of doctrines, rituals, communal practices through which we may glimpse clues to meanings and hope beyond our knowing. We do pay attention to the congruence of the habits, sensibilities, and perspectives we nurture and the traditions that enliven our imaginations and illumine our quests. We draw insights from many disciplines to think about educational policies, curriculum strategies, and developmental readiness of learners. We are the heirs to the wonder and judgment of our ancestors in this quest. We do have an intellectual tradition—from our scriptures and ancient philosophies, to the thinking of major interpreters opening up the meanings of religious traditions for the times in which they lived, to the reformers whose pedagogical visions challenged any education limiting the imaginative capacities of children and the intellectual curiosity of youth and adults, to those colleagues—past and present--who have shaped our professional conversations and relationships.

The juncture of this heritage and our contemporary situation provides much material for lively conversation among religious educators into the future. The dilemma of where to sit in the religious education banquet, in other words, has not ceased. Forty years ago I sought conversations that would provide a context and relationships for my vocational journey. Today I find myself looking for conversations among colleagues seeking to understand and speak salvifically to the contemporary hungers of people. So in this religious education banquet I am looking for colleagues engaged in conversations about the formation and renewal of communities (congregations, religious traditions, public life) that thrive ecologically—i.e. with a conscious commitment to their interdependence in this fractured time with each other and the earth in the providential intent of God for the well-being of all creation. I am seeking conversations on pedagogies of mutually constructive critique to engage religious traditions with emerging knowledge. I am drawn to conversations among teachers of any field or discipline on pedagogical practices that account for the explosion of knowledge, the diversity of cultural experience, and new technologies of communication in nurturing perspectives and practices of piety, thinking and justice that just might leaven our contemporary world with the sense that the good, the acceptable and perfect in the sight of God is a possibility.

As I ponder where in the religious education banquet hall I will find these conversations, I realize that some will be in the center of the room, and others will be taking place in the hallways outside. They share the common feature, however, of being located at the boundaries of knowledge and experience, religious and academic traditions, communities of faith and public life. Even more they are distinguished by the ways they gather us into practices of engaging the mystery of possibilities—God’s providential intent—that lie just beyond our knowing. And that, I contend, is an exciting place to be.

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