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## **EDUCATION FOR VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT: DRAWING WISDOM FROM RETROSPECTIVE NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS**

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*I have often not been clear along the way about the path ahead in my vocation. I do not think that this lack of a plan for the journey, common to many women actually, is necessarily a negative thing. – Belle Miller McMaster*

*Well, who am I? I'm an ever-evolving 50-year-old, with contradictions even as I speak. If I talk for twenty minutes, I might contradict myself ... I'm learning and growing, and a lot of what I've learned is in the last eleven years, since my daughter was born. So I'm learning and growing. And so, that's how I would like to begin. – Ayanna Abi-Kyles*

These two women represent a theme common to women – the discovery of unplanned and unexpected turns in their vocational lives. Such experiences of change without intentionality pose powerful educational questions, especially regarding the role of education in preparing, informing, supporting, and guiding people in their unpredictable journeys. Drawing from oral histories with thirty-one women (Appendix A), we have discovered a recurrent theme of vocational surprises, together with a remarkable readiness of women to meet those surprises, make new decisions, and change their life directions as circumstances change.<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on the educational challenges of this phenomenon.

The opening words of Belle Miller-McMaster and Ayanna Abi-Kyles echo Mary Catherine Bateson's introduction to the life stories of four friends and herself in *Composing a Life*. She says:

This is a study of five artists engaged in that act of creation that engages us all – the composition of our lives. Each of us has worked by improvisation, discovering the shape of our creation along the way, rather than pursuing a vision already defined.<sup>2</sup>

Bateson recognizes that composing is a necessary part of life in an unstable society. She contrasts this with the more settled processes of living in more settled contexts: “In a stable society, composing a life is somewhat like throwing a pot or building a house in a traditional form.” Composing life in settled contexts draws upon clearly established materials, skills, and styles, though, even here, the process does allow for innovation. On the other hand, “the traditional craftsman does not face the task of solving every problem for the first time.” Bateson proceeds to explain how our present society requires people to compose their lives anew, recognizing that even people “who work on factory production lines must craft their own lives.”<sup>3</sup>

The whole idea of composing a life begs educational questions, but the questions have quite complex answers if one considers the challenges of navigating the unexpected twists and turns in one’s vocational journey. In most educational venues—whether educational institutions, religious communities, public agencies, or informal settings—educators walk with people who are discerning their vocation. Since James Fowler’s attention to this subject, however, little has been written to address the significance of vocation as a religious educational issue, nor the qualities of vocational journeys in human life.<sup>4</sup> Particularly missing has been empirical study of vocation in people whose patterns fall outside the assumed norms. The present study addresses vocation from the standpoint of life stories, explicitly oral histories with women from diverse social settings—Christian and Jewish identifications, academic and religious community

contexts, diverse ethnicities, and diverse ministries. These oral histories promise to illumine educational practices in relation to vocational discernment.

Both the educational and vocational questions become more complex in light of the ever-moving nature of vocational discernment. In the Oral History Project, we have heard women telling their life stories in relation to the ever-changing dynamics of family, community, culture, and self. Commonly, the women describe their vocations with intentionality but without a “master plan.” They describe their vocational lives as coherent, but only in retrospect; thus, the very process of oral history invites them to re-member the parts of their lives into a coherent whole. This is an act of social construction, which shapes and reshapes life trajectories over time, as people also structure and restructure their memories of the past. As Elizabeth Tonkin says, the past “enters memory in different ways and helps to structure it.”<sup>5</sup> She adds:

Literate or illiterate, we are our memories. We also try to shape our futures in the light of past experience – or what we understand to have been past experience – and, representing how things were, we draw a social portrait, a model which is a reference list of what to follow and what to avoid ... Sometimes these processes and structures from the past are overturned; then there is a social revolution.<sup>6</sup>

Not only does one’s current life interact with the past, but one’s story is interwoven with every social group and context that has crossed one’s path. Further, people narrate their lives in relation to their audiences, whether the audience is a large group of unknown others, an intimate circle, or simply oneself in an internal dialogue.

In this paper, I will explore this dynamic trajectory, taking account of the diachronic and synchronic complexity of such constructions. Bateson gives a vivid picture of the diachronic processes – complex influences that take place over time – recognizing how people engage life as “an improvisatory art,” combining “familiar and

unfamiliar components in response to new situations.”<sup>7</sup> Tonkin gives a vivid picture of the synchronic movements – complex social influences in the past and present – revealing how people shape their life stories in relation to social dynamics. In so saying, I do not intend to place these two authors in different categories or engage in an extensive comparison of their work. They simply help sketch a picture of the multiple possibilities and issues in interpreting life stories and designing education for vocational discernment.

The purpose of this paper is to discover qualities of women’s vocational journeys and to draw wisdom from oral histories to guide religious educators in their teaching and mentoring with people who wrestle with vocational discernment. For educational direction, we will look particularly to: *narration*, which reveals and shapes vocational journeys; *historical-social analysis*, which uncovers the dynamism of life-making in relation to complex, ever-changing contexts; and *vocational searching*, which supports and challenges people (individuals or communities) as they ask how to live their lives in relation to the larger world. As background, I begin by describing the Oral History Project and its methods, followed by vocational discoveries of that project and educational analysis.

