

**CONVERSATION PARTNERS FOR OUR FUTURE:  
TAKING CUES FROM THE PAST  
Research Interest Group -- APRRE-REA 2003**

Margaret Ann Crain  
Associate Professor of Christian Education  
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

**Voices accorded power in the Twentieth Century**

One hundred years ago, the Religious Education Association met for the first time. The famed educator/philosopher, John Dewey, addressed the group. He began, "So far as I see, psychological theory at present simply emphasizes and reinforces some general principles which accompany a practical movement that is already going on" (Dewey, 1903, 6). His address reassured the religious educators that psychology was simply one of the fields that could contribute to religious education. Apparently, Dewey could count on a common presupposition that religious education draws from the scholarship and theory of other fields than itself. He spent no time defending the notion that psychology had something to teach us.

His speech focused on the relevance of the psychological "principle of growth." This principle described the development of humans through stages which significantly alter the way we experience life and understand its meaning. Children are not just smaller versions of adults. They are qualitatively different. Therefore, Dewey said, "It is a question of surrounding the child with such conditions of growth that he may be led to appreciate and to grasp the full significance of his own round of experience, as that develops in living his own life" (Dewey, 7). A century later, his words still ring true [except, of course, for the gendered pronouns]. Not only did the principle of growth come to dominate religious education, but also it opened the door to an appreciation of difference that we have yet to fully explore. If children are qualitatively different than adults, then perhaps can adults be qualitatively different from one another? Gender, culture and ethnicity may shape a human being more than the early religious educators ever imagined.

I wasn't there, but it sounds as if someone had asked Professor Dewey whether psychology was a threat to religious education. His answer was an implied "no" as he explained the principle of growth and then applied it to religious education. In some settings we still struggle to explain a fundamental quality of religious education; it is interdisciplinary. The Religious Education Association at its inception recognized this. We rely on scholarship from other fields. John Dewey was not a religious educator; he was trained as a philosopher, but generated ideas that were incarnated in progressive education. Significantly, he was part of our very first gathering.

Nearly eight decades later, Maria Harris wrote, "I have had the increasing sense over the last decade that when I speak, people seem to listen." (79:1, p. 22) She called it "the experience of power." Many of us have indeed listened to Maria Harris. She brought a new appreciation of

the importance of the whole person to religious education. She helped us to value religious imagination, creativity, art and music along with cognition as facets of learning about faith. Her wonderful classic, *Fashion Me a People*, helped us to name the aspects of congregational life that play a role in religious education. Harris' work contributed to our understanding of religious education by helping us to think more holistically. As we look back on the Twentieth Century and religious education, certain voices stand out because they reshaped the field of religious education or redirected our energy. The Twentieth Century in religious education is defined by the voices to which we listened both in our fields and in related disciplines. Who had authority? To whom did we listen? To whom did we grant the power to shape our theory and practice?

## **Theology**

Certainly, the voice of theology has always been central. Religious educators begin from theological assumptions about the nature of God and the nature of humans and those assumptions shape our theories of religious education in fundamental ways. Theology should be a powerful voice for religious education. Unfortunately, religious educators have tended to choose up theological sides and cease listening to other voices. Jack L. Seymour described the impact of theology in "Holding Onto Hope: Theological Controversy in Christian Religious Education." He detailed the tug for power between liberal and neo-orthodox religious educators that dominated much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. "Both groups became camps and 'turned a deaf ear' to each other." (2002, 351) The theological foundation shapes the educator's understanding of the authority of the teacher, the content, and the teaching processes of religious education. Liberal religious educators tended to emphasize the experience of the learners, teaching processes, and the atmosphere of the classroom above the specific content. They put a high priority on experience as a source for theological reflection. Neo-orthodox religious educators began with the urgency of passing on the doctrines and stories of the faith and protecting the truth of God's revelation. These differing emphases are not mutually exclusive; yet, their adherents found it difficult to talk to one another because they emphasized different things. Theology remains a powerful voice for religious educators, even though it divides us from one another.

