

## ANABAPTIST WAYS OF KNOWING A Proposal for Tradition-Based, Critical Education

Sara Wenger Shenk  
Eastern Mennonite Seminary  
Harrisonburg, VA

I don't know when it began, but it became a frequent practice in our home. As the children left for school, I would say to them, "Remember who you are!" I never said it without feeling a quiet joy, grateful for knowing something about who I am. And I said it thinking that perhaps our children would also be reminded that they are "somebody"— somebody with a special history, with an identity worth celebrating.

I am intrigued that they didn't ask me, "What do you mean, Mom? What am I supposed to remember about who I am?" An unspoken potency was bound up in the understanding that we shared. "Remember who you are!" seemed to suggest that who we are is worth remembering and has everything to do with how we carry ourselves into the wider world.

The times in which we live may be particularly suited to remember who we are and draw sustenance from that memory. Postmodernity and its disenchantment with "scientific certainties" and universal explanations, offers an opportunity to speak truth out of one's own history as a minority people. In my case, that special history derives from the Anabaptist/Mennonites and their radical identification with Jesus Christ and the early Christian church. "Communities of conviction," as educator Craig Dykstra calls us, bear within ourselves a long historical tradition that is deep and rich, a potent legacy that resources us for discerning how to thrive in this age.

Much of what is called "postmodern," suggests theologian and philosopher of science Nancy Murphy, is actually nothing but a recognition of the failure to find indisputable foundations for universal knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Foundationalism, as a philosophical approach to knowledge, demanded a degree of certainty and decontextualization that is simply not available to most human endeavors. Among theologians and philosophers there is widespread acknowledgment of the importance of taking context into account. Knowledge is "particular and perspectival," and as such is always contestable. Truth, then, can be lived, believed and witnessed to only from a specific perspective or point of view. And so in "remembering who we are" we actively own our perspective and offer its unique texture to the fabric of our world.

### **Postmodernity and Tradition-Based, Critical Education**

The discussion in this paper can be thought of as a conversation about how to remember who we are—a conversation about education, and about personal and communal formation. I feel a profound urgency to engage in this conversation. The urgency grows out of a nagging concern that narratives and practices, which in earlier generations were deeply formative for our community life, are rapidly and uncritically being discarded. In the conversation I will share the distinctive confessional priorities that, in my view, relate most directly to educational priorities. And then, keeping those distinctive priorities in mind, I will invite interaction with philosopher

---

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Murphy, "A Theology of Education," unpublished paper presented at a consultation on Mennonite Higher Education, Winnipeg, Canada, June 13-15, 1997, 3. Murphy refers extensively to these ideas in several of her books: Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics, Beyond Liberalism & Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda, Reconciling Theology and Science: A Radical Reformation Perspective, Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning.

Michael Polanyi, hoping to shed light on ways to reformulate an educational vision and give direction for the educational mission of particular Christian communities somewhat like my own Anabaptist/Mennonite community.<sup>2</sup>

My contention in this conversation about education will be that the early Anabaptist stance toward knowing truth resonates with much of the current thinking about how we come to know in its emphasis on the traditional, spiritual, communal, bodily and practical ways of knowing. Such a stance can provide important insights for guiding us in envisioning educational and formational priorities for the coming years.

An approach to education from within a tradition-based community will underscore the social nature of human life with particular focus on life practices. Community practices express a basic appreciation of the importance of a personal, participatory knowing that must be nourished by tradition and communal experience. Central importance will be given to narratives and practices as providing identity and meaning to the community and its members.<sup>3</sup>

Philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that knowledge and truth are rooted in culture, and need a narrative context in order to become intelligible. "Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions," he asserts. An action requires a context in order to be intelligible. Behavior, he claims, can only be characterized adequately when we know its setting, the beliefs that informed it and the long and short term intentions of that behavior. Behavior and communication only become intelligible by finding their place in a narrative informed by the past, living in the present, and moving toward the future.<sup>4</sup>

In attempting to make sense of the future toward which we're moving, a human is essentially a story-telling animal, argues MacIntyre, a teller of stories that "aspire to truth." Deprive children of stories and "you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words."<sup>5</sup> The story of a life is always embedded in the story of the communities from which we derive our identity, he continues, suggesting that in this way the possession of an historical identity and a social identity coincide. And he notes that what a person is is in large part what the persons inherits.

Murphy suggests that no philosopher has done more to show a helpful way beyond the current crisis about truth claims than MacIntyre and the tradition-based rationality and morality that he outlines in his work. She claims that MacIntyre provides an alternative to the demand for universal reason and to the cynicism and relativism that show up when such a search is found to be futile. It is our traditions that give us the resources for justifying our actions as well as our truth claims, he argues. Outside of all tradition one is morally and intellectually destitute. He also argues that it is possible for traditions to compete meaningfully with one another, and occasionally to argue, in the public forum, that one tradition is rationally superior to its rivals.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> For a broader ranging conversation about tradition-based, critical education see my book, Anabaptist Ways of Knowing: A Conversation about Tradition-Based, Critical Education, to be published by Pandora Press U.S. in late spring or early summer 2003. That conversation includes Rebecca Chopp, Nancey Murphy, Plato and others.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Sloan, Faith and Knowledge: Mainline Protestantism and American Higher Education (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 223, 233. Here Sloan is referring to the work of Lindbeck, MacIntyre and Hauerwas.