### **GATHERING WOMEN’S ORAL HISTORIES**

The Oral History Project has gathered interviews and/or presentations with thirty-one women, having completed a full set of fourteen to date, plus one or more interview with seventeen others. The heart of the project is to gather life stories, hoping to illumine the people who first gather and hear the stories, as well as future generations who will explore library archives. The intent is to engage people in deeper understandings of theology, religious practice and culture, as well as deeper understandings of themselves.

The Oral History Project is in three phases, the first two focusing on collection and reflection, and the third on developing resources.<sup>8</sup> We are presently near the end of Phase Two and in the middle of Phase Three, both of which include a component of analysis and interpretation, but will need to be followed by further analytic work in the future. Phase One had three major purposes: (1) to provide students and community folk with the opportunity to learn from great women who had composed strong lives; (2) to develop archives of women who had engaged the church and culture in significant ways; and (3) to discover the greatness in women around us.

The scope of Phase Two is women who have composed strong lives and are willing to engage intensively with students. In addition, we have focused on women who have lived all or part of their lives in the Southeast United States. Beyond this, the Oral History Committee has gathered nominations and made selections according to the following criteria:

- Women who lead by their moral authority—by their integrity and example as persons;
- Women of courage who have challenged, changed or sustained traditions in their communities, persisting through periods of hardship to strengthen their communities;
- Women who have faced tragedy, adversity or obstacles in ministering within their communities;
- Women who represent different parts of the South (rural, urban, and suburban); diverse ethnicities; diverse theological and political views; diverse ages (over 40); and diverse ministries (both ordained and lay). Diversity also includes women whose influence is quiet and localized, as well as those known widely for groundbreaking leadership.

All of the women interviewed thus far are part of Christian communities, with the exception of one rabbi. Later phases of the Oral History Project will broaden to an interreligious focus, and one course associated with the Project already does this. For

example, a Muslim student has investigated, through historical documents and interviews, the dynamics of gender-related change within her branch of Islam.

Our oral history methodology includes several elements: formal and semi-formal presentations; semi-structured interviews (Appendix B); participant observation (when possible); collections of published and unpublished materials by and about the women; and analysis, interpretation and public sharing. The intent of this paper is to analyze the oral history process for educational clues and, in particular, to analyze the presentations and interviews in order to discover qualities of women's vocational journeys. To this we now turn.

### **QUALITIES OF WOMEN'S VOCATIONAL JOURNEYS**

In focusing on the qualities of women's vocational journeys, I will use two sets of data – the oral histories that I have been describing, supplemented by collections of women's life histories available in published and electronically published forms. These sources are not exhaustive, but they do suggest patterns in human lives—women's lives in particular. Several themes emerge from our analysis, which suggest a landscape of vocational commitments common to the women we have studied:

#### **(1) Unexpected, unplanned, and unimagined twists in the vocational journey.**

I began this paper by naming the first theme – the unplanned and unexpected turns in women's journeys, particularly as regards life vocation. Belle Miller McMaster's words introduced this essay, and she embellished upon the theme in other comments:

So my journey in ministry has never been a clear path, but has had many unexpected turns. I notice this is true for many women and sometimes for men. Such a path calls forth imagination to envision new possibilities and attentiveness to God's guidance along the way.

In a similar vein, Anne Streaty Wimberly recognized vocational surprises and how such surprises have shaped her life directions. She described, for example, the experience of moving from middle class security in Anderson, Indiana, to a brief period of homelessness in Colorado when her family gave up everything (job, home, etc.) to move to a climate to help her mother survive tuberculosis. They had their first Thanksgiving dinner at Daddy Grace's soup kitchen. This marked the beginning of a longer journey:

But later on in my life – many, many years later – there was a connection between that event and another event. When my husband and I moved from Tulsa, Oklahoma, to Evanston, Illinois, I found myself for the first time since undergraduate work without a position. I thought, well, God had brought me that far, to continue my vocation as a teacher. But at that point in time, absolutely nothing opened up. And I found myself yelling to God, ‘God, now what’s going on here?’ ... And I was looking in the Evanston newspaper and found myself in the want ads. And there was a little tiny article that simply said, ‘Wanted, a director of a shelter for homeless people.’ That little tiny article loomed as big as the page ... And I thought, okay, I get it, that’s what I’m supposed to do.

After discouragement from other people, she decided to take this position, and was further confirmed in her decision during a worship service in that time period:

I was questioning, now why did this happen? And I don’t remember what the preacher was preaching about. I just remember breaking down and crying ... because it all came together for me. And it was as though the Holy Spirit was speaking and saying, ‘Don’t you remember, you do remember don’t you, when you were homeless. So you know what it’s like, and I’m calling you to give back.

Wimberly, like Miller McMaster, sees her life in retrospect as involving many twists, but the various twists worked together to open new insights, opportunities, and vocational directions.

