

2003

## Full Issue, Number 16, Winter 2003

The Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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# INTERSECTIONS

faith + life + learning

NUMBER SIXTEEN

WINTER 2003



**Philosopher engaged in self criticism.**

# INTERSECTIONS

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**INTERSECTIONS**®

**WINTER 2003**

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## PURPOSE STATEMENT

This publication is by and largely for the academic communities of the twenty-eight colleges and universities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is published by the Division for Higher Education and Schools of the ELCA. The publication presently has its home at Capital University, Columbus, Ohio which has generously offered leadership, physical and financial support as an institutional sponsor for the inauguration of the publication.

The ELCA has frequently sponsored conferences for faculty and administrators which have addressed the church - college/university partnership. Recently the ELCA has sponsored an annual Vocation of the Lutheran College conference. The primary purpose of *INTERSECTIONS* is to enhance and continue such dialogue. It will do so by:

- \* Lifting up the vocation of Lutheran colleges and universities
- \* Encouraging thoughtful dialogue about the partnership of colleges and universities with the church
- \* Offering a forum for concerns and interests of faculty at the intersection of faith, learning and teaching
- \* Raising for debate issues about institutional missions, goals, objectives and learning priorities
- \* Encouraging critical and productive discussion on our campuses of issues focal to the life of the church
- \* Serving as a bulletin board for communications among institutions and faculties
- \* Publishing papers presented at conferences sponsored by the ELCA and its institutions
- \* Raising the level of awareness among faculty about the Lutheran heritage and connectedness of their institutions, realizing a sense of being part of a larger family with common interests and concerns.

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## FROM THE PUBLISHER

If someone did a word count of the articles that have been published in *INTERSECTIONS* from the very first issue until this one to see what this journal is all about, I feel confident that the word "vocation" would be among the top three. Vocation is a central concept for Lutherans, and this journal grew out of an effort to make it also a central concept at the colleges and universities that are related to the ELCA. Therefore, many leaders at those universities and colleges became excited when the Lilly Endowment, Inc. decided to start a major new initiative in the area of "Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation." They invited church related colleges and universities in the United States to submit grant proposals for programs that would help students examine the relationship between their faith and vocational choices, provide more opportunities for young people to explore ministry as their life's work, and enhance the college's capacity to prepare a new generation of leaders for church and society. It seemed like an initiative that was tailor-made for our institutions.

And sure enough, in the first round of competition two Lutheran colleges and universities received implementation grants, the next year three more colleges were successful, and last fall four Lutheran colleges and universities were selected as recipients of these grants. We extend warm congratulations to Augsburg College, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois; Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota; Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota; Luther College, Decorah, Iowa; Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Washington; St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota; Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana; and Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa, for their successful development of plans to encourage vocational discernment among their students. These institutions will now receive grants from the Lilly Endowment of approximately two million dollars each over a five year period to accomplish the goals that they set out in their grant applications. An investment like that should have great benefits for the students from those colleges, and for the church.

These colleges already have an excellent track record of motivating their students to attend seminary and pursue church careers, maybe Lilly used that as a factor in their selection process. But it is important for institutions related to the ELCA to remember that we see just as much potential for callings to careers of vocational service if our students choose to become accountants, nurses, police officers or home makers. Since Lutherans believe in the "priesthood of all believers." we can use our talents to serve God and his creation to the utmost of our ability in any setting, and be leaders of our church and of society in any career.

Arne Selbyg  
Director, ELCA Colleges and Universities

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## FROM THE EDITOR

This issue continues the tradition of publishing some of the papers read at the Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference. Curt Thompson's paper wrestles with a question I am sure many have asked and identifies a certain un-ease, "the Lutheran knot," as being essential to the Lutheran approach to things. Carol Gilbertson both examines and illustrates the creative dimensions of taking language seriously. She also shares with us some of her own poetic visions. Bruce Heggen talks about the way in which a theological vocabulary can inform the learning and teaching he sees at the state university where he works and the way "secular" students catch on to meaning-making and meditative thinking. The piece by Susan Poppe explores the boundaries of our own freedom and openness and poses some very challenging questions for her own and all of our institutions. Though I have quoted Sig Royspern's oracular gems many times, this is the first time I've had his permission to print them. Just when I think I have turned the last corner and surrounded his thoughts a new side appears in view.

I was very happy to receive the response from Robert Benne to two essays published in our last issue. I was happy because it was a sign that the issue was being read and because someone found the matters discussed there worth further consideration. Nothing would please me more than to have the pages of *Intersections* be the locus of a continuing conversation about issues that matter.

I consented to put my picture on the cover only after voicing several reservations. I do not want to advertise myself, nor do I wish to be publicly pictured without the proper dignity due to my station. In spite of the seriousness of these concerns the others here at the office were unrelenting. Blame them.

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# DO YOU TEACH IN A DIFFERENT MANNER AT A LUTHERAN COLLEGE? UNRAVELING THE LUTHERAN KNOT AND HIGHLIGHTING THE GLORY IN THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Curtis L. Thompson

The question I was given to reflect on during this session is: Do you teach in a different manner at a Lutheran college? That's a tough question, so I think I want to use one of my lifelines and poll the audience. How do you respond when I ask you that question? Yes or no, do you teach in a different manner at a Lutheran college? Some of you respond "Yes" and some of you respond "No." But if you were given the choice, I bet some and maybe many of you would prefer to respond "Yes and No." To most questions, the Lutheran response is typically neither "Yes" nor "No," but rather "Yes and No." It's dialectical. Dialectic is the classical art or practice of examining logically, as by a method of question and answer. Dialectic is a form of discourse in which the issue under consideration is examined from different perspectives. From one perspective one might answer a question in the affirmative, but from another perspective one might feel the need to answer negatively. Thus, the "Yes and No" response. At the heart of Lutheran reflection lies a commitment to dialectal thinking. That's why our question, Do you teach in a different manner at a Lutheran college? requires a "Yes and No" answer.

## I. THE DIFFERENCE OF THE LUTHERAN KNOT

Being Lutheran means having a knot in your stomach. The Lutheran dialectic puts a knot in your stomach, a tension that keeps life from becoming too easy. That knot has been there in my stomach more or less all my life. In my early years growing up I felt it more strongly during family devotions and Sunday School classes and confirmation classes, but it was always there. At Concordia College in Moorhead it was more keenly present during chapel and in some religion classes, but it was always there. During my years at Luther Seminary it was always pretty potent, and during my years in the parish ministry with the people of St. Paul American Lutheran Church by the Dairy Queen in "Northeast" Minneapolis it was always there. During my time at the University of Chicago Divinity School it was not imposed on me from without in the same way as at the seminary; but by that time it had become so internalized that I still felt the need for making sure the knot or tension was there. I wasn't comfortable without it. And I think that's a universal feature of Lutherans. If the knot or the tension isn't there, then the concern quickly surfaces that

maybe the Lutheran identity isn't as present as it should be. This is the eighth summer conference in a row on the "Vocation of a Lutheran College." That's incredible. The Methodists or the Presbyterians or the Roman Catholic colleges don't have that kind of obsession with their identity. It's clearly an indication of our need for the knot or the tension of the Lutheran dialectic.

And this knot becomes a part of who we are. I teach at Thiel College in western Pennsylvania, an ELCA college that was founded in 1866 by the churchperson William Passavant. My wife and I headed out to Thiel precisely because it was an institution of higher learning of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It was an academic place marked by the Lutheran knot. And we have stayed there because it is one of the ELCA colleges. The Lutheran knot has tied us to that spot. This year I'll be heading into my 20th season of teaching in the Religion department at Thiel.

Thiel is out east. It's not on the East Coast, but it's east compared to midwestern schools. The tendency in recent decades has been for the eastern ELCA colleges to loosen the Lutheran knot a bit. That was the case at Thiel, especially in the decade before I arrived, or during the 70s. The thought was, I guess, that if the Lutheran knot is too tight, it might kill an educational institution by making it too parochial and thereby unattractive to non-Lutheran folks. By the time I showed up at Thiel, a concerted effort was being made to tighten that Lutheran knot again and to re-establish relations with the various Lutheran synods. And that effort has continued right up to the present. There is now general agreement that the Lutheran identity of Thiel should be lifted up, not just because this strengthens our recruiting of Lutheran students but because our Lutheran tradition is an important part of our identity and a visible Lutheran knot also works to our advantage in recruiting a broad range of students.

But wherein, we ask, lies the origin of the Lutheran knot? What's the character of the tension that seems to necessarily accompany the Lutheran faith? It has been talked about in a lot of different ways: the law/gospel distinction, the two kingdoms, the tension between the first article of creation and the second article of redemption, the

difference between Word and world. My research over the years has not been in the area of Luther or Lutheranism, but recently I have started doing some work on the theology of Luther. Since Arne Selbyg has reminded us that these vocation conferences are intended to be sort of "Lutheranism 101" for college faculty and staff, I am not going to avoid sharing some of my thoughts on Lutheran theology.

## II. THE DIFFERENCE OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS/GLORY

I would like to speak of the Lutheran knot in terms of the theology of the cross. Martin Luther's religious reflection was centered in what he called the theology of the cross, the *theologia crucis*. During the sixteenth century Martin Luther articulated the theme of the theology of the cross that served as the center of his whole theology. Over against that theology Luther set the theology of glory. The theology of the cross served as the basis for criticizing the theology of glory. The theologians of glory, in Luther's eyes, were too speculative, relying too heavily on human reason to probe the divine mysteries. They were too presumptuous, trusting too confidently in the visible splendors of life as a direct indication of the invisible operations of God. And they were too prideful, thinking that noble achievements in the world came about on the strength of human ingenuity and effort alone. The theology of glory concentrated on the notion of merit and on the idea that humans are able to earn righteousness by means of good works. Luther's theology of the cross undercut the presumptuous speculations of the theologians of glory by singlemindedly insisting on the cross as the clue for understanding the true character of both God and the Christian's life in the world.