<sup>4</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 208-10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>6</sup> Murphy, "A Theology of Education," 4-10. MacIntyre describes "tradition" as a historically extended, socially embodied argument about how best to interpret and apply the formative text(s) of a tradition.

How can we draw strength from a particular tradition, a particular story, while cultivating a lively critique of that tradition so as to keep it vital in changing times? It is timely to re-vision education as both tradition-based and critical.<sup>7</sup>

## **A Particular Faith Community**

There are broad characterizations that are used to describe what is often referred to as the “radical reformation.” The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century were named such because they repudiated their own infant baptism and were rebaptized as adult believers, which was at that time, an act of civil disobedience. They came to reject the medieval synthesis of Constantinian Christendom and sacramentalism and called people to radical discipleship, to patterning their lives on the ethic of Jesus as demonstrated in “the way of the cross”. Rather than church structure or doctrine being paramount in their minds, their life together in gatherings of committed followers of Jesus was modeled on what they understood to be the character of the early church. They were missionary in their zeal, and passionately committed even amidst widespread persecution by Protestants and Catholics. While refusing to bear arms to defend their faith or swear oaths they encouraged obedience of legitimate government. Their concerns about the separation of church and state, about freedom of conscience and about voluntary church membership have continued to germinate and bear fruit in many other contexts.

The Anabaptist/Mennonite approach has been to expect its traditional narratives and practices to serve a central formative function in the life of the community. While they seldom expressed themselves with elaborately formulated, explicit theology, they have been guided by an implicit theology, a set of firm convictions and practices for which they have risked, and sometimes paid, their lives.<sup>8</sup> They sought to model their communal, social and personal practice according to Jesus’ life as the norm with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Mennonite theologian, Tom Finger notes that the early Anabaptists stressed Jesus’ teaching and example far more than did other religious groups of their time.<sup>9</sup> The ethical and philosophical concerns of their approach have been to maintain a unity of faith and practice because it is in following Jesus more closely that we come to know God and God’s purposes more truly. A classic Anabaptist affirmation, stated by Hans Denck, an early Anabaptist leader reads, “No one can truly know (Christ) unless he follow him in life, and no one may follow him unless he has first known him.”<sup>10</sup> Mennonite historian, Irvin B. Horst described this as an

---

<sup>7</sup> Along with education theorist Lawrence Cremin, I am suggesting that each culture (including a church culture) has a vision of life as “a deliberate cultural and ethical aspiration.” It is this vision, drawn from the traditions and experiences of a people, that is the essential content of education. I would further suggest that tradition-based education cultivates continuity with the past in order to encourage new discoveries and the creative, critical dissent needed to revitalize the tradition. Michael Polanyi suggests that a great tradition provides the means both for maintaining itself and for the constructive, critical discernment needed to keep it vital.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Finger, Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach, Volume I (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1985), 85. In some ways believers’ church theology is similar to liberation theologies in that both are primarily concerned with matters of action. Theological reflection is in order to guide action and is evaluated by how well it does, being concerned with matters relevant to practice. While tending to reject natural theology, there is a heavy reliance on Scripture, which they insist cannot be understood and obeyed apart from God’s Spirit.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Finger, “The Constructive Appropriation of Scripture and Anabaptist Tradition,” unpublished paper presented at conference entitled, “Gordon Kaufman’s Theology as Imaginative Construction,” Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, November 3-4, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> I John 2:2-6; Walter Klaassen, ed., Anabaptism in Outline (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1981), 87.

epistemological principle and a distinctive emphasis within the sixteenth century on the nature and method of knowing.<sup>11</sup>

Heirs of the Anabaptists have emphasized the need for unity of faith and practice. Their traditional church-centered communities have maintained a degree of strength in large part because of a profound commitment to maintain the unity of faith and practice and also to remain distinct as a church community from the larger society.<sup>12</sup>

David Tracy suggests that we rely on the historical process of public exposure and discourse to assist in discerning what may become a “classic” expression of meaning that stands the test of time. In examining the particular classical genius of each tradition we may arrive at a more universal understanding of truth. Allowing one’s own particularity to be tested in public is not with a view to losing the genius of that particularity, but in order, potentially, to deepen it and to allow it to inform others’ traditions.<sup>13</sup> For Tracy, the work of practical theology is to bring Christian classics into critical correlation with interpretations of present situations that need to be addressed. His correlational approach speaks to the postmodern experience of religious pluralism. It does this by “reasserting the integrity of particular religious traditions as mediating relatedness to the Ultimate.”<sup>14</sup>

Below three Anabaptist “classic” distinctives are briefly described. These were selected because they may be helpful as we reflect on our ways of knowing and their relevance for theorizing about tradition-based, critical education. And later, these confessional distinctives will be brought into conversation with Polanyi to examine their broader implications for educational theory and strategy.

