

**Mini-Plenary Discussion with Anne Wimberly (“AW”), REA:APPRRE Annual Meeting,
11/22/09, facilitated by Margaret Anne Crane (“MAC”)**

*****Please do not cite without permission of REA:APPRRE;**

contact reaapprre@msn.com ***

MAC: As we bring our stories into relationship, we must also bring care to genuinely hear. Margaret also thought it interesting that Charles Melchert brought up the issue of “Truth” in the panelist conversation with each other, as in we need to be mindful of the truth behind the stories. This caused her to reflect on what is “Truth,” which is Pilate’s question to Jesus.

AW: Truth is like pinning Jello to the wall. When AW invites the stories of students who are preparing to be leaders or participants in a church or school, she is inviting the stories of their lives in whatever way they tell them. We were not there and can’t look at them and say, “You lie.” We have to receive the stories hospitably. We can raise questions about how something happened or how they feel now. The stories may get altered or added to as the tellers are in dialogue with themselves, but our hospitality says we must receive the stories as they are given.

In her own culture, looking at Scripture, African-Americans have a canon within the canon, because the community will not accept with truth parts of Scripture. They receive the parts that connect with their lives and help them in their own doing of theology.

Participant: Presentation is predicated on mutual engagement, on the idea of curiosity and methodology. Reflecting on Participant’s own experience, people who go through tragedies in their lives initially begin by asking “Why?” and their narratives are full of “why’s.” As time lingers and moves on, instead of continuing to ask why, people begin to stay silent and say “Lord, thy will be done.” How do we dance in the silence? How do we engage one another when there are no questions to ask or the inquiry gives place to silence and lament? How do we dance to silent music?

AW: In her class, there are students struggling with so much. So as AW invites their questions and moves into discovery, the students sometime sit and say they are not able to phrase it or speak to it now. She tells them it’s ok to be silent and it’s ok to sit with silence. When people are silent, the inclination is to jump in and ask questions, but it is ok to sit with the silence. It is wrong to assume that when there is silence, nothing is going on. There is a lot going on in silence: it is the time God speaks; it is the time we speak to ourselves; it’s the time we perhaps don’t do anything except rest.

Back to the story of Rose, the black homeless person, who made the statement, “God does bad things to good people.” Rose started by saying, “Just look at Job.” AW began to mentor her, so AW invited Rose to look at the story of Job. They looked at it day by day. They

reached a part of the story where Rose couldn't say anything at all. One morning, Rose walked into the hospitality center radiant and was in a holy dance. AW asked what happened and Rose said, "God spoke to me and said 'Rose, I have something for you to do.'" She then became the mother confessor of every homeless person there at the center. If someone looked at them wrong, you had to deal with Rose. She went with her fellow homeless when social services were denied. She ended up getting LPN training. But she had to go through the lament, the silence, and the conversation with God to get to this point.

Participant: I'm struggling with the tie in between dance and religious education. I have been thinking about the comment in Ted's book: "There is no theology; there is only contextual theology." She is beginning to see theology as contextual. Our stories and narratives are really contextual theology? This provides a rich tapestry in religious education to see the dance between the doing of theology and the context of our narrative.

AW: Our theologies come from our own stories. In that way, they are contextualized theologizing. This gives a third dimension to the dance between theology and religious education: the dance is the way the connections are made; the process of connections. The dance is the outcome between the person who has been in the process and whatever has made the light go off to cause them to enter the holy dance. But the dance is also a communal dance, because the people in the dance have learned a transcendent dimension as well as something in their lives.

Participant: What about the people who aren't asking, "Why God?" but just asking "Why?" What is the connection to the Gospel story and our story? What if the questioner doesn't know the gospel story?

AW: Even if we don't know the Gospel or the person isn't Christian, the why question is really transcendent and one the human being can't answer fully. When children get to be 3 years old, what's the question they are always asking? "Why?!" They keep asking it, and it doesn't matter what answer you give. Maybe this is the unconscious dimension of children that is already connected to a transcendent dimension, which can answer a question beyond the answers humans can give. Of course, this transcendent dimension is drummed out in education with, "I will tell you what the answer is." But as religious educators, we are to call people to participate in asking and answering questions.

Participant: Thinking about the community and big house: It would be easy for people living in the same town together to say they have the same story, but really each one has their own story. It is easy to say, "Oh, I know what you mean." But, we really don't, because despite our commonalities, our individual differences make our stories unique. How do we create communities within education to listen to others' stories? Even across huge differences, people can still be alike even through our contexts are quite different. How does a perceived similarity make it so that we don't really don't hear each other's stories?