## **(2) Trusting intuitive and spiritual knowing.**

A second common theme is the women’s trust in intuitive and spiritual knowing. Sara Armstrong, who served in the Peace Corps, as Mayor of a small Alabama town, and

now as a deacon in the United Methodist Church, expressed a deep trust in life's lessons.

She said:

Everything in your life, if you really look at it, teaches you something, even the bad things. They teach you something and, if you can learn from everything you do, that's what's most important. It's not what happens to you, but what you do with it.

Karen Green found that her faith helped her to know things that were not generally

allowed to her as a woman. She concluded her first presentation with these words:

I leave you with a scripture ... That's Jeremiah 33:3: 'Call on me and I will answer thee and show thee great and mighty things thou knowest not.' As women, there have been great and mighty things we were not allowed to know but, through the grace of God, we know them now. And we will continue to move forward. I tell you to stand on that because it will not fail you.

Both of these women express trust in their faith traditions and religious experience to guide them.

### **(3) Standing for justice: focusing attention on the oppressed and neglected.**

Ayanna Abi-Kyles, quoted in the introduction to this paper, grew up in Detroit, Michigan and, as a teenager, affiliated with the Shrine of the Black Madonna. She describes what she has learned from the Shrine: "If you're going to address oppression, any level, then you have to address oppression on all levels." At this point, she critiques the Shrine itself for becoming so focused on racism that it "left us empty when it came to addressing sexism and environmental issues and domestic abuse and it didn't leave any room for us to address anything other than issues of race." Indeed, Abi-Kyles has continued to address oppressions in many guises, allowing one oppressive discovery and action to lead to others, and seeing the relationships among all of these. She has thus been involved in programs to overcome racism and build the Black church, programs to

support women in ministry, programs to encourage healthy lifestyles in children, and programs to counsel and support women victimized by domestic abuse.

To Abi-Kyles story, we can add others. I have already mentioned Anne Wimberly, with her attention to youth, the elderly, and others marginalized in the larger society, particularly people in African and African American communities. We can also mention Toni White, who has been an advocate for people suffering from mental illness, and Diane Moseley, who is Executive Director of a homeless center for women. We can also mention Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, who has advocated for gay and lesbian Jews, serving synagogues that minister largely to this population. Berner, like Wimberly, has learned much from her own experience, as when she had to confront her own prejudice toward transgendered persons after years of ministry within the gay and lesbian community. Her own experience and ministry led her finally to advocate in her gay-lesbian congregation for these transgendered persons so they too would be fully included. We can also mention Rose Thomason, who grew up “a middle-class, white, southern, Methodist girl, coming of age in Atlanta in the 50s.” Asking herself where she got her passion for justice, she answered, “It must have been a gift from God.” Rose found that she was so angered by racial discrimination, and later gender discrimination, that she joined with others in activist work in Atlanta and in her Methodist denomination. She participated with African American and white women in an organization working for racial integration in Atlanta in the 1950s and 60s. She also joined with others to advocate for Billy McClure to be allowed to serve as an officer in the Salvation Army, and she helped to instigate and form the Commission on the Status and Role of Women in the United Methodist Church.

The oral history literature adds others to this list: Helen Kies, Maureen Adriaan, Rose Jackson, and other Cape Town teachers during the period of apartheid in South Africa; Edna Baxter, Iris Cully, Mary LeBar, Dorothy Jean Furnish, and Sophia Lyon Fahs, who advocated for child-centered religious education during times when religious communities marginalized children in the United States; Eileen Egan who advocated for peace during a time when war was popular in the United States and worldwide; and women in various forms of ministry who have advocated and stood with people on the margins, even while being marginalized themselves.<sup>9</sup>

**(4) Committing to make a difference in the world and to persevere in oppressive systems.**

The emphasis on making a difference pervades all of our oral histories, both in individuals' lives and in their family and community influences. Ayanna Abi-Kyles recalled her family and community in childhood: "No one went to school when there was an election – any election, city, state, and federal election. We all worked the polls, and we were aware how politics influences our lives." She elaborated on how this shaped her spiritual longings and life choices:

And there's another part of me that was spiritually searching for a home because it was, you know, the turbulence of the sixties and early seventies and I needed a place to find some peace. And I could not find it in the mainstream traditional Black Churches because of the lack of emphasis on social action ... My spirit was longing for a space, and so the Shrine best fit that need for me.

Abi-Kyles, as others, chose her spiritual home *and* her vocational directions based on her commitments to make a difference in the world.

One sees similar accents in Bishop Leontine T. C. Kelly, who agreed to be considered for Bishop because of her passion to lead the church in social vision, and in

Belle Miller McMaster, who, even with her “newly minted Ph.D.,” dropped her search for a teaching position and accepted a position doing peace and justice ministry in the Division of Corporate and Social Mission of the Presbyterian Church. One sees these accents in the literature as well, with some women risking their lives (along with men in many cases) to make a difference in the world.<sup>10</sup>

These women embody the explicit commitment expressed in words by Kelly: “We have to really want God to use us to change this world.” They also respond to a world that is devastated with poverty, violence, and oppressions of many kinds. Rabbi Leila Gal Berner explicitly expressed this awareness of the world’s need and God’s call:

We live in awful times. The world is a profoundly broken place. We gather here tonight on the eve of September 11 at the first anniversary of the horrendous destruction that reigned down upon America ... God’s challenge to us to be partners in the work of healing and repair is ever more urgent.