---

<sup>11</sup> See Irwin B. Horst, Proposition V of Theses, appended to his doctoral dissertation for its defense, cited by Willard Swartley in “The Anabaptists Use of Scripture: Contemporary Applications and Prospects,” Anabaptist Currents: History in Conversation with the Present, Carl F. Bowman and Stephen L. Longenecker, eds. (Bridgewater, Va.: Penobscot Press, 1995), 70.

<sup>12</sup> An Anabaptist ecclesiology is a fundamental dynamic shaping a distinctively Mennonite post-secondary educational perspective suggests Rodney Sawatsky in “What Can the Mennonite Tradition Contribute to Christian Higher Education?” Models for Christian Higher Education, Richard Hughes and William Adrian, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 194. The church in Anabaptist-Mennonite thought is “the body of Christ defined by the life and teachings of Jesus, transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. As the primary vehicle through which God today works His will in the world, the church is to be separated from and nonconformed to the world, yet is also salt and light in the world and the agency of God’s reconciling love in the world. The church, accordingly, is visible and tangible for it embraces all those who are baptized as adults upon confession of faith in Christ and who commit themselves to follow the way of Christ in fellowship.”

<sup>13</sup> David Tracy, The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism (New York: Crossroad, 1981). While Tracy’s vocabulary may sound unhelpfully “modern” I find his approach compatible with that of MacIntyre. In her book Beyond Liberalism & Fundamentalism, Murphy explains MacIntyre’s assertion in his books After Virtue and Three Rival Versions of Enquiry that a tradition is a historically extended, socially embodied argument about how best to interpret and apply the formative text(s) of a tradition. A tradition fails on its own terms when a solution to an epistemological crisis cannot be found that measures up to the tradition’s own internal standards of rationality. A tradition is justified insofar as it can be shown to make progress on its own terms while its live competitors fail to do so, Murphy, 103, 107. My sense is that Tracy uses “classic” in much the same way and that one can look for commonalities among the particular expressions of a variety of traditions in order to look for a more universal understanding of what can confessionally be referred to as truth.

<sup>14</sup> James W. Fowler discussing Tracy and Gadamer in Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 185-86.

## **Anabaptist Distinctives Relevant to Education**

Gleanings from the Anabaptist legacy which I deem particularly helpful for reflecting on how we come to know and consequently how we think about education, I've divided into three primary clusters. 1) The first cluster for critical retrieval will include the meaning and relevance of the Anabaptist emphasis on discipleship, particularly as it relates to "indwelling" the story of Jesus, patterning our lives on Jesus' life, and joining ethical and epistemological dimensions of experience which lead toward deeper knowing.

2) The second cluster of characteristics for critical retrieval will include what has been referred to as "the hermeneutical community," or the interpreting community, widely acknowledged as a significant contribution of the Anabaptists. Particularly relevant to our discussion will be the examination of what it means to discern truth within the community and how traditional root metaphors, stories and practices become powerfully formative as they interact with current community experience.

3) The third cluster of gleanings will come from an Anabaptist ecclesiology or understanding of church. What might it mean educationally to think in terms of a tradition-based, prophetic church which nurtures its own members in a distinctive community while working to resource and transform the larger culture? How might cultural practices that "embody" religious traditions as well as critique them, serve an educational purpose? And what of a deep participatory knowing that is nourished by tradition, communal experience and social responsibility?

### **Discipleship: Patterning Our Lives on Jesus Christ**

There is widespread agreement among Anabaptist scholars that discipleship was one of the central concepts of Anabaptist faith and theology. J. Lawrence Burkholder, Mennonite philosopher, says that the central question for the early Anabaptists was: "What does it mean to follow Christ? Or, what does it mean to submit life in its totality to the claims of the kingdom of God?"<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, he asserted, "The uniqueness of Anabaptism lies in its conviction that Christianity is much more than reflection upon Christ as the divine Being who invaded time, and it is more than the appropriation of benefits of the divine drama of the cross. Christianity is the concrete and realistic 'imitation' of Christ's life and work in the context of the kingdom of God."

Menno Simons, the sixteenth-century Dutch Anabaptist leader, chose I Corinthians 3:11 as a key verse and theological motto: "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." (NRSV). Over time, this foundation became the basis for the Anabaptists' growing conviction that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ must be central for understanding salvation, the church, Christian ethics, and eschatology. Marlin Miller, Mennonite theologian argues that the "Anabaptists like to stress that Jesus is both the Son of God by whom we are saved through faith, and the Lord who has exemplified in his earthly life and ministry the way Christians are called to live in this world. This emphasis on Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord has usually included efforts to interpret his saving work in terms that provide the basis for both salvation and ethics."<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> J. Lawrence Burkholder, "The Anabaptist Vision of Discipleship," The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, Hershberger ed., 136-37.

<sup>16</sup> Marlin Miller, in Richard A. Kauffman and Gayle Gerber Koontz, editors, Theology for the Church: Writings by Marlin E. Miller (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1997), 144-45.