Neoorthodoxy dominated protestant theology from the mid-1930s through the early 1960s. William Klempa observed that this theological school "brought a stronger emphasis on the biblical story and interpretation, rather than putting a primary emphasis on life experience" (Cully, 450). The protestant cooperative curricula were strongly influenced by Neoorthodoxy, which emphasized learning the Biblical stories and using the best literary and historical scholarship as interpretive tools for the biblical text. A leading neoorthodox voice in religious education was James D. Smart. He challenged the church to take religious education seriously, to use the best scholarly resources, not fearing intellectual inquiry, a point of view captured by the title of one of his books, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*. Smart edited *The Christian Faith and Life Curriculum: A Program for Church and Home*, the goal of which was a biblically literate laity. Neoorthodoxy raised the standard for learning in the church, placing knowledge about the Bible at the highest priority, an important contribution to religious education in the Twentieth Century.

However, I will argue that the most important voices of influence for religious education in the last century were theologies that took human experience very seriously. This stance will locate me with the progressives theologically. The liberation theologians--feminist, Black, womanist, Latin American, mujerista, etc.—taught us to listen to the truths that emerge when the community gathers to discern God’s Word for that context. Each of these liberation perspectives taught us to listen to the experiences of particular social and cultural groups. Much religious education theory now reflects the goals of liberation theology.

### **Progressive Education and Laboratory Schools**

The Twentieth Century was a time for learning and developing theories that connect to the realities of life experience. Extremely influential theories of this sort came from the fields of education and psychology. Observing children and adults led to theories about learning and human development that revolutionized both the public schools and religious education. Most of the theorists were white men, located in the northeastern United States, part of the academic intelligentsia. They were excited as they learned through observation how to create opportunities for learning that would include everyone. They were optimistic about human nature. They believed that humans yearn for the divine and for meaning in their lives. They developed theories about how humans come to know God and how to help humanity to achieve its God-given potential for a loving and just society.

Again an important early voice was John Dewey (1859-1952) through his advocacy of progressive education. Along with others Dewey argued, “[E]ducation should be child-centered; education must be both active and interactive; and education must involve the social world of the child and the community” (Mooney, 4). Dewey founded a laboratory school at the University of Chicago, a highly innovative notion. When a teacher observed that a child had not learned something, the teacher was encouraged to reflect on why that might be, to observe the child, and to see what could be learned about learning. To learn about learning by careful observation in a school was a new approach.

Many universities and schools of education followed this lead and created their own laboratory schools. I was very fortunate as a two-year old girl to become a student in one of these laboratory schools at the University of Iowa. It was a place full of resources and tests; teachers with specialized interests tried out opportunities for learning with us. Observers often sat in the rear of the classroom or behind a one-way glass taking notes. The goal of teachers and observers was to help each student learn. We enjoyed all the attention. I attended that school through the sixth grade. I had wonderful committed teachers, opportunities to learn art and music, and the use of the whole university library system. I can testify personally to the effectiveness of progressive education in a lab school.

Religious educators such as George Albert Coe welcomed the insights from progressive education and put them to use in our field. Coe was very active in the Religious Education Association from its earliest days. His book, *A Social Theory of Religious Education* published in 1917, translated the ideas of John Dewey into religious education. With Dewey, Coe

recognized that theoretical reflection on teaching and learning in the school must grow out of practice.

Proponents of progressive religious education maintained the sense of authority to teach and to determine the curriculum, but they also listened to the insights of social science as they began to think of the classroom as a laboratory for social change. Coe and other liberal religious educators saw growing in faith as a natural human process. Religious education could help persons to become more reflective and to grow toward the Kingdom of God. Teachers were encouraged to observe children and devise learning appropriate to the child's ability, interests, and needs. Like any laboratory, the classroom was seen as a place in which to generate theory as well as a place to teach and shape young persons.

In the 1940s The Methodist Church, among others, began a process for certification of its Sunday School teachers that involved participation in laboratory schools. Students in the age group became a "class" that the teachers-in-training would practice teaching. Although at first the training events were limited to observing, they evolved into opportunities to practice teaching as well as observing and to learn from that process. Aileen Sanborn, who directed these training events in The Methodist Church, remembers: "After each session, a thorough evaluation of what did or did not take place in the class session was led by the Laboratory leaders" (Johnson-Siebold, 1999, 37). Participant observation proved to be an effective way to learn. Sanborn notes, "Changes in individual's attitudes and behaviors as well as in skills and perceptions were evident" (Johnson-Siebold, 1999, 37). The ideas of Dewey, incorporated into religious education, were widely practiced and trusted.