Such awareness of God’s concern for a broken world was consistently strong motivation for these women who told us their stories.

### **(5) Helping others to be what they can be.**

This theme is implicit or explicit in most of our oral histories. Mercy Amba Oduyoye made a particularly forthright statement of this value when asked about her life contributions. She said, “My most important contribution in life has been helping other people be who they are created to be” Similarly, Anne Wimberly, has given her life to helping people grow into their full personhood, whether attending to people young or old, near or far. In recent years, she has done this through personal friendships, as well as through formal programs at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, Georgia: Youth Hope-Builders Academy, Ecumenical Families Alive Project, and interchanges between ITC and churches in South Africa. In addition, she and her

husband have reared a number of children whose families were not able to do so, as well as hosting families from Africa for long periods. All of these projects are ways of enhancing the lives of individuals and communities.

**(6) Responding to the contexts where one lives.**

Another theme is responding to the contexts where one lives, an accent raised by Belle Miller McMaster, who learned from and felt called to respond to her Southern context and, thereby, learned sensitivity to other contexts as she traveled and worked in later years with international students. Just as McMaster expanded her original cultural consciousness to include the world, so Leontine Kelly's vision grew to include the whole of God's creation, recognizing the goodness and evil permeating that creation, as well as the call of God to respond:

I know that we humans are basically good and so too is the world. I know that we and the world ... are badly broken by evil and that we need one another to heal socially and politically, spiritually, and morally. This is our life's work, to be healers and liberators of and with one another. It is an ongoing life project, one that is never fully accomplished. And it has as much to do with other creatures, with stars and snails and Eucalyptus and elephants as with you and me.

Our oral historians sometimes expressed their concern for contexts that were particular to a time and place, as when Mercy Amba Oduyoye described the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of churches, and its attendant demands to respond to the devastation of racism:

The presence and the address of James Baldwin, the shock of the assassination, and the power of the civil rights movement propelled the Council into what became the Program to Combat Racism. We cannot forget the turmoil that Africans were going through at this time, and especially the struggle against apartheid. The over 200 member churches of the Council could not stand by and consent. As a faith community, Christianity professes a theology and a view of life that is incompatible with racism ...

But then we also experience the inadequacy of using violence to combat violence ... What we are after is to transcend the attitudes that breed racism.

Listening to these women reveals their awareness of particular *and* large contexts, each pointing to the other. The women's alertness to particular contexts seems to have raised their questions for the global, and their concern for the global seemingly turned them back to the particular.

### **(7) Building bridges of understanding and relationship.**

Another hallmark of the oral history interviews is the women's desire to build bridges—bridges between groups of people, across cultures, across religious traditions, between religion and science, and so forth. Consider Toni White, who has built bridges between the church and people incarcerated in prisons, or Anne Wimberly, who has built bridges between people in her theological institution and communities in Africa. Toni White sees her mission as awakening people to deep human struggles. She says:

“Because of what I have experienced, I can understand others who do desperate things and have desperate feelings. Then, I can help other people understand them better.”

Some bridge-building is across diverse patterns of thought, as between religion and science, or between people and ideas. Carol Newsom's bridge-building is between people and biblical texts: “I like to think of myself as a matchmaker, matching people with texts that they can love. And, when that happens, it is very satisfying.” Even this small sampling of the interviews reveals how much value our oral historians place on making connections, a theme that is frequent in women's theological and educational literature as well.<sup>11</sup>

### **(8) Practicing hospitality**

Another major theme has been the practice of hospitality, especially accepting those who are different as guests. This theme is already implied in much that I have

already said, and exemplified by Anne Wimberly's rearing of children and hosting families from Africa; Belle Miller McMaster's creating home space for international students; Ayanna Abi-Kyles working with an organization to create healthy space for survivors of Hurricane Katrina; and Carolyn Abrams' leadership of her church ministry with people who are homeless and disaffected in Wiggins, Mississippi. Carolyn Abrams told us the story of one of her typical weekends:

I spent Saturday afternoon burying a dear friend, Saturday night hosting a benefit program for ten families who were burned out in the community, Sunday morning preaching, Sunday afternoon delivering communion to the sick and the shut-in ...

Then, on Monday morning, ...I [had meetings] and spent the next hour or so at Sam's Warehouse because I needed to purchase snacks for 91 children, who have enrolled in our after school program.

Soomee Kim also practiced a ministry of hospitality in her former pastorate, but only after some considerable nervousness about being the first woman and first person of color to be appointed to a predominantly white church. When first appointed to the First United Methodist Church of San Fernando, she said:

I was very, very sick ... This was a very big Anglo church in the '70s. Now the church was shrinking ... and in a very Hispanic neighborhood. What is a Korean woman going to do in this church?