Many so-called “high Christologies” tend to omit mention of Jesus’ commands, not making his authority concrete enough. Jesus functioned for Anabaptists as “one to be followed in concrete discipleship, not only as an object of worship or an ultimate salvific agent.”<sup>17</sup> When Jesus teaching and example are placed as central, it follows then that the faithful life won’t be understood primarily as giving assent to correct doctrinal beliefs, even though right teaching will be important. Nor will the life of faith be characterized primarily by “an inner attitude abstracted from any visible expression,” although an attitude of trust will be essential. “The life of faith is rather understood primarily in terms of a commitment to ‘following Jesus in life.’”<sup>18</sup>

If Jesus is not a model for conduct, argues theologian John Howard Yoder, the theological significance of his humanity may be diminished: “What becomes of the meaning of incarnation if Jesus is not normative man?”<sup>19</sup> Jesus reveals the true nature and vocation of human beings.

The desire to know the Scriptures so well that one’s life is conformed to the language, metaphors, practices and vision of Scripture was an all consuming passion for the Anabaptists. This immersion in Scripture grew out of the desire to live faithful lives of discipleship. Becoming a disciple of Christ meant “indwelling” the story and the reality of Christ to such an extent that one would come to know Christ and become like Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, within the Anabaptist tradition, modeling one’s life on the life of Jesus occupies a central place. This concept has far ranging educational implications. What does it mean to identify so closely with someone that one’s life is shaped by that life? What does it mean to “indwell” the Jesus story bodily, embodying that story and the Spirit of Jesus in ways that transform one’s life and spirit? What would it mean to be so immersed in scriptural narrative that its language and metaphors become the primary shapers of our imagination and practices?

### **Hermeneutical Community: Discerning Truth Communally**

Designating the local congregation as the “locus of interpretation” was arguably the most important and distinctive Anabaptist contribution to sixteenth century hermeneutics, argues Stuart Murray in his recent, exhaustive survey of Anabaptist hermeneutics. The community was “the focal point” of Anabaptist biblical interpretation, the context for every believer’s engagement with Scripture, and the setting for their reliance on the Holy Spirit. Contemporary discussion about biblical interpretation has both recovered this emphasis and suggested important refinements and developments.”<sup>21</sup>

The interpreting community for the Anabaptists, “was the congregation of believers meeting together around Scripture in order to learn how to live as disciples.” Elements deemed essential for participation in the community of interpretation were “the participants’ commitment to discipleship, the communal context, the authority of Scripture and the goal of application.”

---

<sup>17</sup> Thomas N. Finger, “The Way to Nicea: Some Reflections from a Mennonite Perspective,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 24:2 (spring 1987): 216-17. Finger argues that in general, believers’ church movements are not best interpreted as movements away from outer authority to inner subjectivity but rather as attempts to turn from sub-Christian kinds of authority in order to come under the authentic, transcendent authority of Christ.

<sup>18</sup> Miller, 39.

<sup>19</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 22.

<sup>20</sup> The concept of “indwelling” comes from Michael Polanyi, whose thought we will explore briefly later. He suggests that we must indwell the particulars internal to our awareness in order to be able to do what we are consciously intending to do. See *The Tacit Dimension* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smity, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> Stuart Wood Murray, “Spirit, Discipleship, Community: The Contemporary Significance of Anabaptist Hermeneutics,” a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The Whitefield Institute, Oxford, July, 1992, 420-22.

Murray illustrates how all these elements have been reemphasized in the contemporary rediscovery of community-based interpretation.<sup>22</sup>

Willard Swartley, New Testament scholar, observes that it is striking how much the distinctive features of an Anabaptist hermeneutic are “hot” topics in current hermeneutical discussions. The Anabaptist emphasis on congregational or community discernment as an essential part of interpretation has many resounding echoes in the current role of community in understanding and living the faith story. In addition the Anabaptist emphasis has a strong contribution to make in three contemporary arenas: against the reign of individualism; as correction to the chasm that has opened between scholars and lay people; and as antidote to postmodern emphasis on deconstruction.<sup>23</sup>

We must beware however, he cautions, that we don’t claim too much from a movement that had its own internal problems, and whose approach to biblical study was defined by specific issues in the sixteenth century socio-political environment. Yet, neither should we discount their insight and contribution for we do gain insight from them for a whole array of issues.<sup>24</sup>

Murray acknowledges that while the Anabaptist model represented a radical alternative in the sixteenth century and its contemporary influence is highly significant, it has several limitations which must be addressed if the full potential of congregationally-based interpretation is to be realized. He makes these suggestions for improving on the model:

- The community of interpreters need not exclude scholars. The relationship between scholars and local congregations will need to be worked out carefully, but their involvement has tremendous benefits.
- The community of interpreters need not exclude those who have studied Scripture in earlier generations. It’s appropriate to be wary of according them too much authority, but earlier interpreters should be admitted into the present community of interpreters. This community can be seen as a transtemporal community.
- The community of interpreters should include persons from diverse social, political and cultural backgrounds, lest a local congregation not recognize its own presuppositions and interpret Scripture in ways that merely confirm its existing convictions. The extension of the interpreting community to global dimensions holds out exciting possibilities.
- The community of interpreters may include a theological college, mission agencies, etc. provided they operate with genuine accountability and opportunities to test interpretations.<sup>25</sup>

Again, the educational implications to be drawn from the Anabaptist model of community-based biblical interpretation appear to be significant and worth further exploration.