It should be underscored, I suppose, that Luther did openly criticize the theology of glory. However, this was not long lived. Only at five different points did Luther mention the theology of the cross and the theology of glory, and these were all between the years 1518 and 1521. Luther likely discontinued his use of the phrase "the theology of glory" because he realized that it is a bit misleading. There surely are inauthentic forms of the theology of glory, i.e., when theology assumes one or another triumphalistic shape, from consumerism to militarism to ecclesiasticism. But so too is there an authentic form of the theology of glory. Martin Luther affirms glory as the teleological principle of the human creature. That is, creation's goal is for the human to become glorious. One can find a theology of glory in Luther's theological anthropology, and this

theology of glory stands behind and sustains his theology of the cross. The tension between this theology of glory and the theology of the cross is fundamental and this tension, I would suggest, lies behind the various other Lutheran dialectics.

Luther's *theologia crucis* has inspired theological followers to continue his polemic against the *theologia gloriae*. On the scene today there are not many self-appointed Lutheran defenders of the faith who feel the need to search out and destroy any and every theology of glory. But there are plenty of Lutheran theologians who, armed with their fighting doctrine of justification by grace through faith and their dialectic of law and gospel, stand ready as theologians of the cross to chastise theologians who focus on glory and freedom and human creativity; the critics regard that whole approach as basically an effort to run away from the cross, contrition, and confession. The Lutheran knot is defended by way of the theology of the cross. In Lutheran circles today, therefore, commitment to the theology of the cross often carries with it suspicion of and contempt for theological perspectives leaning toward or resembling a theology of glory. The climate within the Lutheran ranks is currently such that most would consider it theologically stupid if not suicidal to advocate a theology of glory.

I want to do precisely that, however, to advocate a theology of glory. Much has been lost in the broadside attack on the theology of glory. The creation, the natural, reason, and the human are concepts that generally have not been given their due in Lutheran theology because of the widespread antipathy toward the theology of glory that has created an atmosphere in which it is imprudent to sing the praises of glory in any form other than a narrowly understood *Gloria Dei*. There needs to be developed, I think, a renewed appreciation for the notion of glory that is both central to the biblical story and relevant to contemporary theological thinking. I define glory as the sparkling presence of God shining through human beings and the world of creation. It should not be blasphemous or pretentious for Christians, even Lutheran Christians, to claim that God is "really present" in, with, and under the creatures and events of the world. The theology of the cross needs to be complemented by a version of the theology of the glory that bears resemblance to thinking encountered in the distinguished tradition of Christian humanism.

The theology of the cross points to the dialectic or tension that is the source of the Lutheran knot. But sometimes that theology becomes so onesidedly negative that it loses its tensive quality. We need a theology of glory to balance out

the theology of the cross. The Lutheran knot requires it. On the whole I believe our Lutheran colleges have been places where the glorious side of the human has been remembered and appreciated. As we proceed today in considering what is different about teaching at a Lutheran college, I want to be highlighting the glory that is implicitly affirmed in Luther's theology of the cross. And this should be able to happen somewhat organically, because this lifting up of glory is one of the things that the Lutheran colleges have done rather well over the years in their teaching, especially in comparison with the Lutheran seminaries. There is it seems a little different manner of teaching at a Lutheran college as compared to that at a Lutheran seminary, maybe because seminaries sense more of a charge to protect the faith.

The tension between cross and glory can be developed in terms of Word and world. A little over a year ago I was asked to speak at a Men's Breakfast Group sponsored by a Christian denomination. The group meets twice a year at The Brass Lantern, a restaurant located a few miles out of Greenville. As a personal aside I can say that vocationally, I operate in my life as a theologian. That means that my job is to formulate discourse about God, so that the reality of God might be understood and appreciated and experienced more fully by people in our time. I've come to realize as I've tried to carry out this theological task that the whole relationship with God takes place within the context of the world. The world requires attention theologically. So for this men's group meeting I decided to lead them through some reflections on loving the world, to underscore that, for Christians, loving the world can't be separated from loving God nor can it be separated from the whole God-world relationship. Therefore, after settling on this theme for the talk, I telephoned the organizer and gave him the title "On Loving the World." So I chose that title very intentionally, in order to counteract the tendency of Christians to overemphasize the Word and underplay the world. Well, when I arrived at the breakfast a few months later, I was glad to see a very good turnout. The organizer said they had advertised the event quite a bit and he was pleased with the number of men that had shown up. Then he introduced me and said, as advertised, I would be speaking on that all-important theme of "On Loving the Word." So I had to explain that my actual topic was "On Loving the World," which maybe wouldn't have brought out as many men if it had been the publicized topic but which I felt was equally important.

### III. THE GENERAL DIFFERENCES OF CHURCH-RELATEDNESS

At a general level, one can identify reasons why one might find a different manner of teaching at a Lutheran college. Being an ELCA college means that the education process is granted its own integrity, its own arena. A Lutheran college differs from a Christian college in its self-understanding. The Lutheran knot, whether manifesting itself as the distinction between the two kingdoms, the kingdom on the left and the kingdom on the right, or the distinction between the law and the gospel, or the distinction between Word and world—means that academics are taken seriously in their own right. ELCA colleges do not affirm such things as Christian geology or Christian economics or Christian sociology. At our colleges professors and students are free to inquire without censure from some big brother type of religious authority. Luther valued education; he said according to some accounts, "Better a smart Turk than a dumb Christian." Gratefully, our Lutheran church expects us to strive for academic excellence; and when we do that, when we are a strong educational institution, then we are fulfilling one of our major roles as a college of the church. No matter how much we affirm postmodern cultural currents that embrace all the differences of pluralism, Lutherans still also finally affirm a unity or singularity of truth, even if we are deprived of any absolute knowledge of that truth. But God is one and so, ultimately, is God's truth. In fact, I like to think of truth as one of God's great nicknames, along with Beauty, Justice, and Love. If Truth is God, then knowledge is not to be feared; rather, we can expect knowledge to lead us to Truth or God. So holders of or those held by the Lutheran knot fully endorse that beautiful aphorism of Sir Francis Bacon: "With the first sip of the cup of knowledge one loses God; but at the bottom of the cup one finds God in all God's glory."

Having mentioned postmodern cultural currents, let me add a word on how the Lutheran knot influences my evaluation of contemporary cultural configurations. Cultural evaluating is critical if one sees the theological task as requiring an understanding of the world no less than of the Word. Discerning cultural forces is part of doing theology. We note, then, that our Lutheran colleges are situated within that important trajectory of Western culture flowing from the Enlightenment, which is the fountainhead of the modern world. The postmodern begins at different points in time depending on one's analysis, from early figures such as Nietzsche, Marx and Kierkegaard of the nineteenth century to later twentieth century figures situated between the two world wars. But the postmodern generally is depicted as a protest movement against the sameness of the modern. The postmodern hails difference over against

modernity's preference for unity of worldview that gushes forth from steadfast devotion to rationality and autonomy. My commitment to the Lutheran knot nudges me to maintain the dialectic between the modern and the postmodern; it enables me to recognize that postmodernity has suffered from some excesses while making a legitimate critique of the modern, and that modernity surely deserves postmodernism's criticism but also possesses some features worth preserving. So the knot leads me to affirm a late modern form of culture that wishes to level the postmodern critique against the modern but strives all the while to preserve worthy elements of the modern. The early modern can be cleansed of its abuses and be reshaped as a late modern form of culture that appreciates the postmodern emphasis on difference but does not give up altogether on the modern quest for rational, autonomous life.

One teaches in a different manner at a Lutheran college because it is a church-related institution of higher learning. The importance of a church-related college lies in this, that it is a place where a special variety of discourse is created and embodied. There is the church with its Word on the one hand and the world with its words on the other. Each has its discourse. But the church-related college is situated in-between these two. It takes both the church and the cosmos seriously, but its discourse is not merely that of either Christ or culture. Rather, it brings these two together and a new level of discourse is the result. A distinctive type of discourse is born in the mutually critical correlation of Word and world. This mutually critical correlation means that the message of the church and attending spiritual values of humankind are brought critically to bear on the situation of the world in all its scientific, socio-political, economic, psychological complexity, and likewise the rigorous, down-to-earth, hard-nosed cognizing of the world is brought critically to bear on cultural meanings and values including the kerygma or message of the church. Created is a fresh discourse which is the air the church-related college breathes, the food it eats, the blood it pumps, and the artistic expression it contributes. Our Lutheran colleges are houses of hermeneutics and rhetoric. They develop interpretations and they engage in arguing their interpretations. State universities do this too, for interpreting and arguing interpretations are the tasks of academic institutions. And yet, there is a difference. For the church-related college is a half-way house. By design, that is, by mission, it stands "in" the world but is not "of" the world. The Lutheran knot ties us to "in but not of" language. That is why its discourse is special. That discourse, which welcomes

warm-temperature experiences of faith no less than cool-temperature experiments of science, bridges the gap that exists between the two other discourses of church and world. As students learn that synthesizing discourse, they experience what our academic catalogues call "an integrative worldview," which is a prime goal of the education process at our church-related colleges.

While this discourse-creating quality has been the most important feature of Lutheran church-related colleges all through their history in this country, there is a significant sense in which this intrinsically important feature is gaining greater extrinsic importance as we move ahead into the twenty-first century. It seems to many that we are currently in the middle of a paradigm shift. As I have indicated, some analysts of culture are still pushing for a further advance of the modern, others believe the modern has to be buried and replaced by the anti-modern values of the postmodern, still others are calling for a return to the pre-modern, and a few of us are advocating instead a late modern form of culture in continuity with and yet significantly different from the early modernity of the Enlightenment. This whole confusion over where we are culturally is a sign of the transition that we are in. Coming, it seems, is a new global paradigm which is leading to a restructuring of knowledge within the academy. The move toward the global is forcing disciplines together; the result is the creation of whole new levels of knowledge bridging disciplines. Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary teaching and research is becoming the order of the day. Graduate schools are being transformed, begrudgingly, to be more in tune with the new times. Specialization is not being done away with, but the trading of specialized knowledge, which was the original intent of specializing anyway, is becoming expected. The humanities are being driven to mix it up with one another and also with the sciences. Because of global crises, the sciences are being forced to take seriously questions of values and ethics and other humanities' types of concerns. The Lutheran knot helps to open us to this new paradigm.

We can see, then, why the church-related college will gain greater extrinsic importance in the future. We can envision a time when the academy as a whole will be creating new discourses. It will be needing to do out of dire need what the church-related colleges have been doing all along out of faithful commitment, namely, bringing together different discourses and in the process creating a new one. The long tradition of the church-related college should leave it poised to lead the way through the confusion and disorientation of dealing with the new paradigm that is

upon us. If the church-related college is to do this, it must not forget either of its two foci, either the church with its Word or the world with its words, nor can it lose the mutually critical correlation of these two.