AW: This gets us back to the whole area of hospitality, which says we really do wait and really do open ourselves to hear, not just listen, to the story of the Other. We must recognize that the particularities and nuances of the Others' stories are different, because it is THEIR story not OUR story. There are themes that may be similar, but the particularities and the nuances are quite different. The hospitality is in the sharing and listening; it means we are there to hear...and what does this type of hospitality mean to the Other?

We may identify with the story of the Other and glean from this identification some of its meaning for our own lives, but even this insight and wisdom we glean will be particular for us.

Participant: Comment and question. He is impressed with how she has developed a narrative approach, which is rich and fruitful. The narrative becomes a place where we can come to truth. What he sees is some resistance to this, such as Chuck's comment in the panel discussion about questioning the narrative and asking about the truth of the narrative. But AW said, we come back to the fact it is in the narrative that we do theology. Her approach really is not telling our narratives, but starts at the place of listening to the narratives of others. Within AW's own story, from where does this insight about the importance of developing an openness to the Other come?

AW: I grew up in Anderson, IN, a few miles from a KKK headquarters. In the schools in Anderson, there was a small population of black persons, and her parents went to Second Methodist Church, because there was a First Methodist Church. The church community was going to make a difference in the lives of the young people. The elders of that church were both the listeners and the tellers of our stories and gave us a sense of identity about how we were going to live. Key story: Her mother taught her to play piano at 4.5 years old. A little after turning 5 years old, Ms. Ida Montgomery, who was the oldest person in the church and the church pianist, asked AW to play "Jesus Loves Me" for the children's choir. At age 7, Ms. Montgomery told her it was time for her to play a hymn for the congregation to sing; and, the piano all of a sudden got so big...but she did it.

In Sunday School, the listening to what they were doing and how they felt about it was always connected to Scripture. The assembly time in Sunday School was the intergenerational; make no mistake about it, somebody from each class was going to tell a story about what happened in that class and how it connected with their lives. The community listened and received what was said. So early in her life, the story was pivotal at church and at home. She gained a real appreciation for this. The natural process of story linking was what happened in church.

When she went to teach in Africa, she took this model with her to Africa. When they asked what Western model will you teach us, she said told them the model was the way you tell a story, and tried to show them that the African model of storytelling is a way of thinking and learning that the rest of the world needs to know. It is such a natural way of engagement.

Participant: “Revelatory,” “organic”, “intuitive knowing.” These words set off in the participant’s mind that the basis of this theology is that we all have the spark of God within us, we are all temples of the Holy Spirit, and these things can happen because of this mystery that’s within in. The deep theology is that, God is within each one of us and blesses each one of us. Is she off base? To the participant, if I really believe your story is sacred, then I am able to listen to it in a way that is affirming.

AW: “Revelatory” is used because the statements and comments are revelatory of our conversation with the transcendent image. There is an “intuitive knowing,” even though we may not be able to say it, of the transcendent image we call God.

AW then went back to her personal story because she needed to talk about a tough story that helped to shape her understanding of our stories and what listening does to the teller. She recalls a conversation between her and her father-in-law. AW lost 4 children, one of which was a little girl, Diana Kay, born pre-maturely and later died. Diana Kay is buried in Massachusetts. At the loss of the fourth child, AW was yelling at God, “I don’t understand this...Why?!” Then her husband got a job at the Inter-Denominational Seminary in Atlanta, GA, so far from Massachusetts. AW again started asking “WHY?”

As AW and her husband were travelling to Atlanta, they stopped at her father-in-law’s home. He was a pastor. And he simply said, “What’s wrong with you child?” She bellowed out, “I don’t want to go out there (to Atlanta). Diana Kay is buried in Massachusetts, and I’m abandoning her. And I have no children to go down with us.”

Then her father-in-law became the story teller, and he re-told the creation story. “Don’t you know, child, that God took the earth and sculpted us, and when we die we go back to where we came. So child, wherever you go, that is where Diana Kay is. For where is there earth? Everywhere.” For AW, that was an ah-hah moment. Her father-in-law linked her lament to Scripture and then reflected it back to her. That made all the difference to AW. At that moment, she entered into the holy dance and was in the throes of the holy dance at that moment so she was able to go on to Atlanta, GA and move on with her life.

This concluded the discussion time with Anne Wimberly.