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. The assumption that Anabaptist hermeneutics was unsophisticated and has little to contribute to contemporary hermeneutical issues is a natural concomitant to the prevailing neglect and dismissal of Anabaptism, Murray suggests. The gradual rehabilitation of Anabaptism, however, and the discovery of its relevance to various topics and within diverse traditions justifies a reexamination of this assumption, 316.

John H. Yoder observes that it was “a basic novelty in the discussion of hermeneutics to say that a text is best understood in a congregation,” “The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists,” in Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives ed. Willard Swartley (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies), 27. And Lydia Harder has shown how this insight has much in common with current hermeneutical developments in liberation theology and interpretation theory, in “Hermeneutic Community: A Study of the Contemporary Relevance of an Anabaptist-Mennonite Approach to Biblical Interpretation,” (Th.M. Thesis: Newman Theological College, 1984).

<sup>23</sup> Swartley, “The Anabaptist Use of Scripture,” 73.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>25</sup> Murray, 424-28.

Of particular interest is the intentional bringing together of tradition and experience in the context of community discernment. This convergence includes the communal intention to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to understand those texts which are deemed authoritative and in order to gain insight in how to live, how to practice truth in daily life.

Critical for the educational process is the consideration of how the tradition is allowed to shape the community's practice and which experiences and voices will be allowed to enter the process. Murray's suggestion that the community of interpreters should include persons from "diverse social, political and cultural backgrounds," lest a congregation not recognize its own presuppositions and simply confirm its own conventional interpretations will be critical to a vital educational process.

### **Ecclesiology: Tradition for Transformation**

While many of the descendants of the early Anabaptists (Mennonite and others) largely withdrew into sectarian enclaves following decades of severe persecution and had a progressively diminishing impact on the culture at large, I think it would be fair to say that the early Anabaptists saw their mission as one intended to transform culture. There is a passion evident in their writings and reported activities that they felt called to restore true Christianity.

Although the earliest Anabaptists seem to have hoped that a reformation of the state churches could be achieved, they were soon disillusioned. They soon came to realize that reforming the state church system was inadequate and that forming believers' churches was essential. They rejected Constantinianism or establishment Christianity and its symbols. They rejected "two-tier Christianity with different standards and callings for different Christians," and chose to apply New Testament standards to all Christians.<sup>26</sup> The renewal of the church, for the Anabaptists, included a critique of and dissent from any form of "establishment" Christendom that didn't involve voluntary commitment in defining a visible community. The renewal of the church had sociological and ethical implications as well as doctrinal and ecclesiastical significance.<sup>27</sup>

Miller suggests that while the religious and civil authorities of the time viewed all sixteenth-century Radical Reformers "as social revolutionaries," this doesn't mean that all the Radicals set out to overthrow the established order or that they aimed to create a social revolution in the entire society. With the exception of the Munsterites, he argues, this was not their explicit concern. "They were concerned rather to follow Jesus in all of life, in the social and political as well as in the religious spheres. Out of this concern they insisted on religious freedom, developed a new economics, refused to take the oath, and did not participate in warfare. In the context of the sixteenth century, these beliefs, protests, and alternative practices in effect made Anabaptists 'socially revolutionary' in some sense."<sup>28</sup>

The calling of the church, argues John Howard Yoder, is to be "the conscience and the servant within human society," a role that is possible only when the church community resists the world's seductive pressures to live on the basis of values other than those directly exemplified by Jesus.<sup>29</sup> Yoder insists that the church's task of maintaining the integrity of its own life and

---

<sup>26</sup> Murray, 332-33.

<sup>27</sup> Miller, in Kauffman and Koontz, 41.

<sup>28</sup> Miller, summarizing Walter Klaassen, "Radical Politics: Anabaptism and Revolution," in Anabaptism: Neither Catholic Nor Protestant (Conrad Press, 1973), 78.

<sup>29</sup> Richard B. Hays, The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996, 245, summarizing Yoder, Politics of Jesus, 157-58.

witness isn't to be construed as a withdrawal from the world or a retreat from social issues to focus on private piety. "What needs to be seen is rather that the primary social structure through which the gospel works to change other structures is that of the Christian community." The church, he says, is called to contribute to the creation of structures more worthy of humankind. The church is called to make known to the powers, as no other proclaimer can do, the fulfillment of the mysterious purposes of God by means of Christ.<sup>30</sup>

To assist the church in making known the transformative purposes of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Yoder's perspective on the role of tradition is helpful. Through the continuing process of communal moral discernment over time, he suggests, the Christian community develops a tradition that shapes its distinctive character in contrast to the values and norms of the world. Worship, he notes, "is the communal cultivation of an alternative construction of society and of history. That alternative construction of history is celebrated by telling the stories of Abraham (and Sarah and Isaac and Ishmael), of Mary and Joseph and Jesus and Mary, of Cross and Resurrection and Peter and Paul, of Peter of Chelchitz and his Brothers, of George Fox and his Friends." A community shaped by these principles will be engaged in a "modeling mission," embodying an "alternative order that anticipates God's will for the reconciliation of the world" and exercising influence disproportionate to its size or visible power.<sup>31</sup>