I started researching ... and found that the first founder was somebody named Dr. McClay ... And then I also found out that Dr. McClay was the leader of missions in Asian countries. McClay led the first group to China and then he was the first [modern missionary] to put foot on Korean soil ... Now, I was called to his church to be pastor. I was the first woman and the first ethnic minority in their 122 year history ... This is my fourth year there. We are opening our doors to the neighbors. People [of all colors] have started coming to our church.

For both Carolyn Abrams and Soomee Kim, the value of hospitality is born in their own life experiences, as well as in their ministries. This is indeed the case with most of our oral historians.

**(9) Turning to women's communities for support, consciousness-raising, and empowerment**

Another common theme is the value of women's communities for the oral historians. No one expressed the personal value more clearly than Laura Mendenhall:

I have some incredible women friends ... I'm part of two triads, two groups of three. One group is me and two social workers. They were both elders in one church I served ... I'm very close to both of them and we have been friends for 25 years. They're my family. And I have another group of two friends and they are both pastors. We've been friends for over 20 years ... [These six friends] are the ones I could call at 2 a.m. for anything.

Powerful friendships mark many of these women's lives as they reconstruct their stories in the retrospective oral history process.

Women's communities have also been important to socio-political action for many of the oral historians. Rose Thomason, for example, said:

Dana and I and some other astute women organized the Atlanta Committee on Women and Religion [in 1969]. We invited every religious establishment in the phone book and gathered a group of women together who were Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Christian Scientists, and Salvation Army. The group undertook two projects. We organized a defense fund for Billy McClure, who was suing the Salvation Army for sex discrimination against its officers ...

The other project was directed toward the three seminaries in Atlanta: Candler, Columbia, and ITC. In 1969 there were no women in faculty or administrative positions in any of the three seminaries.

In Rose's story, as in many others, social action arose from the camaraderie and conscientization in women's groups. The groups sometimes initiated critical awareness, sometimes nourished it, and sometimes empowered the women to act in community with one another.

**(10) Increasing care for oneself and connecting with caring communities**

Another value is not surprising in light of the active lives of our oral historians. This is the women's increasing care for themselves and their growing intentionality in

connecting with caring communities. Ayanna Abi-Kyles and Carolyn Abrams, for example, have become strongly committed to health care for themselves and others. Bridgette Young has developed an intentional Sabbath practice, which she has carefully kept for the three years since her decision to do so. She said to the community, “Keeping Sabbath reminds us that we are not in control of our lives. God is.”

### **(11) Turning to humor for survival –**

One final quality of the women’s vocational journeys is their emphasis on humor. Humor not only lightens their spirits, but it enables survival. Teresa Fry Brown, in a moment of dry wit, explained the situation of women pastors: “Women are often assigned to dead churches. Oh, we have some of those in the room that should be on life support. That is, of course, until [the women] bring them back to life, and then they are replaced by a competent young man.”

Sometimes the humor has been aimed directly toward social change. Diane Moseley and Toni White described how Candler women students used crunching apples to teach their professors and colleagues the importance of inclusive language in the 1970s. Every time a professor used non-inclusive language, each woman took a big bite from her crunchy apple, making a chorus of crunches. This action was during a time when Candler women were about five percent of the student population, and their experiences of marginalization were daily. Women students found life-giving humor in their gatherings, and they sometimes used humor to make their mark.

### **EDUCATION FOR VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT**

This paper illumines the power of life story in three ways: (1) the power of *life review*—retrospectively remembering one’s life; (2) the power of *social discovery*—

analyzing the intricate relation of human lives with complex social dynamics; and (3) the power of *empirically-discovered life patterns* to illumine qualities of human life that can be overlooked in theoretical abstractions. These three values of narrative suggest corresponding educational directions: *narration* (as a basic educational approach), *historical-social analysis* (as a practice of contextual reflection), and *vocational searching* (as a practice of personal reflection on the patterns of one's individual or community life). Together, these can illumine educational practice in relation to vocational discernment.

#### **EDUCATIONAL APPROACH: NARRATION**

Narration is a *pathway along which people discover and shape their vocational journeys*. We have learned this repeatedly in the Oral History Project. At the conclusion of an interview, women almost always make comments such as: “it was fun”; “I thought I did not have much to say, but I could not stop”; and “I realized some things about my life that I had forgotten or never even seen before.” The women’s words suggest important insights about oral history and about educational practice.

First, we have learned that oral history is itself an active process, facilitating people in their work of understanding and reshaping their life journeys—sometimes making sense of a journey that earlier appeared to happen haphazardly, sometimes informing new decisions, and sometimes influencing other people. This is partly due to the qualities of oral history, which we discovered in the literature and in our own history gathering. Oral history: (1) creates a forum for sharing life stories; (2) values the lives of people in the background of their communities; (3) reveals the textures of social movements, often uncovering movements that are not widely recognized or sanctioned by

the larger society; (4) creates a safe space for telling stories of terror and hurt, even opening space for healing; (5) raises consciousness about the plights of people whose lives are filled with terror; and (6) stirs imagination and courage for action in the future.