I can attest to the power of laboratory schools as a religious educator too. When I began as a religious educator in 1978, the first training event I attended was a laboratory school for religious education. The efforts to learn from our teaching lab were intense. I chose junior high youth as the age level in which to specialize. I learned the developmental theories about these youth as well as varieties of teaching methods that honored their stages of development. By the time I came into the lab school movement, participation was waning. However, lab schools trained me to observe the learners and myself closely, learning from those insights about how to teach. It was an invaluable experience.

## **Psychology**

Educators, both in public and religious education, welcomed theories from psychology. A leading voice has been Jean Piaget (1896-1980). Piaget became interested in how children create knowledge when he noticed the wrong answers children gave to questions on an intelligence test. After observing this and connecting the wrong answers with the ages of the children who gave them, Piaget described stages of cognitive development to explain the wrong answers. His idea that certain cognitive abilities take time to develop was a way to explain what he observed. The descriptions of cognitive stages supported efforts to make education more child centered. Now religious educators begin with their knowledge of what is age appropriate when they design curriculum and resources for learning. Piaget's observation started a revolution that reached deeply into religious education.

Dewey had high hopes for the formation that a school could provide, preparing students to be citizens in a democratic society. Piaget studied the development of cognition processes, recognizing that the brain develops the ability to deal with complex and abstract ideas over time. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) extended the work that Dewey and Piaget began by developing theories that took more seriously the social context in which a child is developing. Although he was not trained as a psychologist, Vygotsky became interested in educational psychology after teaching literature in a secondary school (Mooney, 81), a rich context in which to observe how adolescents learn. Vygotsky sought to connect social and cognitive development, arguing that they cannot be separated. His theory describes the zone of proximal development, the “distance between the most difficult task a child can do alone and the most difficult task a child can do with help” (Mooney, 83). In a socially nurturing setting, a child can learn more effectively. Religious education theories that take the community of faith very seriously are reflecting the concepts of Vygotsky (see especially O’Gorman, in Seymour, 1997). Vygotsky is less known than Piaget and Dewey, but his theories describe much of what we do today. He learned by observing not only the child, but teachers and peers as well. Vygotsky’s theories can help us to see that the whole social setting for learning must be considered as we develop theories for religious education.

### **Developmental Theories**

More recently, James Fowler and Carol Gilligan have contributed important theories for religious educators. Fowler translated the moral development theories of Kohlberg into the realm of faith. Carol Gilligan and her associates extended Kohlberg’s work in moral development by asking if there might be gender differences. Gilligan’s work with women made us aware that we must not make the experience or development of Euro-American men normative. Even though Gilligan and Fowler sought to describe the path of development for all humans, their work opened up the notion that humans are not all the same. Culture, gender, ethnicity, class and other social differences affect how humans grow, develop, and learn. The research methodologies of both Fowler and Gilligan were ethnographic, relying primarily on interviews. Religious educators have listened to each of these theorists and have sought to take account of the new understandings in our work.

So many other voices were helpful as we sought to understand the learners in our congregations. Malcolm Knowles’ helped us see that androgogy is more appropriate for adult learners than pedagogy. Joan and Erik Erikson provided a very helpful description of the psychosocial development of human beings, shedding light on the emotional dilemmas that humans resolve at each stage of their life journey and describing religion as part of a healthy personality. Other names to note are Robert Havighurst, Daniel Levinson, Gail Sheehy, and Ken Stokes. The goal for these theorists was to describe “predictable stages” of human development. The danger was that people would be judged according to what stage they exhibit. Although many theorists resisted making the descriptions hierarchical, the danger was that they would be misused or misunderstood in this way.

The theories of human development, learning and cognitive growth sought through observation to identify universal human patterns. Ironically, they now help us to see difference. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, for instance, emerged only twenty years ago. Already it is widely accepted and incorporated in most printed curriculum resources. We have learned from this theory that learning occurs in many ways; it helps us to see individuals as unique and yet capable of learning. Educator Jane Vella writes, "All valid knowing is idiosyncratic, personal, and culturally specific" (2000, p. 44). Many religious educators would be comfortable affirming Vella's pronouncement. This represents a significant shift that has occurred over the last century. Observation of children and all learners has helped us to understand that the learning process is very complex and that each child will learn best when her needs and abilities are taken into account. The voices proclaiming this truth were welcomed and heard during the Twentieth Century in religious education.