Noteworthy scholars, who are not explicitly Anabaptist, appear to affirm an Anabaptist understanding of church. The church, New Testament scholar Richard Hays asserts, is a countercultural community of discipleship, and it is this community that is the primary addressee of God's imperatives. The community in its corporate life is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God's redemptive purposes in the world. And the coherence of the New Testament's ethical mandate will come into focus only when we understand that mandate in churchly terms, when we seek God's will not by asking first, "What should I do," but "What should we do?"<sup>32</sup>

Hays insists that without the embodiment of the Word, none of our other deliberations matters. We can do an excellent job of exegeting scripture, looking for coherent themes that unify diverse New Testament scriptures, and interpreting what relevance those scriptures, from a world much different from our own, have for us. And yet the value of our exegesis, our interpretation, our theological and philosophical deliberations, will be tested by our capacity to produce persons and communities whose character is commensurate with Jesus Christ, and thereby pleasing to God.<sup>33</sup> It is the church, in the fullness of its life practices—not primarily its arguments—that draws others to consider the Christian faith.<sup>34</sup>

There are foundational implications for tradition-based education to be drawn from this discussion of Anabaptist understandings of church. I hear a persuasive case being made to affirm the value of a distinctive community that provides a context for cultivating transformative narratives, language and practices; a church that teaches people the language and practices that enable them to know Jesus as Lord.

---

<sup>30</sup> Yoder, 1972, 157-61. Yoder refers extensively in his book to Hendrik Berkhof's book Christ and the Powers (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1962).

<sup>31</sup> Hays, 253, citing Yoder, The Priestly Kingdom, 92, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Hays, 196-97.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 212.

<sup>34</sup> Clapp, in Phillips & Okholm, 90.

## Conversational Partner

I've found philosopher Michael Polanyi helpful as I reflect on possible affinities between an Anabaptist approach to knowing and recent conversations about knowing that lead us toward a fresh appraisal of religious ways of knowing.

In Polanyi's major philosophic work Personal Knowledge which he published in 1958, Polanyi describes the prevalent distorting assumptions about the impersonality and certainty of scientific knowledge and the belief that anything outside of scientific "objectivity" is unreal. These assumptions devalue our moral values, spiritual powers, affections, responsibilities and judgments, he claims.<sup>35</sup> All knowing of any kind, he asserted, involves personal commitment and the acceptance of personal responsibility for one's beliefs. The significance of this new conception of knowledge is "the *personal participation* of the knower" in all acts of understanding.<sup>36</sup>

Polanyi stressed the important role of the bodily roots of our intuitive capacities. He contended that knowledge is personal in that its creative or intuitive side is animated by bodily and passionate vitality. In so doing he avoids the image of a disembodied intelligence that accompanies the common perception of a mind and body dualism.<sup>37</sup>

Polanyi suggested that knowing involves the commitment to indwell the particulars of our own subliminal knowledge or the particulars of the tradition before we can move on to new understanding and action. An act of knowing based on indwelling relies on "interiorizing particulars to which we are not attending and which, therefore, we may not be able to specify, and relies further on our attending from these unspecifiable particulars to a comprehensive entity connecting them in a way we cannot define, so that we will be able to pursue new discoveries."<sup>38</sup>

Polanyi's idea of indwelling suggests that we dwell in our entire cultural heritage—the language, the practices, moral values, artistic standards, ways of looking at the world. It is this particular inheritance that equips us for handling and understanding the world. It would be futile to think we could get to any understanding of the world except by starting from the particular inheritance in which we were brought up, any more than we can learn language without learning a particular language, or a child can get a religious sense except through being nurtured in a particular religion.

The sureness of tests and rules for scientific verification of knowledge has to be replaced by what Polanyi calls a "Society of Explorers" where the committed person in "an organically functioning community learns his skills from its traditions in order to make his own contact with reality."<sup>39</sup> Polanyi shows that science cannot live except in the traditions of a community united by trust and by love of truth and acceptance of authority. Furthermore, a community where persons conform to the traditions and yet are encouraged in creative dissent may come to see

---

<sup>35</sup> Drusilla Scott, Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi (Lewes, Sussex: The Book Guild Limited, 1985 and Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 6-7. Polanyi's best known published works include: Personal Knowledge 1958; Knowing and Being, 1960; Science, Faith and Society, 1964; The Tacit Dimension, 1966; and, Meaning with Harry Prosch in 1975.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Polanyi, The Study of Man (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1959), vii-viii.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Langfor and William Poteat, eds. Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi (Durham, N.C.: The Duke University Press, 1968), 66.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Polanyi, The Tacit Dimension, (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1983), 24.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 311 and Scott, 76, 80.

more deeply the truths that the tradition only partially embodies. Polanyi suggests that “a man who has learnt to respect the truth will feel entitled to uphold the truth against the very society which has taught him to respect it.”<sup>40</sup> Such a community must rely for the transformation of tradition on the intuitive impulses of individual adherents of the community and it assumes that individual members are able to make “genuine contact with the reality underlying the existing tradition and of adding new and authentic interpretations to it.”<sup>41</sup>