Educationally, we can elicit parallel discoveries, suggesting the importance of narrative approaches to education. From the oral history research, I will sketch a pattern for this narrative approach, which I will then elaborate in the next two sections. Since education has a more intentional formative and transformative purpose than oral history research, the educational approaches will be more proactive and imbued with educational purposes, such as nurture, critical analysis, and reconstruction. With this in mind, some important aspects of a narrative approach to religious education are to:

- (1) *Create opportunities for people to share their life stories*—The healing and transformative potential of this practice has been discussed at length by many educators and pastoral theologians in the past. One noteworthy example is the religious educator, feminist theologian Nelle Morton, who came to see the dramatic value of “hearing others into speech.”<sup>12</sup>
- (2) *Value each life as precious, including those in the background or on the margins of their communities*—This value is particularly potent for people who have been undervalued in the past, which likely includes everyone in some form and degree. One oral historian was particularly vocal on this point in relation to women. Roberta Bondi said, “We need to hear, again and again, that our value does not come from pleasing anybody, including men and women too. Our value comes from God, who loves and cherishes us so we can go about being the women we are, without shame, hanging back, or apologies.”

- (3) *Analyze the textures of social movements as they are uncovered in people's stories*—Social analysis (considered more fully in the next section) is vital to understanding people in relation to the rest of society, indeed in relation to creation. This analysis, informed by oral histories, needs to include movements that are ignored or judged negatively by the larger society
- (4) *Create a safe space for telling stories of terror and hurt*—Safe space is an urgent human need. The gratitude of our oral historians suggests that an inviting space in which their stories could be received was a treasure, echoing Lynn Westfield's discoveries in her women's literary group. The educational challenge here is great because spaces can never be completely safe. Indeed, the Oral History Project is instructive here because we engaged in extensive approval processes with Emory University's Institutional Review Board, as well as extensive consent processes with the oral historians. For educational settings, these processes will be less technical, but they will be just as important, namely analyzing your educational approach to ensure that it is open, non-coercive, non-invasive, confidential, and respectful, then creating a spirit of welcome and respect so each person's stories can be accepted and respected as her or his unique reality and perspective thereon. The results of such communal safe space is often healing, both in the sense of release and in the communal support and understanding that often follows. Indeed, people often hold some of their stories so closely that the stories become ominous and destructive in their untouchability.
- (5) *Raise consciousness about the plights of people whose lives are filled with terror*—This will include the lives of people gathered in a particular educational

setting, as well as those lives that teachers and others introduce into the learning community. Human story-sharing often evokes other sharing, and it often leads people to novels, the human sciences, and religious resources for deeper understanding of, empathy with, and hope for human life.

(6) *Encourage imagination and courage for action in the future*—Narratives inevitably evoke imagination and, in educational settings, this imagination can be invited, encouraged, and developed. Imagination is vital if people are to find the hope, strength, and courage to move toward a new future, which is a central teaching in most religions of the world.

With these directions in mind, we move to a second, closely related aspect of religious education.

#### **PRACTICE OF CONTEXTUAL REFLECTION: HISTORICAL-SOCIAL ANALYSIS**

Historical-social analysis is the way by which people come to understand the dynamic construction of their lives in relation to the larger world in which they live. Here, I will simply name some of the ways in which oral history functions and some of the educational questions raised by the very process of social construction.

Oral history is a social construction, but it also contributes to social construction as it is shared and engaged. We have discovered several aspects of this construction process in analyzing oral histories. The process: (1) engages people with cultural and contextual diversity; (2) helps people understand the dynamics of complex social systems; (3) fosters imagination, wonder, and empathy; (4) inspires creative agency; and (5) inspires and challenges people to consider the directions of their own vocations.

This is a positive rendition of the functions of oral history, and it does not take the place of serious intellectual and social questions, which have been studied by Donald Ritchie, Sherna Berger Gluck, Daphne Patai, Elaine Lawless, and others.<sup>13</sup> Several questions remain for further research. To what extent are oral histories dependable as revealers of human life, and in what ways are they limiting? To what extent does the selection and approach to oral history distort our access to human lives and socio-historical contexts, and to what extent can such influential actions be done self-consciously and transparently so as to contribute further data for analysis and interpretation? To what extent are the meanings constructed in the process of telling and interpreting oral histories simultaneously valuable and limited, and how might the subjectivity and dynamics of social construction actually contribute to interpretation and theorizing about human existence and human vocation? These are questions for the future, but what is important here is the power of oral history to illumine human lives and the discovery process of historical social analysis.

Educationally, this discussion suggests that the telling of stories needs to be amplified with historical-social analysis, supplemented by other analytic resources and brought into dialogue with religious texts, traditions, and practices. Analysis is not an end in itself for religious education, but a means to some of the very ends that oral history has uncovered: (1) engaging people with diversity; (2) helping people understand and navigate complex social systems; (3) fostering imagination, wonder, and empathy; (4) inspiring creative agency, both from reflections on one's own stories and on those of others; and (5) inspiring and challenging people to reflect and make new decisions on the directions of their own vocations. How might we approach such goals of education? I

suggest that some clues are offered in the vocational stories of our oral historians, particularly in the qualities we discovered in reflecting upon them.