### **The current state of practice in religious education**

2003 finds us in a time of shrinking resources and diminishing energy for religious education but urgent need. Theological divisions threaten to destroy denominations and nations. As I write the Episcopal Church is debating whether they can accept a bishop who is openly gay and living in a committed relationship with another man. The secular press is fascinated by these arguments in the church. Too many laity respond to such questions with ill formed theology and little understanding of the biblical authority on which the argument rests. Religious educators have the potential to develop theories that can empower laity to do the important theological reflection required to deal with these difficult questions. Religious education can equip laity to move through the maze of differences and diversities that threaten to tear faith communities apart. Yet, our skills are not valued and our voice is not widely heard.

Therefore, as we situate ourselves for the beginning of the third millennium I think we must first lament. We must lament our powerlessness and our voicelessness in the church. We have not succeeded in helping the volunteer religious educators in our faith communities or even many pastors to embrace the learnings from observation that we know so well. In spite of widespread agreements among religious educators that each individual is unique and will learn in ways that reflect that uniqueness, practices of religious education in congregations continue to fall back to traditional models. Karen-Marie Yust reported to APRRE last year that "Little pedagogical value is placed on children's experiences and teachers are uncomfortable with children's honest discussion of difficult issues" (2002, 156). She also observed that curricula "don't seem to see children as distinct and contributing persons who are fully 'present' in the faith community" (2002, 152). Yust's research project, based on rigorous observation, revealed that the theory of difference is not fully implemented in our congregational education programs.

Perhaps we have not believed in ourselves enough! However, we must not give up.

The publishing houses produce some curriculum resources that do reflect those learnings. A few congregations have innovative and exciting religious education programs that take difference and diversity into account and effectively organize contexts for teaching and learning for all ages. In my denomination, the United Methodist Church, more and more congregations

have used the Disciple Bible Study curriculum that embraces many of the best insights of educational and developmental theory. Persons are transformed through Disciple and congregations are claiming their mission for the world more faithfully.

A quick look through the last few years of *Religious Education* reveals that our scholarship devotes energy and thought to increasingly particular populations as we articulate our theory. Published articles are about Jewish women, students in Israel, a Hong Kong case, reflections from Asia, Korean American young adults, Hmong Americans, Generation X, Zimbabwean Christians, fifteen and sixteen year olds in the United Kingdom, the Arab/Israeli conflict, Holocaust education, and many other specific cultural and developmental contexts. Publications of the Religious Education Association seem to recognize the importance of differences that occur in humans and between cultures and to reflect this in its publications.

I do not believe that we should abandon the use of observation as a way to develop grounded theory. Instead we should re-double our efforts to understand how humans learn and grow in faith. And we must help congregations to use those learnings! The theories that emerged from observant researchers have re-emphasized the creativity of the mind of God. We wonder anew at the Creator when we appreciate human beings and see their diversity more clearly. The popular saying, “God don’t make no junk” should guide our efforts to see the wonder and gift of each bit of God’s creative work.

### **Conversation Partners for the New Millennium**

I propose four major conversation partners for the beginning of this new millennium:

- (1) Theories about research methodologies for ethnography and epistemology will clarify the relationship of the researcher and those we observe so that the research act itself can be an act of liberation and justice.
- (2) Theories about the formation of identity such as Dan McAdams’ can help us to understand how humans are formed in ways that connect them to communities and value systems.
- (3) The learning task approach of Jane Vella will help teachers claim their role as observers and students learn in ways that work for them.
- (4) Narrative theory will be important to the religious education of the next millennium. We must continue to explore how narrative can carry identity, construct community, and produce theology. Let us look at each of these in turn.

#### **(1) Ethnography and Epistemology**

My work with ethnography has sensitized me to the importance of remembering myself as part of the research act (Crain). Those important voices of the last century who taught us to observe and learn from our observation were, as I said earlier, primarily white men in the northeastern United States. They were highly educated, from the middle class, and their power was taken for granted. As we begin the third millennium we are aware that we must continue to observe. But we also know now that the objective stance of the theory developers was a fiction. The work was often patriarchal or imperialistic. Theorists of feminist epistemology helped us

realize that we are connected with those we seek to learn about. We must develop theory in partnership with those whom the theory will describe. We believe that knowing requires connectedness and relationship. In addition, we question whether grand narratives or meta-theories that cross gender, ethnic, and cultures borders are possible; we have learned to look for and value difference.