Polanyi contends that a great tradition provides the grounds for both its being maintained and its being changed. His structure of bodily or tacit knowing shows the relation between traditional frameworks which form the background of our subsidiary awareness, and the acquisition of new knowledge that arises as we pursue solutions to the problems we are currently focused on.<sup>42</sup>

Drusilla Scott, in summarizing Polanyi says that just as in science we learn by dwelling in a tradition, learning from it so we can go beyond it, so we learn religious understanding by being brought up in it among people for whom it is meaningful and whom we trust. By dwelling in the “forms and rituals of one religion we can thus learn meanings which reach a more universal truth.” In a note of irony, perhaps, Polanyi appears to be suggesting that the religious community ought to become more like the scientific community where respect for tradition and authority are maintained with the purpose of encouraging creative dissent that will change the tradition—“a Society of Explorers, rather than rule and dogma, to safeguard the search for truth.”<sup>43</sup>

There are fascinating connections that can be made between Polanyi’s epistemology and an Anabaptist perspective on tradition-based, critical education. Polanyi’s concept of “personal knowledge” in which all knowledge revolves around the responsible person resonates on a profound level with the Anabaptist emphasis on discipleship. Each individual is responsible to make a personal, conscious choice to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In addition, every believer is considered to be a minister and is expected to give witness to his/her faith as well as engage in an ongoing process of communal moral discernment, offering his/her own personal interpretation to be tested by the community.

The concept of bodily/tacit roots of all knowledge relates in many ways to the practical, ethical dimensions of Anabaptist faith and life. The Anabaptists formed their thinking, language and practices from the Scriptures. They steeped themselves in the Scriptures and sought in every way possible to conform their lives to the Scriptures so that one could say the text lived in them and they lived in the text. In Polanyi’s language we could say that they committed themselves to bodily indwell the particulars of their faith heritage as shown in the New Testament and in so doing, found themselves radically transformed and able to transcend the conventions and limitations of the establishment tradition around them. In their “radical reformation” they demonstrated that a great tradition provides the grounds both for its being maintained and its being changed, reformulated, and revitalized.

When Polanyi speaks of the need to participate in the same kind of indwelling as the teacher is practicing in order to more fully understand, he strikes an anchoring chord with the Jesus-centered Anabaptist movement. Perhaps more than anything, the Anabaptists emphasized

---

<sup>40</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 61, cited in Scott, 158.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 59, cited in Scott, 163.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Gelwick, *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 139.

<sup>43</sup> Scott, 186.

committing oneself to follow Jesus' teaching and example. Neither church structures nor doctrines were considered as centrally important as modeling one's life on Jesus and the early church. Their desire to faithfully embody the practices of servanthood, love of enemy, sharing material resources, truthfulness and so on, allowed them to participate in the kind of "indwelling" their teacher had practiced.

Polanyi's concept of "indwelling" as necessary to understand the nature of reality and God appears to affirm the Anabaptist perception that no one can truly know Christ unless he/she follows him in life. And there is also that intuitive love or hunch that moves one to commit oneself to indwell in such a way that new discoveries will be forthcoming which resonates with the accompanying affirmation that no one may follow Christ unless he/she has first known him. For both Polanyi and the Anabaptists, knowing and doing appear to be inseparably intertwined.

Polanyi's concept of the "Society of Explorers" has some intriguing resonance with the Anabaptist approach to communal discernment in the interpreting community. The community of "explorers" who are guided by rules of accountability and yet open to new intuitive, imaginative insights appears similar to the Anabaptist approach to discerning truth in some respects. For the Anabaptists, consistency with the Scriptures and the agreement of the community were key criteria for discerning whether an interpretation or practice was of the Holy Spirit. The dynamic of discernment involves both an authoritative traditional framework that placed limits on each individual's self-determination and an openness to the inbreaking of new insights brought by the Holy Spirit through individuals and confirmed by the community.

Polanyi's contention that there will be no new discovery or basis for radical change without first indwelling an authoritative tradition has profound implications for a tradition-based educational theory. In addition, his suggestion that a community must rely on the intuitive impulses of its individual adherents for the transformation of the community and his assumption that individuals can make contact with a reality separate from the community which draws the community into truer and more desirable ways to live, are highly significant. His suggestion that there is a spiritual reality embodied in tradition that both sustains the tradition and transcends it invites both a rootedness in tradition and a critical, creative dissent from it which calls the tradition to become more of what it ought to be.

## **An Emerging Educational Theory**

What educational approaches or strategies might one begin to sketch out in light of the conversation above, and in view of the educational challenges that face our faith communities? Below I suggest several for our ongoing conversation.

### **Indwelling Narratives and Practices**

For the Anabaptists, neither church structures nor doctrines were considered as centrally important as modeling one's life on Jesus and one's communal life on the early Christian church. The concept of "indwelling" suggests that we live and think out of the most deeply formed, bodily particulars of our internalized skills, habits, attitudes, and images. What might an educational strategy that focuses on what it means to participate in the same kind of "indwelling" as our teacher and Lord include? Let me suggest these characteristics.