Being an ELCA college means that issues of faith are understood as being an important part of life. In searches for presidents of our Lutheran institutions there are often impressive Lutheran candidates with terrific jobs in state schools who are asked why they would consider a change. One might hear said, as I have, from a candidate for a presidency of a Lutheran college, that as an ELCA clergyperson he had always wanted the opportunity to be in a leadership position in an ELCA college. For this person, it was absolutely no contest: he would leave his current position in a second, for he would love to come and be engaged with those at the Lutheran college in making it an even stronger and better educational institution of the church. This person was convinced that at that Lutheran college there is agreement that issues of faith are a critical part of understanding human development. The Lutheran knot ties us to that expanded understanding of the world that faith is always seeking. It brings into our conversations the reality of a God who is committed to the creation, loving it with a love that will never let it go.

Being an ELCA college means that Christian values are lifted up within the community's life. We can't overestimate the impact that is made by opportunities to participate in serious discussion of contemporary issues of faith and life. Of course, this happens all the time in the classroom; but it also takes place in other settings. Our Lutheran colleges do manage to create special times when faculty, students, administration, and staff are together reflecting and sharing ideas on ways in which holding a Christian stance implicates one to respond in this way or move toward this affirmation or be engaged in this action. The pattern of life of our brother Jesus and the community of freedom and love that he inaugurated (i.e., the kingdom of God) offer much to current contemplation of vexing ethical questions. The Lutheran knot prevents us from forgetting about and fleeing from our particular Christian resources when dealing with thorny questions.

#### **IV. THE SPECIFIC DIFFERENCES AT THIEL**

At a more specific level, I should repeat that I teach in the Religion department at Thiel. We make an effort to respect the Lutheran knot. We try to keep a balance between Word and world, cross and glory within the department. We keep the tension by respecting the two sides of our

discipline. In the field of religion there's currently a tension between religious studies and theological studies. That tension has been around for about forty years. Religious studies is a more worldly approach to religion. It employs various methodologies in exploring the subject matter of religion, from psychological to sociological, historical, phenomenological, gender and class considerations, and many other approaches. Religious studies is less quick to assume the religious stance, and when it does it is sure to keep alive the critical spirit of doubt as the indispensable other side of faith. Theological study on the other hand is more eager to hold up the Word of God as key for understanding what religion is all about. Theology as discourse about God, especially of the Jewish and Christian variety, receives a special place in the theological study of religion. Doctrinal ideas and liturgical rituals of the Jewish-Christian tradition are deemed worthy of study in their historical context and in terms of their systematic coherence. The theological approach to religion presumes that the most insightful way to learn *about* religion is by functioning *in* religion. The Lutheran knot is present within our department in that we want to do our educating with the tension that comes in affirming both of these approaches, both the religious studies approach and the theological approach. Some religion departments around the country have insisted on the need to choose one or the other, so one can find theology departments that aren't interested in hiring religious studies scholars and religious studies departments that wouldn't consider hiring a theologian. In our little department we have attempted to keep a balance between these two and to hire people who are open to incorporating insights and approaches from "the other side."

At Thiel all students are required to take the religion course entitled "Interpreting the Jewish and Christian Scriptures." That's clearly an indication of respect for the Word. Theologians of the cross wouldn't ask for more. But within that course students are exposed to all the worldly considerations of what is entailed in arriving at a meaningful interpretation of the Bible in our contemporary world. Students learn that the Word can't mean without the world and that the world shapes the meaning of the Word. They learn the historical-critical method. And yet, they learn also that that rather critical or negative method does not provide the last word on the meaning of a biblical text, but that there is a need to discern via the productive imagination new meanings in keeping with the overall biblical message of liberating transformation. We like to think that this Scriptures course gets our students to explore the deeper meanings of life in the twenty-first century and

that the new meanings they settle on are in fact what is meant by God's Word.

I teach and hope our students learn that Word and world belong together. God, according to traditional Christian formulation does not need the world in order to exist, but the ultimate reality of life does need the world in the project of creation. For at the heart of divine creating is the bestowing of freedom upon creatures. The Creator desires to create a world that opens up space for self-determining, and through cosmic evolution and biological evolution and cultural evolution that desire has been met. The long evolutionary process has resulted in us, human beings who are little less than the angels, amazingly glorious creatures who possess the power of self-determination. God has a purpose for the world, but that purpose is for the world to participate in bringing about the divine purpose. Therefore, the Creator God needs the world, and the world is thus rendered glorious as the divine helpmate.

I teach that the Word is the source of the world's transformation. The Almighty Lover is the source of creative transformation, the cause of the effectiveness of new possibilities and thus the ground of freedom. The Word creates human freedom and calls humans to use their freedom to the fullest, that is, to enhance their own freedom and the freedom of others. When we heed that call to use our freedom for the enhancement of freedom, we are loving. When we feel the urging and luring of new possibilities, when we hear the call not to give in to the easy decisions to go with the old, safe ways of past habits, but to actualize ourselves by way of those tough decisions that lead us in new directions—then in that hallowed, sacred experience of struggling with possibilities we become aware of God's presence within our lives. We are again encountering the Lutheran *kn*ot. The divine reality needs us because we are created co-creators. God needs the world in the sense of needing to recruit partners, needing to enlist conspirators to *kn*ock down the walls that separate people, to challenge the prejudices and biases that people hold, to smash the exclusivity of clubs, clans, and cliques, of closed communities and congregations. God needs us to be agents of creative transformation, agents of reconciliation, co-creators with God in making all things new. The Word needs us, needs the world, because the creation has been designed in such a way that the creative transformation of the world will be accomplished in and through our partnership. The Lutheran *kn*ot ties Word to world while ever distinguishing the two.

At Thiel all students take a first-year, two-semester, team-

taught interdisciplinary course in "The History of Western Humanities." This course covers the disciplines of history, literature, art, music, philosophy, and religion. Here the investigation of religion is a part of the study of the development of the Western world. While there is an effort to offer a coherent word on the place of religion, the focus is clearly on the world. The same can be said about the second-year, two-semester, team-taught interdisciplinary course on "Science and Our Global Heritage." That course includes the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities and centers on the theme of sustainability as four units are covered, namely, "Brazil and Biodiversity," "India and Food (Population)," "Nigeria and Natural Resources," and "China and Industrialization." Here the focus is truly global in scope. Covering the religions of those geographical locales means that at least introductory consideration is given to Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, African indigenous religious traditions, and Christian Liberation Theology. World religions are tended to in that course, and students are exposed to questions raised by cultural and religious pluralism. So here again it is the world side of the world and Word dialectic that receives the emphasis, but the concern for the Word is present in the rational quest for genuinely seeking to understand the "other" that is a central objective of the course.

I teach that world and Word belong together. The world needs the Word for a sense of purpose and the God of the Lutheran *kn*ot provides that. Our students need to ask the big questions about the purpose of life. As humans, we ask the meaning question and the answer doesn't come apart from some over-arching sense of the purpose of things. What is of ultimate significance? What is it that is of primary importance in life? Where have I come from and where am I going, ultimately? Those are all at heart religious questions and in the answer we give we identify our Good. Martin Luther has said, "Find your Good and you will have found your God." Luther loved the name for God, as deriving from the word 'good,' because as he put it, "God is an eternal fountain which overflows with sheer goodness and pours forth all that is good in name and fact."

I teach that the world needs the Word because it needs a good. We need the Good as the ground for our values and the goal for our striving. Directionless, we meander aimlessly; with direction, we can flourish. We need a Word about a God who is our Good so that we have an orientation for our living. We need a source of self-transcendence, so that we, individually and communally, don't become complacent but remain self-critical and open

to fresh novelties that challenge us and enliven us. The Lutheran knot bears witness to the God of creative transformation who, making all things new, gives us an orientation for our living and a transcendent reference point for opening up the future and calling us away from the status quo in our individual and corporate journeys.

I also teach that the Word calls us to criticize the world. Our students are fascinated and too often captivated by the prevailing religion of our culture. Consumeristic economics in which the individual is understood as a freely acting, insatiably acquisitive agent whose fulfillment is found in continual monetary gain to enable continual buying of things—that's the most popular form of religion in the contemporary world. The individualistic attainment of material goods is finally, though, anemic because it doesn't deliver what it promises, the abundant life. It delivers instead the insufficient life, the skimpy life, the form of life that leads to what prophetic songwriter and artist Tracy Chapman sings about as "The Rape of the World." The consumeristic quest for things is never brought to closure, as long as one stays captivated by that worldview. Once we're in the race to collect things, it's a never-ending race that requires bigger and better things but which never brings satisfaction or fulfillment. What that prevailing consumeristic model of the good life lacks is a real God, a God of creative transformation making all things new, one who lets us know who we really are, one who reminds us of our limits by saying "Enough is enough," one who entices us to think about living sustainably and enables us to move more fully into a sustainable lifestyle, one who makes us realize that envisioning alternative economic models to the one that prevails is a very important religious item on the planetary agenda for the coming century.

So my teaching is different at a Lutheran college because I teach the Scriptures course, the Western Humanities course, and the Global Heritage course. But it is also different in that I have invested a good deal of time as Co-Director of what we call Thiel's Global Institute. The Institute began about five years ago as the Institute for Science and Religion in a Global Context. A couple of years ago we decided we needed to deal with issues of society and values as well as science and religion, so we changed the name to simply the Global Institute. The Institute primarily sponsors two conferences every year. We sponsor an Earth Week Celebration during the spring semester. As part of that annual April celebration hundreds of elementary school kids come to the college for workshops on that year's theme. Three or four national

speakers for our particular topic are brought in and other fun events take place. As one studies the global situation it does not take long to learn that economics stands at the heart of the global community's life. We all need to be learning more about economics if we are going to be able to function as responsible citizens in the global arena. So more recently the Institute has begun sponsoring a shorter conference in the fall semester on global economics. This past fall, after September 11, the symposium topic was "Religion, Economics, and Violence: Promise and Peril of the New Millennium." Lectures for that event included "The Moslem World, Globalization, and Violence" by a leading Islamist, "The Economics of Violence" by a trade policy expert, and "A Rational and Effective Response to Terrorism" by a State Department official from the Office of the Coordinator of Counter-Terrorism. The Lutheran knot ties me to the work of the Global Institute and encourages my institution to support its work.