The ideas of connected knowing that feminist epistemology helped promote have been adopted widely in qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (2003), who have written extensively about qualitative research, identify several paradigms that reflect this approach. I would argue that religious educators should look closely at *critical*, *constructive* and *participatory/cooperative* paradigms for our work. These paradigms seek co-created findings, researcher and researched working together. They suggest that the community of inquiry should become embedded in the community of practice. The inquiry will lead to action that can transform the world “in the service of human flourishing” (Lincoln and Guba, 2003, 259). This epistemology proposes that knowledge is constructed through extended participation in the social order. Although those who explore these research paradigms are struggling with philosophical arguments about the nature of reality and what can be known which may seem too esoteric to take up our time, their convictions about methods for research can teach religious educators important things about how to observe in ethical and loving ways.

Lincoln and Guba do not underestimate the vigor of the controversies among those who do qualitative research. Each researcher is subject to attacks about validity from those who operate from a different paradigm. Researchers (ethnographers) write in widely varied voices, using everything from objective third person to poetry and song. However, they write:

At some distance down this conjectural path, when its history is written, we will find that this has been the era of emancipation: emancipation from what Hannah Arendt calls ‘the coerciveness of Truth,’ emancipation from hearing only the voices of Western Europe, emancipation from generations of silence, and emancipation from seeing the world in one color. (2003, 286)

This describes the emancipation that religious education seeks as well. With Roberta Bondi I affirm that theology “involves learning to see the ways in which false images of God, ourselves, and the world have bound us and taken away the life God intends for us.” (1995, 11) We will have much to learn from our colleagues who struggle with the methodological and epistemological questions in qualitative research and especially from those who are exploring the critical, constructivist, and participatory paradigms.

The term *ethnographer* describes scholars who study people in many fields including sociology, anthropology, and education. Ethnographers are beginning to be very concerned about the role of their own needs and interests in the research they do. The myth of value-free research or the neutral researcher has been exploded. In its place, many ethnographers struggle to admit their own role in the “findings” of their research but also to claim some validity and reliability. Where the “insider” and “outsider” seemed obvious, we now struggle with ambiguity and permeable borders.

A recent volume by anthropologists who study religion exhibits these convictions. Editor James V. Spickard writes about the kind of claims that ethnographers in this post colonial, post patriarchal time can make. He writes, "No longer can ethnographers pretend to be invisible recorders of an objective social world. Instead they must discover who they are in the ethnographic encounter" (2002, 241). Researchers in anthropology and sociology are coming to believe that the researcher is just as important to study as the researched! Religious educators must learn to look first to ourselves. We must search out the presuppositions that may blind us. What we see is limited by what we already think we will see or hope to see. Theory building about how people grow in faith must be reflective because the observer limits what is seen. Persons working in the fields of sociology and anthropology can help us to think about how to do this.

Our connection with the persons we seek to understand must also be just and ethical. The colonial or patriarchal stance for research has been shown to be un-loving use of power. Particularly when Westerners study people from other parts of the world, we must be humble and open to learn ways that will challenge our assumptions and stretch our imaginations. Our power as researchers and writers must not be used in ways that demean or damage those whom we study. Feminist anthropologists such as Ruth Behar and ethnographers in the sociology of religion are writing exciting theory that explores the dynamics related to use of power in the research relationship.

Maureen O'Brien (1999) used the phrase "sustained, interpretive reflection" in her description of the work of practical theology. This phrase aptly describes the approach of ethnographers who take seriously the limits of their own meaning systems and seek to work in partnership with those whom they study.

## **(2) Focusing on Identity Formation**

As we move into the new millennium, religious educators should listen closely to the voices of psychologists who are working on identity formation. We have seen that the congregational leaders who help their parishioners to claim strong identity through their faith have developed faithful and effective congregations. The congregation of St. Mark United Methodist Church in Chicago is a prime example. I recently attended a service where the congregation bid farewell to its beloved pastor, Dr. Myron McCoy, who was leaving to become president of Saint Paul School of Theology. An impressive parade of persons testified to how they were empowered when they knew who they were. Especially meaningful were the statements from young men who were proud to be Black and male. Clearly these young men are going to make fine contributions with their lives. The congregation has helped each of them to claim an identity that affirms who they are and empowers them to live as faithful Christians. How does this happen? Why are so few congregations able to succeed in this important work? These are questions for religious education, but we need the theories of identity formation to help us.