1. "Indwelling" will involve direct, as well as indirect teaching. It is not primarily about conveying information. A parent or teacher will assist a child by immersing him or her in formative texts and practices which will allow the child in a regular, disciplined, imaginative and

loving way to internalize their meaning. Immersion will include telling and reading stories, memorizing and singing poetry, drawing and dramatizing images and events. This indirect exposure will prepare the child for his or her own moments of insight, and later for critical, reflective thinking.

2. “Indwelling” as a strategy will mean living into the story and ethic of Jesus to such an extent that I come to interpret and experience myself and my world on its terms. “Indwelling” the formative narratives of my faith community will mean that its language and metaphors become the primary shapers of my imagination and practices. In order to enhance the abilities of our children to understand their world primarily in light of the Scriptures, from the day they are born we will surround them with poetry, songs, images, symbols, and stories of the Scriptures and their faith tradition on a daily basis. Our best poets, artists, story-tellers, song-writers and faith heroes will embody and enact our community’s most formative literature.

3. The ability to “indwell” the way of Jesus will first mean engaging in regularly patterned, habitual behaviors that reflect that life. It will mean, from the day our children are born, we will surround them with the daily rhythm of bodily practices among which would be prayer, worship, hospitality, peace-making, truth-telling, respect for elders, and service to neighbors.

4. “Indwelling” the tradition of one’s teacher will provide a way of seeing and forming a particular perspective on reality. “Indwelling” the Jesus story bodily, for example, will mean engaging in the practices of servanthood, love of enemy, sharing of material resources and in so doing coming to see reality from the perspective of those whose reality we come to share. By “indwelling” the forms and practices of the Jesus way we are enabled to see reality from the perspective of the poor, the weak, the outcast.

To employ the strategy of “indwelling” will mean that we pay far more attention to the bodily aspects of social memory. It will mean identifying a cultural fund of Scripture, poetry, music, stories and daily, habitual practices which convey the spiritual and moral qualities deemed essential for forming basic character dispositions and the capacity for innovative, critical thinking.

### **Communal Moral Discernment as “A Society of Explorers”**

Through the long night of honoring those who engaged primarily in detached, rational thinking most of us have come to doubt our own powers for faithful, imaginative and personal judgment. It is imperative that we develop confidence in our own personal powers of judgment once again. This won’t mean that our every emotional whim can be trusted but that through self-discipline and apprenticeship to the masters of the art of moral discernment, we can learn once again to use our faculties of personal judgment for the good of the community.

A primary strategy of education will be to invite adults to engage their powers for faithful, imaginative and personal judgment. We must find ways in the family, at church and at school to provide opportunities for persons to use their personal judgment in communal moral discernment around the Scriptures and in conversation with present experience. Adults need to be reassured that they know more than they think they know and that even as relatively uneducated, ordinary church members, they are capable of listening to the Spirit and the Scriptures and assisting in communal discernment.

The Anabaptist tradition tells of congregations of believers meeting together around Scripture in order to learn how to live as disciples. It was assumed that Scripture was clear enough for ordinary Christians to understand and apply when read communally and under the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It was assumed that clarity about the meaning of the Scriptures was provided to those who approached them with a right attitude out of a commitment to faithful living rather than mere curiosity.

### **Revitalizing Core Practices**

The educational strategy that has the most power for transforming our families, churches and schools is the revitalization of core faith-based practices. Our practices are shared activities through which we come to form perspectives on reality and to know the truth as embodied in Jesus Christ.

But it is also through our practices that we bear fruit. Our practices of making peace, telling the truth, opening our home to the stranger for example, when done in the name of Christ, suggest the sort of fruitfulness that comes from “abiding in Christ.”

So we have a fully formed circle, an inseparably intertwined cord of epistemological and ethical dynamics. Engaging in ethical practices modeled on Jesus is essential for coming to know the truth of the Gospel and those same practices also embody the fruitful outworking of that truth—the gift of the Gospel to the world.

An educational strategy that seeks to renew community life by identifying and revitalizing core practices which reenact the self-giving life of Jesus holds great promise for wide community interest and involvement. When people are invited to talk about practices in their childhood home or in their faith community, they are often eager to offer vivid memories and concrete, down-to-earth stories. Reflection on practices generates strong feelings both about the abuses and the creative possibilities of specific practices. When asked to imagine what a good culture might look like, whether a family culture, a school culture or a church-based culture, persons are energized to imagine what the concrete patterns and practices of a good and godly life together might look like. If we’re not talking about a legalistic imposition of authoritarian dictates from the past but about a quality of life that promotes human flourishing, generosity, mutual respect, and the celebration of our faith stories, persons are energized to think about revitalizing core practices. They glimpse the intrinsic connection between down-to-earth practices and the “the abundant life.”

Many persons in post-modernity are drawn, not primarily towards adopting a system of beliefs but rather toward down-to-earth practices that construct a wholesome way of life. Every family, church and school, however, will want to identify and name those practices which most nearly express the quality of life together that they long for and creatively choose to construct.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> The discussion above is extracted from a much longer conversation about education that will appear in a book I authored called Anabaptist Ways of Knowing: A Conversation about Tradition-Based, Critical Education, to be published by Pandora Press U.S. in late spring or early summer 2003. That conversation includes Rebecca Chopp, and Nancey Murphy and Plato among others.