One final point should be mentioned. Another way in which I teach in a different manner at our Lutheran college is that I participate when I can in the worship life of the campus. When there are campus-wide worship events at Thiel, I try to attend. This has nothing directly to do with my teaching. In my teaching in the Religion department and in the interdisciplinary courses, I attempt to maintain the distinction between teaching and preaching and try not to cross the line. But I also know that I am called to be a professor, that is, to profess to the students what is most important in my life. So I hope that my profession of faith shines through all that I do. But I don't typically talk about my religious faith, even if it informs all my thinking and lecturing and discussing in class. So an important statement is made through my participation in Christian religious functions on campus. It discloses that, while I stand in a thinking relation to the world as that which exists for me to know, I also stand in a thanking relation to the world as that which is donated to me as gift. By worshiping I profess publicly my commitment to ultimacy as imaged by Christian symbols, myths, and narratives, and that commitment makes all the difference in my teaching.

So, do I teach in a different manner at a Lutheran college? From one perspective I have to answer, "No, because I am called to incorporate students into an earthy, all-too-human process of interpreting the world. This tough secular work is most mundane and shares much with teaching that goes on at other institutions." From another perspective, however, I must answer, "Yes, because this mundane secular work of incorporating students into an earthy, all-too-human process of interpreting the world is a *vocatio* or

calling from the God of life who desires the creation to flourish in glorious fullness of life." For me, only such dialectical doublespeak leaves me content, with that unmistakable feeling in my stomach that is distinctly the

at-once dreaded and delightful dis-ease of the Lutheran knot.

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## HONORING THE WORD: LUTHERANS AND CREATIVE WRITING

Carol Gilbertson

Before I begin, a disclaimer. I am talking today about being a creative writer at a Lutheran college, but I probably have fewer creative writing credentials than those who teach writing at your institutions. I think Arne Selbyg allowed me to masquerade as a "creative writer" today because for the Lutheran Academy at Harvard last summer—on "The Lutheran Public Intellectual and the Arts"—I proposed a project of "creative" writing rather than of scholarly research. But I do consider writing my vocation as much as teaching and scholarship—my way, to quote Darrell Jodock's definition of *vocation*, of seeing my "life and work as avenues of service to God, the community, and the work, not merely as ways to pursue [my] own goals" (19).

My title is "Honoring the Word." Lutheran theology is grounded in the Word, and since we are Lutheran colleges, we should also be grounded in the Word. I am not a theologian, but, as one of my students once said, "Hey, my misunderstandings work for me!" In the first place, "Word" means the Logos, the primordial ordering principle that moved over the face of the waters and declared "Light" and "Land and Sea" and eventually "Creeping Things" and "Humans": "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). This elemental naming becomes the labeling power humans are gifted with: Adam and Eve name each species of the Garden's flora and fauna, and the biblical Word is filled with subsequent namings all the way down to the Father's baptismal blessing, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (I Peter 1:17), and Simon Peter's witness, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt. 16:16); from the awe-inspiring "I am who I am," down to Revelations' "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (21:6).

Martin Luther used the term "the Word" (with a capital *W*), in the most specific sense referring to the Scripture, God's Word: the Old Testament precepts, the law we humans can never fulfill; and the New Testament gospel, God's promise of salvation in the face of that human inadequacy. Luther's central privileging of God's Word led him to popularize the Bible by translating it into German, and to establish schools so that lay people could learn to read it. It also led him to write his theological pamphlets in a

simple and direct style and to use homely, colorful images in order, as he says, "That I may open then an easier way for the ignorant" ("Concerning Christian Liberty").

Luther expanded his notion of the Word to include what is spoken, with the Holy Spirit sifting into people's hearts through oral language. This is why Lutherans emphasize the *sermon* and, to insure that preachers preach the *gospel*, emphasize that sermons be grounded in scriptural readings, and be based in knowledgeable exegesis. The priesthood of all, in a sense, made scriptural interpretation another vehicle of God's Word. A germ of the Word could sprout in more informal settings too, when the gospel was spoken, or the spirit found its way into human language while the speaker was unaware.

For me, a corollary to this enlarged definition of the Word is the sacred power of human language as God's gift. In *Real Presences*, George Steiner takes this spiritual sense of human discourse to one logical and essentialist extreme, arguing that language is only capable of meaning because of God's absolute reality: "any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence." (3-4). I am not sure I would go so far as Steiner does, but I *am* talking about ways that our communal language in Lutheran colleges can have holy uses.

If language is a treasured gift, then, we need to be careful not to spend it profligately. We needn't hoard it, of course—saving up thoughts phrased in beautiful, unspoken words. Muteness does not work to link the Body's limbs. Jodock says that a Lutheran college organizes "itself as a community of discourse" (16). Valuing words means that, as community members, we exercise care in speaking and writing. We need to build comfortable verbal rooms to live in, but also to describe the room's furnishings as precisely as possible. We need to clarify together what we mean by "faith and learning," by "teaching values," by the sometimes loosely-used words "diversity" and "identity."

**A. The Chapel Word.** Our communities have different institutional architectures, to continue my metaphor, so the literal places where our communal spiritual discourse takes

place differ, and some worship traditions are livelier than others. For some of us, faith and learning come together most palpably at chapel, where a community gathers to listen to worshipful music, to declare our faith in carefully-crafted creedal statements, to pray, to sing, and to hear Scripture.

In some campuses, we also gather to hear the spoken Word--musings by staff or faculty speakers who respond to the biblical text from the perspective of their disciplinary expertise. Here too, speakers need to exercise care. Communal words are strong medicine: they can be bitter and make us weep; they can heal or make us laugh, and they can illuminate. The chapel talk—a genre that includes personal stories, scriptural interpretation, theological reasoning, and personal witness—is produced for *worship*. A message is spoken, but these chapel words are *themselves* the shaped utterance, like a poem's language. And they are particularly poignant because spoken by someone people know, someone who laughs over coffee and who has a distinct professional role at the institution. Locating this discourse within a community of faith and learning means that a chapel message is not a disciplinary lecture, a diatribe on political ills, or even a simple appeal for service project volunteers. We must underwrite our words with theology and biblical texts, because articulating the Word's philosophical implications teaches us (and students) to exercise our intellects in faith matters. In chapel we take a moment together to meditate, to probe, to question, and in doing so, to hold up that Word as a shared gift.

One of my former students, now an English professor, recently wrote to me about her college experience. She said she was turned off by fellow students who used literature for classroom "testimony or proselytizing," which made her carefully avoid "letting personal faith" influence her literary interpretation. But she went on to say:

*being at an ELCA college did make a difference, and this was largely because of chapel. I think I had an unconscious sense that chapel talks were a different kind of discourse [than the classroom]. I remember, for instance, a chapel talk you gave during my freshman year. In your drama class, we had recently read [John Webster's Jacobean tragedy] The Duchess of Malfi, and you used that play to illustrate something you were saying. Shamefully, the particulars escape me, but I do remember the moment: it was one of the first times I started to think that literature could enhance, enrich, and complicate the way I thought*

*about religious or moral questions.*

Chapel talks sometimes need to explore the implications of our culture's public discourse; we need to encounter Luther's other Kingdom. Here's a section of one of my recent chapel messages, which some of you may have read in Luther College's faculty journal *Agora*:

*In Martin Scorsese's 1976 film "Taxi-Driver," the lead character, played by Robert DeNiro, is a Vietnam veteran disgusted by the decadent lives his yellow cab ferries at night through the steamy Manhattan streets. When he encounters the waiflike child-prostitute played by Jodi Foster, he is horrified at her victimization by abusive pimps and customers. His disgust rises through the film until he is so repulsed by the social garbage of his environment that he purchases a high-tech gun, stalks a group of pimps to their flophouse, and blasts them away in a bloody apocalypse. The film doesn't intend us to applaud the violence, but we are drawn into the psyche of this disturbed--but oddly puritanical--character, and we too want the world to be somehow rid of such evil characters.*

*In some deep way, I think we all understand this impulse not only to clean up our immediate surroundings but also to clean up the world, to get rid of all the unsavory dirt that pollutes human life. Consider Timothy McVeigh's drive to blow to smithereens the Oklahoma City Federal Building, the government storming of the Waco Branch Davidian cult headquarters, the disgruntled postal workers who have blown away their former co-workers, and, of course, the terrorists who masterminded the September 11 disaster.*

*But this urge to cleanse the world is not limited to psychotic misfits and misguided religious fanatics. President Bush has used this clean-sweep rhetoric in order to build support for the War on Terrorism, and all of us at some level would like to wipe out those who commit terrible acts. These purifying impulses--though not parallel--share a similar psychology and rhetoric. And the Old Testament prophets use just such apocalyptic images and violent rhetoric. From the third chapter of Malachi:*

*But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?*

*For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. (3: 1-3)*

*A kind of Gothic shiver runs down our spine as we*

read such passages, but the unsettling problem is that we aren't really sure that the evildoers aren't us. The idea that we--or those we know and love--might be burned off the earth's face by this avenging God is unpalatable to our grace-loving faith. But is it possible that the dramatic triumph of God's gentleness can only be articulated within the rhetorical context of hyperbolic judgment? We need to hear that we are lost and blind wretches in order to be found, to really see, to understand being embraced by amazing grace, to internalize that even pathetic, wretched old me--not dramatic enough to be really evil--can be made marvelously, dramatically new.

Malachi's God says, "You have turned aside from my statutes." And then he makes it sound ever so simple: "Return to me." And if you do return, you will experience something that can only be articulated with the same hyperbole as the heavy judgment language: THEN, says God, "see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing" (3:10-12).

God's Malachi judgment is a set of binary oppositions--a person is either righteous or an evildoer. But this God knows human moral ambiguities and does not encourage our absolute judgments. Those who seek to wipe clean the world's evil are not God's instruments, though they may think so. Instead, we need God's wrathful world-purification as an image of judgment that we ourselves should never carry out. Be wary, Malachi implies, of attempting to clear-cut the forests of the world's evil; leave the rough stuff to God. On the "day when I will act," the Lord says, "Then you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not" (3:17-18). In other words, God does the judging, and only then will we--with our myopic mortal vision--see which is which.