Identity was named as a developmental task for adolescence by the work of the Eriksons. They helped us see that a positive resolution of the identity crisis allows young people to become

healthy adults. Claiming one's identity involves integrating one's view of oneself with the judgments of others and of society. Dan McAdams has observed many people in his efforts to understand how human beings develop their identity. Like James Fowler, McAdams has used life history interviews as his primary research methodology. He claims that the foundation of our identity is faith. We make meaning when we "create dynamic narratives that render sensible and coherent the seeming chaos of human existence" (1993, 166). Our life stories are woven into a narrative that includes the cultural and religious norms that we inherit. Thus identity is shaped by culture and religion as well as by the events of one's life.

Fowler and McAdams both built on the work of Joan and Erik Erikson. Those early theories assumed that one grand meta-narrative would suffice for all people and all cultures. Now theorists are looking at how cultural and religious scripts both resource and limit the formation of identity. Helping persons to engage their life stories critically can liberate them from existing repressive ideologies regarding gender, culture and race. Mai-Anh Le Tran, for instance, is convinced that we must seek to understand the "multiple dimensions in which 'religious stories' and 'cultural stories' serve as exploitative as well as liberating 'normative scripts' for individuals' faith formation and identity construction" (unpublished research protocol, 2003, 3). Much observation and investigation remains to be done in cultures other than Western European and North American to begin to understand how identity is formed in the crucible of life story mixed with cultural and religious traditions and norms. And we will not expect to identify a single meta-narrative. Identity may be specific to culture.

### **(3) New Approaches to Teaching**

The old paradigm for teaching, so aptly named the "banking method" by Paulo Freire, is pretty universally discarded today. Teachers seek to attend to the differing learning styles and intelligences of their students and to construct contexts for learning that will engage the learners in productive ways. At least that is the theoretical stance that most teachers would claim. In reality, all too often the old model of depositing knowledge and competence in a student's "bank" remains the fallback position of too many teachers and schools. The seminaries, colleges, and congregational schools in which we teach remain guilty of this.

On the other hand, the multiple intelligences theory of Gardner (1983) is widely known and accepted as true. The denominational curriculum writers are encouraged to include learning activities from several intelligences in most session plans for children and youth. This approach has made its way only peripherally in most adult curriculum resources. Yet, the sense that all persons do not learn in the same way is pervasive.

Jane Vella (2000) offers the sort of creative pedagogy that we need to revitalize adult education in congregations. She builds on the important work of Malcolm Knowles and Paulo Freire but makes it practical for the culture in which North American faith communities dwell. She defines a learning task as "an open question put to learners who have all the resources they need to respond" (p. 8). Persons who are yearning to know God do have open questions, the questions that life poses to them! Religious educators in congregations can provide the resources for learners to address those questions. Vella develops the learning task model to rely on active

engagement, accountability and creativity. The stress on accountability in her model is especially exciting. Vella organizes a learning task so that the learners will know that they know. How much more satisfying congregational religious education could be if its participants could “know when they know.” In other words, they would recognize that their life questions will be addressed by their participation in religious education! Our colleagues in the field of education, such as Jane Vella, have much to offer for religious education.

The theories of emancipatory pedagogy from scholars such as bell hooks are exciting and renewing for religious education. At the theoretical level emancipatory pedagogy is widely accepted. But we have failed to translate it to the congregational level. We must address this with those professional and volunteer religious educators at the grass roots level. This is an important task crying out for attention from religious educators.

#### **(4) Narrative Theories**

From time immemorial, humans have told stories. These stories carry truths about the meaning of life and the relationship of humans (and all creation) to the divine. Much of our biblical heritage, of course, is narrative. We talk about God and the nature of God by telling stories of humans. Developmental psychologists have taught us that meaning, identity and faith are known through narrative. Who are our conversation partners as we expand our appreciation of narrative for religious education?