### **PRACTICE OF PERSONAL REFLECTION: VOCATIONAL SEARCHING**

The educational discoveries that I have presented thus far correlate well with the religious education literature. By focusing more particularly on vocation, we may discover some distinctive aspects of education for vocational discernment. How, for example, might education inspire and support the qualities I discovered in analyzing the thirty-one oral histories? I will present these suggestions in the form of questions that people might ask themselves. These clustered questions could be posed in any educational setting, whether small groups, formal classes, individual mentoring, spiritual direction, peer mentoring, or an institution's meetings to discern its institutional vocation. Of course, teachers and leaders will need to select questions and wording to fit the people and the situation

- (1) What *unexpected, unplanned, and unimagined twists* have you faced in your vocational journey? Where have these led you? Where might they lead you now?
- (2) When you ponder your vocation in the future, what do you discover in your *meditative moments with God* or in your *deep intuitions*? If you traveled in the directions suggested by these spiritual-intuitive insights, where might they lead?
- (3) What *concerns you most about the world* as it is today, whether injustice, environmental degradation, oppression, or neglect? In what ways do you experience a call (or sense of urgency) to respond?
- (4) When have you felt a strong *commitment to make a difference in the world*? As you reflect on this now, what difference do you yearn to make in the next season

- of your life? To what extent might your commitment(s) strengthen you to persevere in oppressive systems?
- (5) When in your life have you been *drawn to help others be what they can be*? Do you feel drawn to this now? If so, who are the people (or creatures) who seem to be calling out for your support, encouragement, and empowerment?
- (6) In light of your contextual reflection, what *contexts* (near or far) call out for your attention? How might you respond?
- (7) What *conflicts or unnecessary separations* trouble you most, whether separations among nations or groups of people, cultural and class separations, generational separations, religious misunderstandings and conflicts, or seemingly irreconcilable ideas? Do you feel an urgent pull to build bridges of understanding and relationship? If so, with whom, for what purpose, and how?
- (8) In what ways do you sense a need in your life or your community's life to *practice hospitality*? To whom might that hospitality be directed and how might you shape it to be true, rather than false or degrading, hospitality?
- (9) What *human communities* offer you support, consciousness-raising, and empowerment? How might you develop stronger and more life-giving relations with such communities?
- (10) Where do you feel gaps or needs in your own life, places where you need extra *care*? How might you increase your care of self and connect more fully with caring communities?

- (11) When did *humor* help you endure a difficult time in your life? How might you develop your practice of humor in order to strengthen you and keep the world in better perspective?

These questions are not exhaustive, but they begin to reflect our discoveries in the Oral History Project. More important than the particular questions and clusters of questions is the very practice of engaging people in personal reflection on vocation, a practice that is important for all, whether young children or senior adults. If we think of vocation as shifting over time, then people need to engage in vocational discernment throughout their lives.

In conclusion, the oral history research that birthed this paper highlights the promise of a narrative educational approach to vocational discernment, together with contextual and personal reflection. The underlying hope is to help people engage the unique stories of their lives in relation to the small and large contexts in which they live, thus to discern movements of the Holy and vocational directions. This paper is a beginning point for religious educators who seek to travel with people in their vocational discernment, but beginning is what we need now to do.

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## APPENDIX A

### ORAL HISTORIANS INCLUDED IN THE QUOTED INTERVIEWS

This appendix gives brief contextual and vocational information about the women quoted in this paper. The analysis of the paper was based on all thirty-one interviews and presentations, several of which were multiple (2-5 interviews or events). The list below only presents those women who were explicitly quoted in the paper. [Note: I will add specifics about the context of their quotes later.]

Carolyn Abrams—Pastor, H. A. Brown Memorial United Methodist Church, Mississippi, Excerpts from presentation, ///.

Ayanna Abi-Kyles—Program Associate, Black Church Studies and Women in Theology and Ministry, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia—Excerpts from Classroom Interview, Candler School of Theology, Women in Theology and Ministry, Oral History Project, Prophetic Pioneers in Religious Education, 10 November 2004.

Sara Armstrong—Associate Council Director, California-Pacific Annual Conference, United Methodist Church—Interview, /////.

Leila Gal Berner—Rabbi, Kol Ami, The Northern Virginia Reconstructionist Community—Presentation, ///

Roberta Bondi--Professor Emeritus of Church History, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia

Karen Green—Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students, Muhlenberg College—Presentation, //////////////

Leontine T. C. Kelly—Retired Bishop, United Methodist Church; former Bishop of San Francisco Area

Soomee Kim—Former Pastor, San Fernando First United Methodist Church; presently the Acting Director of Student Life and Campus Ministry, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California

Belle Miller McMaster—Former Director of Advanced Studies, Candler School of Theology, Presbyterian lay leader, Atlanta, Georgia —Excerpts from Presentation at Covenant Dinner in her honor, Candler School of Theology, Women in Theology and Ministry, Oral History Project, 20 February 2003.