So finally, Malachi's prophecy is not about judgment; it's about coming home. And it includes a splashy passage about this return, which is filled with wonderfully hyperbolic mixed metaphors:

You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.  
And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will  
be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day  
when I act. (4:2-3)

As you return to God, beware of the mud and shake the ashes from your feet, but remember that we all emerge out of ash and finally enfold ourselves in dust. Only a hair separates us from evildoing--where we walk, there is a great chasm on either side, "the valley

of the shadow of death," and we must keep peering down--but grace allows us to tread that narrow path and if we follow it, we will find ourselves--at some point--leaping like calves from the dark stall into the healing wings of the sun.

\* \* \*

**B. Classroom Wonder.** I am quite sure that something one might label "spiritual" happens in other contexts besides chapel: intimate conversations, moments of public eloquence. But I'd like to talk about the classroom. I think we as teachers can honor the Word by bringing to our classes a sense of wonder, modeling inquiry as God's delightful gift. Jodock explains that the Lutheran legacy is "free inquiry" (23), the rigorous pursuit of truth with no fear of shattering faith or offending God. I don't mean we should be teaching "Christian" economics and physics; I don't mean we should begin our classes with prayer, or bring a personal faith witness to the classroom. The classroom should not be a *religious place*, but I do think it is a place where the sacred can be implicitly revealed.

Part of this wonder is an appreciation for different avenues to the holy. One of our academic goals ought to be to teach students to be *religiously imaginative*. In another context, Martha Nussbaum argues for developing a *moral imagination*, demonstrating how novels, in particular, elicit a way of seeing which develops "[H]abits of empathy" and a "sympathetic responsiveness to another's needs" by helping us to "define the other person as spacious and deep" (88). But she steps delicately around wonder about transcendence, and she neglects religious dimensions of human experience which are crucial to many people's "rich inner life."

Nussbaum's argument can be extended to a call for developing the *religious imagination*. At many of our colleges, we require students to take religion classes to develop their biblical and theological sophistication, but we need to also help them expand their religious *imagination*. The most religiously narrow-minded people I know are individuals who cannot imagine their way into someone else's spiritual psyche. Developing our religious sensitivity may not be essential to good citizenship, as Nussbaum argues the moral imagination is, but it is essential to a working church--the Body of Christ--and, I would argue, it is essential to a constructive religious climate in the larger commonwealth.

Teaching wonder might seem more natural to literature classrooms than to other subjects, though I think we've

neglected it in many academic disciplines. One feels a sacred moment when the minds in the classroom are coming alive together; when the participants feel the synchrony of voicing shared ideas, feel their almost palpable progress towards truth. In literature classrooms, this feeling is heightened by the aesthetic pleasure of the very medium being discussed: the class may be silently awed at a poem's words or deeply moved at a character's speech. But a chemistry class might be similarly stunned by an electron microscope's portrait of vibrantly-colored crystals, a math class by the eloquence of a particularly intricate equation (so I suppose my definition of "word" would include, at times, numbers).

**C. Wording the Sacred in Poetry.** Finally, I want to talk about how deeply our campuses need poetry as a distinctive way of honoring the Word. Poetry is dead, some say: it is an esoteric medium which only literary *aficionados* can read with understanding and pleasure. The popular perception is that poetry usually speaks about love or death and is constructed of short stanzas of regular, "sing-songy" meter, and true rhymes--this after nearly two centuries of free verse poetry in conversational language about all subjects. In new biblical translations, poetic language is replaced by prosy, contemporary wording with no cadence. Sales of poetry books suffer, and huge bookstores have one or two small shelves devoted to serious poetry. Teachers often convey to the students that they themselves feel that poetry is incomprehensible, even that they openly dislike poems. We are quietly producing a people who are unaware of this major spiritual resource, who feel that it does not speak to their experience.

Despite this public neglect, poems continue to quietly and profoundly affect people. Former Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky's Favorite Poem Project revealed dynamic interest in some poems. At celebrations and times of crisis, people turn to poets to capture, in language of beauty and power, the communal emotion. Some newspapers reported that after the September 11th attack, people in Manhattan offices viewing the disaster, and others across the country watching it on television, turned to the Internet in search of poems--a secular but spiritual scripture to sustain them in the midst of confusion, terror, and grief. Singer-songwriters travel the country, singing their original pieces, and many are fine poetic work. A very few popular films nod toward poetry as a powerful voice (*Dead Poets' Society*, the grieving lover reading Auden's "Stop all the clocks" in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, and the various re-makings of Shakespearean drama on film). And a good share of students privately use poetry to express their

thoughts.

Still, poetry suffers in our college curricula. Even English faculty sometimes prefer teaching fiction, and recent emphases on the politics and economics of literary production sometimes render poetry irrelevant. Other faculty use *novels* to teach religion, political science, and economics, but rarely choose a poem to deepen students' understanding. Our current emphasis on global issues has called again for relevance and utility, and many faculty would see poetry as one of the least pressing of students' academic needs. Yet poetry is the most interdisciplinary of disciplines, written about all ways of knowing, regularly using prominent images and technical terms from across the academic spectrum to reflect on a historical event, chemical element, athletic move, or anthropological discovery. As Luther's Dennis Jones Teaching Professor in the Humanities for the next two years, I've designed a project to bring such relevant poems to each discipline for student-faculty discussion, and to build an audience for poetry.

By shaping these issues into poetic form, poets help those of us deeply entrenched in our disciplinary thinking, to reconceive and re-envision. Thus I would argue that *poetry is a crucial part of both the spiritual dimension and the intellectual content of our faith and learning dialogue*. Poetry deepens our understanding of human experience, transforms sense impressions into imaginative vision, makes daily language speak lived truths in radically new ways. A poet particularizes a speaker's pain or joy and yet elevates and universalizes it. In a brief white space, poets voice our humanness. If the novel, as Nussbaum argues, helps us to be morally imaginative, poetry, it seems to me, leads us to be spiritually imaginative. The concrete images and fleshy language of poetry incarnate the unseen sacred.

Thus it is that I see writing as a Christian vocation. We Lutheran college writers need to write for our communities as well as for a wider audience; our role is to commemorate our shared sorrows and joys--to inscribe our community's significance, to demonstrate how the Word conveys the flashes of holiness within our mundane lives. And the colleges, in turn, need to recognize and celebrate poetry's rich potency in the same way that they have celebrated the range and power of music.

Let me try to illustrate by reading some of my own poems. (As I wrote this, I kept thinking that I was being mercilessly self-indulgent by making a presentation in which I read my own work when I suddenly thought,

"Well, if I wrote a lecture and then read that, I'd *still* be reading my own work!").

In late June a year ago, I sat on a limestone patio step and looked at my shriveled and dry flower garden. I particularly noted the poppies, which had been intensely red-orange but had now dropped their petals. I felt worn-out by the heat, and the summer was careening to a close. So I wrote the following rather depressed opening lines:

Late June

*Sometimes, in late June,  
when the irises tighten into purple fists  
and poppy stalks bend toward bare knobs,  
the mind, like the sun on the grass,  
stares at the bare blades of a life,  
and time seems a thin stem  
growing toward a past  
when blooms stood fast in the wind.  
Now, a whispered breeze is too intense,  
and the petals are too thin  
to remember.*

It's important to remind our students that life experiences sometimes end merely in resignation or even depression, rather than affirmation. The novelist John Updike talks about his Lutheran upbringing and the way that sometimes the church tries to make God the "God of the dead":

*Having accepted that [God was a "God of the living"],  
I have felt free to describe life as accurately as I could,  
with especial attention to human erosions and  
betrayals. What small faith I have has given me what  
artistic courage I have. My theory was that God  
already knows everything and cannot be shocked. And  
only truth is useful. Only truth can be built upon. (qtd.  
in Jodock 23)*

When I wrote the "Late June" lines, I felt I was speaking a truth. But, interestingly, in this case I suddenly, months later, found my way toward a final affirmation, and I wrote an ending for the poem that also seemed to speak a truth:

*Yet at my back a choir  
of lilies quietly unfolds their yellow robes,  
preparing alleluias for a still July,  
when they will bare their flame-tipped throats.  
The hope is enough.*  
\* \* \*

This year I wrote some poems that honestly began as celebration: I don't know if it was the newly empty nest, or that, after four years, I was no longer department head. I wrote another poem this June, this time about that

month's lushness. This poem begins indoors, looking out at the same patio scene:

Early June

*Even from the window  
through the cold rain  
the colors astound: blooming bugleweed  
splashed like a pink and purple shawl  
with fringes of white alyssum,  
daisies opening their eyes with tiny white lashes,  
irises the color of pale skies and deep, bloody earth,  
peach and red hibiscus trumpeting,  
sharp pink fuchsia blossoms  
splayed by purple tongues.*

Again, I felt the grass's presence in the scene:

*Around this display,  
the grass deepens  
its green and knowing gaze . . .*

But where did I want the poem to go? I had a grandly regal imagery going in the first part, as well as a sense of observers: me at the window, the grass around the flower garden. Suddenly, I remembered an amazing figure from African history: Mansa Musa, a great, wealthy 14th-century ruler of the West African empire of Mali, who made a famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1325; he brought with him 60,000 slaves dressed in silk who dropped so much gold dust to the crowds along the way that it actually caused a twelve-year devaluation of gold in Cairo! Suddenly I had my poem's conclusion:

*the grass deepens  
its green and knowing gaze  
as stalks of regal poppies  
drop their extravagant flakes  
like Mansa Musa in procession,  
grandly gesturing  
to silk-robed servants  
sowing gold  
to awe-struck Cairo crowds.*  
\* \* \*

I just returned from a wonderfully cozy family vacation at our cabin in Montana where I wrote several poems. In this poem, I begin with the actual details of our daily vacation life--in this case, my own culinary mistakes inside the small cabin:

Sweet July

*At the cabin making cookies,  
I leave out the spices,*

*and then, the next day,  
I promise a coffee cake,  
but I forget the sugar.*

Suddenly, the poem takes me outside to our stunning surroundings and then to some small incidents of the previous days, which in my mind have become epiphany moments:

*The lake is clean blue,  
the water cool, and the pine resin  
sings its honey song.  
Mock orange in full bloom.  
A fox and then a bear cross the road  
like old friends from town,  
and the bald eagle sits  
high in our ponderosa, looking.*

Then I return the poem to the cabin interior, to our little family's life together:

*We eat ripe plums  
and read a book aloud,  
and the words make  
us laugh and talk.*

And finally, thinking back on my cooking mistakes--forgetting the sweetening in my recipes--I end the poem with the question this reverie left me with:

*How can we  
add any more sweetness  
to our lives?  
\* \* \**

The poet celebrates God's creation, but not always by naming God. Why is that? I don't know if I can answer. My first draft ending to that "Sweet July" poem was something like, "Surely God wonders / at our need / to add more sweetness / to our lives." Since the poem's still in process, God *could* still make it in, but so far it doesn't quite work. The poet tries to make the scales fall from our eyes, so traditional language often fails. We need fresh language to voice life's incarnational dimensions. This is a hard thing to do. On Good Friday this year, I tried to write a poem using images from Christ's life and passion but without directly naming them; instead, I used contemporary images from my world on that day:

Good Friday  
*Last Sunday, the world hailed the spring sun.  
Town kids drove loud cars down the streets,  
and people shouted yard to yard.  
But now we've lived through the week's hard work,  
reading in the news the parables about despair,  
hoping for miracles at our work desks and shops,  
fixing early suppers of day-old bread*

*and perhaps a glass of inexpensive wine.  
Weeds and plastic grocery bags now lodge  
in the windblown stalks of our sleepy gardens.  
Cross pieces on porch rails sag from weather,  
and drifted leaves entomb the whitened shrubs.*

Again, I wasn't sure where to go from here, but I knew I didn't feel the despair of that scene. My hope in writing the poem had been that new language for a spiritual message might evoke in my readers some almost-forgotten memories and faint spiritual sensibilities. Finally, an ending came to me:

*Yet today some crocuses push brilliant blooms  
through the grass straw and stiff stems.  
A child, red jacket tied around her waist,  
skips down the sidewalk pulled by a small white dog.  
A man we know knocks gently at a nearby door.  
Thank God it's Friday. Sunday will come again,  
and once again, our withered, lonely death  
will seem to be no more.*

\* \* \*

I've also attempted some more explicitly religious poems. I've recently tried to stretch my poetic range by writing hymn texts, which must declare the faith but must also use fresh words and images. This spring Wartburg College composer Karen Black and I wrote a hymn emerging out of our Lutheran Academy experience together, "The Word First Gathered Chaos Up" [which the Vocation Conference sang at its closing Eucharist]. I also recently wrote a poem about the Annunciation, which appeared in *The Cresset*. One of my favorite iconic images from a medieval illuminated manuscript depicts the Annunciation, where Gabriel's words are projected onto a stylized scroll that ribbons out toward Mary and enters her ear: the Word impregnates her womb. I knew that the Latin word *textus* means "woven thing"—and I was fascinated with the way it suggests both *text* and *textile*. And along the way, the fairy tale image of spinning straw into gold intervened. All these connections were a gift--what has been called the poet's "muse"--the notion of the transcendent as it comes to the artist in the creative act. Here's the poem:

Pondering These Things  
*"But Mary kept all these things, and  
pondered them in her heart." Luke 2:19  
The words he dropped into her ear  
threaded down into her womb  
to gather fibers up and spin out filaments.  
In secret shuttle, the woof of flesh  
wove deftly through a spirit warp,*

*and text became a textile.*

*It was a new synthetic,  
finely wrought.*

*And when this subtle weaving filled its loom,  
her body labored in a stable through the night,  
and in the morning saw the handiwork laid out,  
and strawpiles all around seemed spun to gold.  
The shepherds ambled in with skeins of wool,  
and kings rode in on stars  
to kneel and say this new material  
had unraveled all the fabric  
of the world.*

\* \* \*

Writing incarnationally means to put transcendent spirit into art's physicality, to bring the body into the spiritual dimension. Part of the poet's job is to make even suffering significant and beautiful and perhaps bearable. I buried my mother two years ago, after she had spent years moving down the dark corridor of Alzheimer's syndrome, and several months later wrote a therapeutic chapel talk in which I worked through my grief and found my way to a Word of consolation and hope. Here's my ending:

In the end, all that was left of her vibrant presence was a thin, silent form. And yet even that shriveled body with its fragile pulse beat was a naked verification of our *grounding* in love--that this incomprehensible God still quietly loves even so slight and frail and quiet a thing. This message was my mother's final ministry to me before she died serenely last April, just as the dawn turned the sky a brilliant rose.

That was my later word of hope, but in earlier months before her death, I had felt differently. I remember how difficult it was when my Mother could no longer mentally locate the names of things--she who had spoken four languages, having grown up the daughter of Norwegian-American missionaries in French-colonized Madagascar. It seemed to me the loss of a crucial bond with the phenomenal world, the human loss of the metaphorical embrace of her language. Here's the poem's opening:

*The Limbs of Words*

*Yesterday, as I drove, the fields unfolded  
from the gray road like bolts of green corduroy.  
At the base of a hill, a small tree struggled to leaf,  
and farther down in the valley,  
a sudden bush rose into bloom,  
astonished like a white balloon.  
On a nearer rise, three cows, the color of pecans,  
nuzzled the grass in slow, parallel lines.  
A spaniel barked at a pickap's gravel dust*

*near a farmhouse with a leaning screen porch.*

*I hold the world's things in the arms  
of my words. They are grounded  
in the thingness of what they name,  
sure and solid, and when I speak,  
objects stand in the mind and take notice:  
road, field, tree, cow, house.  
I arrange them like apples in a china bowl:  
spaniel, corduroy, balloon, pecans.  
Today I go to the nursing home to see my mother,  
who once spoke surefire words and polyglot:  
My ear still hears her singing "Jeg er så glad," her  
blue eyes clear;*

*I hear the French r low in her throat,  
the Malagasy proverbs she had from childhood.  
I hear the secret tremble in her public voice,  
her whispered language of faith or failure.  
Her bedtime calls still echo through the summer stars.*

But how to capture the emotional trauma of my mother's language loss? I had heard a colleague in psychology talk about semantic *trees* in the brain, with the most general categories of words being the trunks, then the more specific limbs, which finally move down into the end branches and leaves of the most specific species names. So I had that image in mind--by that time, my mother was lying still in bed unable to speak at all. I wanted--for me and for others--to capture in words the deep gash to one's humanity of that language loss, and a loved one's frustration in witnessing it:

*But then some years ago, she looked at things and  
spoke,  
and the words shriveled on the tongue into hollow  
seedpods,  
or fell from her lips like early fruit from frostbitten  
trees.*

*Names for things broke into particles of sound,  
and her words, like her twig arms,  
could not embrace the world she saw.  
Labels moldered on the brain's dusty shelves.  
Thoughts inched up semantic trees  
and lodged in stunted branches.  
Sentences wandered the gray roads of the mind,  
lost their way, and left phrases lurking  
low in the throat like gravel dust.  
My mother lives in a bed with wheels,  
but she lies still like a bolt of cloth.  
My mother, I say,  
but that round belly of a word  
sags in my mind like her aged breast,  
a flat skinflap, milkless.*

I considered ending the poem with that sharp image of personal loss, but I wanted to convey the enormity of this dehumanization's effect—a kind of cosmic echo. So I decided to use two different kinds of images which would end the poem: 1) the earth-shattering, conceptual shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric worldview; and 2) the moment when God flashed a laser-slice of light—the Logos, the Word—into the dark chaos, and all creation took shape: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Here's the poem's conclusion:

*Here where she lies,  
hazy-eyed and thin-throated,  
the universe hangs like a clock  
that wheels away the heavy hours.  
But here the Word does not bring light,  
and the fruitless earth  
is no longer at the center.*  
\* \* \*

The semester my mother was dying, my Introduction to Poetry class for two weeks heard me repeatedly say that she was in a coma and I didn't know whether I would be in class or not each new day. When she died, the class created a card for me, using phrases from elegies we had discussed, and I was very moved. After the funeral, I returned to the class and--not really knowing how to talk about the experience and how to capsule my grief--I read this last poem. The following year, when my colleague asked his "English Teaching Methods" class to write about their most meaningful experience with poetry, one student described that day when I returned to class after a week away and read that poem. She was stunned by how the poem captured a poignant moment in the life of someone she knew so well, but in a different way. That was a moment of classroom wonder, but more than that too.

I've already read you my July benediction poem, but my summer was full of such moments of blessing. After a couple of beautiful evenings watching western North Dakota sunsets, I wrote a poem called "Night Rising":

*Night  
We call it nightfall,  
as if someone in an overhead lightbooth  
suddenly dimmed the stage spots,  
and darkness fell from the sky  
like a velvet proscenium curtain,  
as if the sun dropped her heavy skirt*

*over sunburned thighs after a hard day.*  
The poem talks about how night does seem to *descend* in the city where

*The sun slips behind a wall of brick,  
and heavy shadows slide down the sides of buildings,  
hanging black triangles under balconies. . .  
falls softly into the creases of hooded blankets  
on the heads of men huddled at store entries. . . .  
The compass of the night leans down  
and draws its dark rings under the streetlights.*

"Night falls in the mountains too," the poem goes on,  
*where the ridge*

*Pulls up to hide the sunset and casts a cool shadow  
On the valley, dropping blue depth into the lake.*

The poem sets up this opening in order to lead into the sharply contrasting description of dusk on the plains:

*But on the plains darkness rises from the long land.  
You can feel the soil slowly cooling underfoot,  
releasing its blackness from under the green quack  
grass,*

*under the stalks of big bluestem and crested  
wheatgrass*

*and poison ivy leaves. The evening spreads upward  
under the rows of hanging sunflower heads.*

*It deepens the blue undersides of the flowering flax,  
the purple berries of the buck brush. It moves up the  
cornstalk*

*and traces a sharp line under each arched leafblade...*

Finally, the rising darkness renders its peaceful benediction:

*Trees rise up from vast plains like black ghosts  
to jag the flat horizon. The owl rides  
on the rising night. Large-eared deer  
lift up their antlered silhouettes  
against the last blossom of sky  
as the dark earth reaches up  
to push the crescent moon  
into its dim position.*  
\* \* \*