One obvious place to look would be literary theory. Scholars in this field have understood the component of narrative and how stories work for centuries. They can teach us about how a plot develops and how protagonist and antagonist interact. They can help us to identify the crisis that proceeds to a denouement and the yearning for a *deus ex machina*. Literary theory can provide tools for evaluating the integrity of a narrative as well.

When we seek to build theory about religious education we are concerned about the experiences that people have in which they learn and thereby grow in faith. But experience always has a predecessor experience; the present flows out of prior experience. Past becomes present and leads to future. One’s present experience is a part of a life narrative. Complicating the effort to understand the experience of religious education is its complexity: a life narrative is both personal and social, embedded in a culture. Life narratives are the phenomena religious educators can study to seek answers to the questions we pose.

However, narrative has become also a way to do the research. Scholars in anthropology, education, psychology, and psychiatry rely on life narrative to explain and assign meaning to experience. In all these fields, they have struggled with how the scholar can communicate the learnings that emerge from their research. Major theorists have claimed narrative as their method of choice, both for inquiry and for writing their theory. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) use the term “narrative inquiry” to mean “both phenomena under study and method of study” (4). Their work expands and clarifies the role of narrative in research. Even the chapter titles are intriguing for a religious education scholar. “Being in the Field: Walking into the Midst of Stories” (63) could easily describe what happens when a new pastor or rabbi arrives in a

congregation or when a researcher enters the field. Their notion that the inquiry takes place in a three-dimensional space (54) with the inquiry backward and forward, inward and outward, and located in place can be a fine way to think about something as bounded as a class session or something ambiguous and occurring over time such as a growing sense of one's identity. Narrative inquiry, particularly as presented in the work of Clandinin and Connelly, has great promise for theory building in religious education.

## **Conclusion**

The second century of the Religious Education Association lies ahead of us. Unfortunately, living on this globe seems ever more difficult and dangerous for human beings. We need a faith that gives meaning to life and provides resources for a world in turmoil as much as we ever have. The processes that help us learn and grow in faith are the work of religious educators. As the meeting announcement said, "Such times call for discerning hearts informed by good religious education." Our leadership is urgently needed. We need to claim our authority and speak more powerfully to the church.

As we always have, we will rely on those from other disciplines to stimulate and resource our work. We do not need to apologize for this. It is our genius to put them together in the service of God and God's hope for the world.

## **References**

- Bondi, Roberta. 1995. *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Clandinin, D. Jean and F. Michael Connelly. 2000. *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Crain, Margaret Ann. 2001. "Looking at People and Asking 'Why?': An Ethnographic Approach to Christian Education." *Religious Education*, 96: 386-394.
- Cully, Iris V. and Kendig Brubaker Cully, eds. 1990. *Encyclopedia of Religious Education*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Dewey, John. "Religious Education as Conditioned by Modern Psychology and Pedagogy." *Religious Education*, 69: 6-11. [Reprinted from the Proceedings of the First Annual Convention of the Religious Education Association, Feb. 10-12, 1903, pp. 60-66.]
- Fowler, James. 1981. *Stages of Faith: The psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Gardner, Howard. 1983. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.

- Gilligan, Carol. 1982. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Harris, Maria. 1989. *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Johnson-Siebold, Judith ed. 1999. *Personal Narratives: About the History of Methodist Christian Education in the Twentieth Century*. Unpublished monograph. United Methodist Association of Scholars in Christian Education.
- Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Egon G. Guba. 2003. Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences in *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Second Edition* edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- McAdams, Dan P. 1993. *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.
- Mooney, Carol Garhart. 2000. *Theories of Childhood: An Introduction to Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget and Vygotsky*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- O'Brien, Maureen R. 1999. "Practical Theology and Postmodern Religious Education." *Religious Education*, 94:313-328.
- Seymour, Jack L., ed. 1997. *Mapping Christian Education: Approaches to Congregational Learning*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Seymour, Jack L. 2003. "Holding Onto Hope: Theological Controversy in Christian Religious Education." *Religious Education*, 98:348-364.
- Spickard, James, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire. 2002. *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*. New York: New York University Press.
- Vella, Jane. 2000. *Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Yust, Karen Marie. 2002. "Theology, Educational Theory, and Children's Faith Formation: Findings from the *Faith Formation in Children's Ministries* Project." *2002 Proceedings Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education*.