Laura Mendenhall—President, Columbia Theological Seminary, Atlanta, Georgia

Diane Moseley—Executive Director, Killingsworth Home, Columbia, South Carolina

Carol Newsom—Charles Howard Candler Professor of Old Testament, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia

Mercy Amba Oduyoye—Professor of Theology, Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana; Former Deputy General Secretary, World Council of Churches

Rose Thomason—High school teacher, author, activist, Pensacola, Florida—Presentation, //////////////

Toni White—Pastor, Suber-Marshall Memorial United Methodist Church, Columbia, South Carolina

Anne Streaty Wimberly—Professor of Christian Education and Church Music, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia—Interview conducted /////.

Bridgette Young—Associate Dean of the Chapel and Religious Life, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

## APPENDIX B

### ORAL HISTORY PROJECT – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Oral History interviews begin with one general question, “Tell us some of the most significant moments in your life and work.” We then move to a list of particular questions, but we ask these in varying orders and in dialogue with the flow of the woman’s story. When a woman’s story leads in directions beyond our pre-established questions, we encourage the interviewee to continue her narration. We also ask “tell me more” questions to encourage the woman to narrate her life in ways most natural and helpful to her. We do ask all of the questions below, but the flow, and sometimes the wording, varies according to the person and the setting.

- What are some of the most significant events in your life journey? Why have these particular events been significant?
- Who have been some of the most significant people, communities, and places in your life? Why?
- How would you describe your ministry and changes in your ministry over time? How has your ministry been shaped by your life experiences and distinctive personality? How has your ministry, in turn, shaped you as a person?
- As you look back on your life thus far, what do you see as the most important contributions you have made? Why do these stand out as important?
- What crises have you faced in your personal life and ministry?
- What crises have your churches and other communities faced?
- What have been major moments of struggle for you? These might include moments of losing faith, disrupted relationships, self-doubts or public upheaval.
- What have been major moments of joy?

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<sup>1</sup> The Oral History Project was initiated in 1999 by the Women in Theology and Ministry Program of Candler School of Theology, collaborating with the Pitts Library Archives Department, Emory University. We are grateful for generous funding from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, which has made the OHP possible by supporting action-research on teaching through oral history and oral history resources.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Penguin, Plume Book, 1989), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> James Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, III

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating our Past: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

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<sup>7</sup> Bateson, 3.

<sup>8</sup> The work of Phase One generated a videotape collection, fourteen written transcripts, and a small collection of materials by and about the women whose oral histories we were collecting. Phase Two, spanning 2003-2006, focuses more systematically on teaching through oral history, both in teaching events for the Candler and Emory communities and in specific courses with smaller and larger foci on oral history methods and materials. This phase has included the review, expansion (e.g., further interviews), and analysis of Phase One transcripts and collections, as well as the gathering of fourteen new oral histories, three extensive ones and eleven shorter ones.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Wieder, *Voices from Cape Town Classrooms* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); Talbot School of Theology and its "Christian Educators of the 20th Century" web-based database project funded by the Lilly Endowment ([www.biola.edu/ceacademic](http://www.biola.edu/ceacademic)); Harvard Square Library: Notable American Unitarians ([www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/unitarians/fahs.html](http://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/unitarians/fahs.html)); Lucinda Nolan, "Seeing What Is Not There Yet: Sophia Lyon Fahs, Entelechy, and the Religious Education Association," Paper presented at the Religious Education Association and Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education, Chicago, 9 November 2003. ([http://www.mtso.edu/aprre/Members/meeting/2003\\_papers.htm](http://www.mtso.edu/aprre/Members/meeting/2003_papers.htm); [cnolan1118@yahoo.com](mailto:cnolan1118@yahoo.com)); Linda L. Baratte, "Religious Education in the Prophetic Voice: The Pedagogy of Eileen Egan," Paper presented at the Religious Education Association and Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education, Chicago, 9 November 2003. ([http://www.mtso.edu/aprre/Members/meeting/2003\\_papers.htm](http://www.mtso.edu/aprre/Members/meeting/2003_papers.htm); [jbaratte@att.net](mailto:jbaratte@att.net)); Elaine Lawless, *God's Peculiar People: Women's Voice and Folk Tradition in a Pentecostal Church* (University Press of Kentucky, 2005); and Lawless, *Holy Women, Wholly Women* (University of Pennsylvania, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Wieder, *Voices*.

<sup>11</sup> Beverly Harrison, *///*; Mary Field Belenky, *///*; Carol Gilligan, *///*.

<sup>12</sup> Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home, ///*. See also: Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching from the Heart, ///*; Anne Wimberly, *Soul Stories, ///*; Margaret Ann Crain, *///////*; Lynn Westfield, *///////*.

<sup>13</sup> Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: Oxford University, 2003); Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Lawless. *Holy Women, Wholly Women*.