I ended my chapel talk about my mother with lines from T. S. Eliot's poem *The Dry Salvages*, and they will also serve as my ending today:

*. . . These are only hints and guesses,  
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest  
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.  
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is  
Incarnation.*

(*The Dry Salvages* 212-15)

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# WRITING TOWARD THE NIGHT COMPLETE: TEACHING AND WORKING AT THE PUBLIC, SECULAR INSTITUTION

*Classroom and Campus Ministry as Communities of Memory and Hope*

Bruce Allen Heggen

## 1. FINDING COMMUNITY

The office of Lutheran Campus Ministry at the University of Delaware is directly across the street from Russell Hall, a freshman honors dorm. On the day all 3,500 plus first year students at Delaware move into their dorm rooms, I like to spend time in my office, watching parents and students in a mad tangle, unloading cars, vans and even rented trucks, locating dorm rooms, carrying clothing, computers and televisions into small spaces they will begin to share with one or two strangers. At noon, the street is barely negotiable. By 6 PM the street is nearly empty, except for debris of moving. Good-byes have been said; parents have begun making the trek home. Some farewells have been teary; some not. New students are on their own in a way most have never been before. Fast-forward four months: by December, some "frosh" have learned to get themselves up for an 8 AM class – some have missed many classes. Some who were excited to be at University have been homesick in a way they could not have imagined. Some are pleased at the progress they have made in their classes. Some have failed to be admitted into select and competitive programs. All say in December that they had had no idea how hard they would have to study. But the very first few days leading up to this play themselves out in similar ways on all college and university campuses, public and private: the night before classes begin, new students wander around looking as bewildered and disoriented as Hereford calves fresh out of a Colorado branding chute. I remember the student at MIT, a young woman from Maryland, who finally made it to the Wednesday evening Lutheran-Episcopal Eucharist at the Saarinen chapel there: how she held her green *Lutheran Book of Worship* very, very close for a while. Finally, in all that newness, something familiar.

I teach as supplemental faculty for the English Department of the University of Delaware. Among my courses is English 110, "Critical Reading and Writing." The goal is for students from a variety of educational backgrounds to learn the basic skills for research, and to write competently in the conventions of academic discourse. We begin the semester with a "diagnostic" exercise. I think of the student who struggled for an hour to get three or four nearly coherent sentences out. It occurs to me that we may have

a problem here. We do. He is the student most likely to miss the 8:00 AM class. When he comes, he usually rushes into the basement level classroom seven or seventeen minutes late, always in stocking feet with roller blades in hand. I wait for the day when he comes careening in without having bothered to remove roller blades before a crash landing in his desk. It never happens. I'm not sure whether I'm relieved or disappointed, but I decide against suggesting the possibility to him. When we talk about his writing, he makes it a point to show me photos of his art projects. He's an art major; he's pretty good.

Generally my worst fears for him as a writer were realized. Steven King (yes, *that* Steven King) has said that few of us will become Hemingways or Eudora Welty's; but there are also only a very few who cannot improve their writing.<sup>1</sup> This kid threatens to be the exception to prove the rule. I had decided that the last assignment of the semester should describe an event in which the students realized that they were part of family or community: I stole the title of their assignment from Harold Ditmanson, once of St. Olaf: "Hours of Authority." One student wrote of his Bar Mitzvah; another, about a family Christmas that might have been a scene from a Russell Banks novel. My artist student wrote about a memorable Fourth of July: there were fireworks; a neighbour's car caught fire; he and his friends were questioned by police. But he concludes, "All in all our night was complete: danger, people getting together, explosions, and lots of fun." His competence in research was still marginal; but because of the freedom of that sentence I wanted to believe that he had come far enough as a writer to pass the course. Maybe I envied him his ability to say so clearly what it is that grounds us in community: danger; people getting together; explosions; and lots of fun.

I allow students to write regularly of their own experience because I am convinced that all of our writing is somehow autobiography. We write best when we write about what moves us, what interests us, what touches us – what heals us: "In your wound is your brilliance," writes poet Robert Bly.<sup>2</sup> Most students come to their discipline for one of

two reasons: the prospect of a good income, or because they love the subject. A student loves her dog and her horse and chooses Delaware for the pre-veterinary medicine program in the College of Agriculture. Among her professors one will stand out for his enthusiasm in an anatomy classroom: he's the one who has made a career of wandering town collecting cat cadavers in order to make fresh tissue slides, the one who would find a particularly interesting specimen and then, like a kid showing off his favourite Christmas present, call students to share the discovery. It is difficult to help a student maintain enthusiasm for a subject when he or she becomes aware of the rigour of the discipline. Yet we know that the rigour must be maintained, because it is that hard work that brings the student out of his or her own limited neighbourhood through the confusion of freshman orientation and the first semester and into the wider community of the discipline and of the world.

The rigour of the discipline also brings a student closer to God, though a student may not know that. In a fit of high self-esteem a few years ago I bought a poster with Einstein's picture on it, and his words, "I want to know God's thoughts; the rest are details." I believe that there is no better way to know what Dorothy Sayers called "the mind of the maker" than through attention to the details of the made. Which is to say, we are drawn to what we love, and it is through love of the created that we are drawn to love of the Creator.

## 2. THINKING HOPE

"Critical Reading and Writing" has other goals and objectives than to help the student articulate that love of the created thing that draws one into vocation. The goals of the course are simple (though not easy): the student is to learn to read with pencil in hand, growing familiar with an author and with the author's point of view, eventually the better able to provide a summary and critique of the author, and able to place the author in conversation with other authors, and to do so in writing, and to develop one's own argument according to rudimentary logic. The student who learns to do this well passes the course and may do so with an "A."

There is however another aspect of critical thinking that is more difficult to teach. It can not be taught in one class only, but must be learned over a long period of time. A freshman woman wrote in an early assignment that she had been horrified to learn from other freshmen of high schools

so violent that students have to pass through metal detectors before entering the building. In her paper she said that she was glad to find out about this because she planned to teach some day, and she hoped to avoid teaching in this kind of environment. I am saddened but not surprised at her response. I want this person to learn that the problem is not addressed by her engineering her life in such a way that she steers clear of such a school; it is addressed when she recognizes that such schools can and must be changed, however slowly, with however much difficulty, whatever the social forces that resist such change, and that she can and in some way *must* have a part in that change. Her hope for her future has got to be based on something other than the avoidance of a teaching position she judges to be bad; and it is her teacher's responsibility to teach hope as a critical principle and to foster it in pedagogical practice.

### 2.1. THINKING HOPE: CALCULATIVE AND MEDITATIVE THOUGHT

To teach hope in a concrete way it helps to understand something about different ways of thinking. Douglas John Hall, for instance, draws on Martin Heidegger's distinction between "Meditative Thought" and "Calculative Thought."<sup>3</sup> "Calculative thought" is characterized by "planning and investigating;" it "computes, . . . ever new, ever more promising and at the same time economical possibilities. Calculative thinking races from one prospect to the next. Calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself."<sup>4</sup> Meditative thought, on the other hand, considers "the *meaning* in everything that is." Meditative thought may appear to be removed from reality, if the nature of reality is determined by "calculative thought" only; it is not concerned with carrying out "current business" or with "the practical." It is, on the other hand, "associative," even poetic, in that it can make "poetic leaps of relationship" not so discernable to one schooled in "calculative thought" alone.<sup>5</sup> And it cannot be evaluated on "scantron" forms.

To help freshmen in a class at a secular public university devoted to critical reading and writing begin to recognize the possibility that there are two ways of thinking, I draw on, for instance, a poem by Richard Wilbur: "Advice to a Prophet":

*When you come, as soon you must, to the streets of our  
city,  
Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,*

*Not proclaiming our fall but begging us  
In God's name to have self-pity,*

*Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and  
range,  
The long numbers that rocket the mind;  
Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,  
Unable to fear what is too strange.*

*Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the  
race.*

*How should we dream of this place without us? –  
The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,  
A stone look on the stone's face?<sup>6</sup>*

Wilber is telling us what cannot be accomplished by calculative thought, the attempt at persuasion by data and naked fact alone; data and naked fact alone do not touch the human spirit. We require something else: and the remainder of the poem lifts up the meditative quality of metaphoric, associative recognition of a deeper dimension of creaturely existence faced with the possibility of the obliteration of sentient life on the planet earth:

*Speak of the world's own change. Though we cannot  
conceive*

*Of an undreamt thing, we know to our cost  
How the dreamt cloud crumbles, the vines are  
blackened by frost,*

*How the view alters. We could believe,*

*If you told us so, that the white-tailed deer will slip  
Into perfect shade, grown perfectly shy,  
The lark avoid the reaches of our eye,  
The jack-pine lose its knuckled grip*

*On the cold ledge, and every torrent burn  
As Xanthus once, its gliding trout  
Stunned in a twinkling. What should we be without  
The dolphin's arc, the dove's return,*

*These things in which we have seen our selves and  
spoken? . . .*

Even freshmen, however irreligious, however committed to the values of the marketplace, can be drawn through the power of metaphor to appreciate the poet's criticism of the language and methods of calculative thought, and to make sense of what the poet names later as "the red rose of our

love" and "the clean horse of our courage."

## 2.2. THINKING HOPE: "INSTRUMENTAL" VS. "SUBSTANTIALIST/OBJECTIVE" REASON.

The theorists of the Frankfurt School, sometimes known as the "Institute for Social Research," offer a second illustration of the varying modes of thought that we learn to recognize and work between in order to teach hope. Developing their fundamental ideas in the early years following the first world war, and continuing their most creative work among the expatriate German communities in New York and California from the mid-1930s through the early 1950s, they spoke of the distinction between "Instrumental Reason" and "Substantialist/Objective Reason." Gary Simpson defines *Instrumental Reason* succinctly as "the concept of reason . . . whereby reason becomes powerful as an instrument or tool for pursuing efficient means toward a given end but impotent for evaluating the desirability or value of the given end or goal."<sup>7</sup> *Substantialist/objective* reason is "the conception of reason that postulates and seeks to examine an objective, total order within human reality and functions to provide a rationale for the patterns of social existence."<sup>8</sup> Unlike Heidegger, and those who use his distinction between meditative and calculative thinking, the theorists of the Frankfurt School do not privilege one mode of thinking over another. Heidegger's preference for "meditative thought" is limited in that it tends to express nostalgia for a pre-enlightenment way of seeing the world, a way to which we cannot return. Nonetheless, the advances of the enlightenment may not be claimed uncritically. Thus, both instrumental reason and substantialist/objective reason have their place, and each may be used in critical evaluation of the other. Instrumental reason, for instance, advances technology; substantialist/objective reason asks about the use and liability of technology. Walter Benjamin, Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer and the other social thinkers of the Frankfurt School were influenced by Marx's "dialectical materialism" and critique of capitalism. But they refused to recognize Marxism as an absolute and timeless revelation: rather, they borrowed its dialectical methodology to criticize any closed philosophical system. They did not reject the enlightenment but were sceptical of the positivism and progressivism of the heirs of the enlightenment – their nominalism, empiricism, and high estimation of scientific evidence. Critical theory is not "doctrine," but *method*.<sup>9</sup>

It is a primary feature of critical theory to be "ecological," in the sense that Joseph Sittler spoke forty years ago of "The Ecology of Faith": that is, the "critical theorists" recognized that any system under scrutiny is not external to the observer, but rather the observer is a part of the observed; to recognize a need for change is to recognize also that the consequence of any change is to change ourselves.<sup>10</sup> In that one is neither identified with the system under review nor detached from it, but is a part of it, theirs is an argument against totalitarian systems, an argument against what Max Weber called the "fully administered society." Or, as Walter Benjamin put it, it is a commitment to the concern that the murderer never triumph over the innocent victim (a thought echoed by Elie Wiesel when he says, "we have poetry in order that the dead may vote") – or, as Matthew Lamb put it in his collection of essays concerning the significance of critical social theory for Christian ethics, it helps the Christian express "solidarity with victims."<sup>11</sup>

### 2.3. THINKING HOPE: THE CULTURAL ROOTS OF CRITICAL THOUGHT.

The concepts of "critical theory" as concepts are notoriously difficult to teach and put abstractly into practice; my freshman who hopes to avoid teaching in a desperately tough inner city school is not likely to respond to them early in her undergraduate career. But there is a moral rigour and a theological subtlety in the thought of Adorno, Benjamin and Horkheimer that Martin Jay suggests originates in the "values espoused" in the even secular Jewish homes in which they were raised.<sup>12</sup> Douglas John Hall writes that Christian theology includes a self-critical stance not unique to the theological discipline, but "is part and parcel of the cultural matrix that is the foundation of the prophetic and wisdom tradition of the Hellenic world. The university is a child of that cultural spirit that lives between belief and the ongoing critique of what is believed."<sup>13</sup> Thus, even in a secular classroom an aware teacher can foster critical thinking in the undergraduate by pointing out, for instance, the inherent self-criticism found within the sources of the western artistic and cultural imagination.

Another class that I teach in the English department at the University of Delaware is "Biblical and Classical Literature." It is a course required of both English and Art History majors and recommended for religious studies

minors, intended to compensate for the illiteracy of most Americans concerning the sources of the western artistic and intellectual imagination: the biblical literatures written in Hebrew and Greek, and the classical literatures written in Greek and Latin. Ideally this would be at least a two-semester course leading to the convergence of these two great streams in Augustine and Dante. But even a semester is enough to get an overview of the great sweep of biblical narrative and a taste of the pagan myths of cultural origins; and to begin to see how the narratives and myths develop and reinterpret themselves in light of the demands of new contexts: how, for instance, generations after Moses prophecy arises in a new way as the critical conscience of divinely ordained kings, and how women of courage subvert the dominant paradigm of patriarchal oppression; and, at the other end of the Mediterranean, how the playwright Aeschylus rewrites Greek theology to offer the community a new way of resolving tragedy and treachery; how a Socrates could offer a city weary of empty religious practice the critique of careful thought. How the greatest and earliest of our literatures arise out of the shadow of the destruction of great cities: after the events of last September 11 it is particularly poignant to remember that the epic and dramatic poetry and the philosophy of Greece is commentary on the Trojan war; that the canon of Hebrew scripture was formed in response to the fall of Jerusalem; that Augustine wrote *The City of God* with the sacking of Rome echoing in his mind. The ancient literatures teach that barbarity still lurks at the edge of the civilized clearing, that the ancient commitment to hospitality still stands, that those who practice hospitality are still vulnerable to those who would violate the counsel that every stranger is Zeus in disguise. One does not necessarily have to profess Christian faith to teach undergraduates in a secular classroom the primary tenet of "critical theory," that every "absolute" is subject to revision: so Jesus says, "You have heard it said; but I say unto you." It *may* belong to the realm of Christian confession, and thus to the specialized work of campus ministry, to move from this to the claim that, in the words of Walter Brueggeman, "something is 'on the move' in the darkness that even the lord of the darkness does not discern;"<sup>14</sup> and yet the most irreligious of students can be helped to recognize that that is also the subtext of so popular a literary and cinematic text as *The Lord of the Rings*. Might this help an undergraduate education major look at violent schools differently, and hope – and work for – other possibilities?

## 2.4. CRITICAL THEOLOGY: THE "THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS" IN THE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM.

Not every student studies "Biblical and Classical Literature," though it is a surprisingly popular elective. But the point is that a secular learning community enables the teaching of hope through the critical and self-critical exploration of any of the multicultural sources of the modern world. Within this curriculum the equally critical and self-critical study of confessional theology also has its place, as Douglas John Hall has said clearly:

*While Christian theology must not be presumptuous about its place in the contemporary university, and while its first responsibility must be the service of the community of belief, both university and church benefit from this pursuit of this discipline within the secular academy. The university benefits because apart from an holistic grasp of Christian belief Western civilization (including the university itself) cannot be profoundly understood, critiqued and (in its better expressions) preserved; the church benefits because without the critical dialogue of the academy belief too easily degenerates into credulity, sentimentality or ideology.<sup>15</sup>*

A Protestant, Hall draws on Martin Luther's "Theology of the Cross" as a primary touchstone for his own theological reflection. He writes that a theology of the cross always argues against propositional certainty in theology, reminding Christians that doubt is an intrinsic dimension of the faith which is, nonetheless, always faith seeking understanding, and always in relationship with the Man of Nazareth who made himself vulnerable in "obedience unto death, even the death on the cross." Such a theology is "a discipline highly practiced in the art of self-criticism."<sup>16</sup> Hall has long insisted that that "meditative core" of Christian faith puts Christian faith in opposition to the Christendom which has become the officially or unofficially established religion of Europe and North America since Constantine appropriated the cross and said "In this sign I conquer." The political edge of Luther's "Theology of the Cross," Hall argues, is its critique of what he names America's culture of "official optimism" – an optimism called increasingly into question by global political, economical, and environmental developments, and which in turn relies increasingly on military strategies for defence and on a shallow, one-dimensional religious justification of those military strategies.<sup>17</sup> Hall finds that Christian theology as a "Theology of the Cross" has a place

in the academy first, because it has its roots in the critical proclamation of the Hebrew prophets and the critical reflection of Hellenistic philosophy; and secondly because the subject and object of the theology of the cross is *not* abstract "divinity" but the God of Abraham and Moses, who is always *for* the world in its wholeness, understood as the beloved artefact of God's creation and the beloved object of God's redemption.<sup>18</sup> Thus, while many university scholars and the theologian at work in the university may justifiably critique certain of each others' assumptions and ways of thinking about the world, they still share at their best a common concern for "the fate of the earth," (Jonathan Schell) and for human futures, and a common commitment to service grounded in wisdom and instructed by love.

Hall acknowledges that to teach as a confessional Christian theologian in a secular university is to invite an inevitable tension:

*Those involved in the teaching of Christian theology in such a context are conscious of their responsibilities to two communities of discourse whose methods and priorities are not made easily compatible – the university, which by its nature as a community of open-ended inquiry must maintain a certain scepticism in relation to all systems of meaning, and especially those that seem to posit finality; and the church, which at its best is also sceptical of such systems but cultivates its peculiar openness to mystery through commitment to a specific spiritual-intellectual tradition – a commitment that our immediate predecessors in this discipline named "the scandal of particularity."<sup>19</sup>*

Thus he insists that when that tension makes of Christian theology the object of religious *Wissenschaft* it is no longer a Christian theology which assumes a commitment to a certain "scandalous particularity;" in the words of David Miller of Syracuse University, it "loses traction." If one yields to the temptation to resolve the tension easily "either one accentuates one's commitment to the academy in such a way as to minimize one's responsibility to the community of faith; or one emphasizes one's belonging to the community of faith so as to avoid existential entanglement with the claims of the university."<sup>20</sup> Hall laments that when scholars have accepted positions in departments of religion without assuming the burden of answerability to religious communities

*. . . the result is that the churches have been*

*deprived of this scholarship, and (more regrettable still) have therefore been all the more vulnerable to simpler and frequently simplistic versions of the faith, which have gained a stronger hearing in our society through the mass media.*<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, more simplistic versions of the faith are not corrected when the scholar submits to a "kind of loyalty to the religious community that sits lightly to the requirements of reason and the academy."<sup>22</sup> But the tension entered *consciously* can produce positive gains: when theology as self-consciously Christian theology is astutely aware of and committed to the world and committed as well to the service of memory against cultural amnesia, the Christian scholar can engage in what Hall calls a "dialectic of proximity and distance" that may be "against the world for the world" (as George Lindbeck, Richard John Neuhaus, and a number of others entitled a book published at least thirty years ago), and may also be "against the church for the church and for the gospel." Understood dialectically, and critically and self-critically, a world-oriented Christian "Theology of the Cross" supports all members of the learning community in their integration of faith and intellect – *and* it supports members of the learning community in resisting abstraction for the sake of "meaning" in consideration of the concrete and the particular. As Luther said, "the 'Theology of the Cross' calls a thing what it is."<sup>23</sup> It is utterly honest. But because its realism is understood theologically as the way God works in the world, it is also utterly hopeful.

### 3. TEACHING HOPE.

To teach to a college student a reason for hope and a sense of responsibility to community requires more than attention to course content and to ways of thinking. Teaching hope and responsibility are also matters of pedagogy. Pedagogy, though, is a matter around which I find much sadness and cynicism. In a posthumously published essay Lionel Basney of the English department at Calvin College lamented the nature of teaching in higher education at the end of the twentieth century: "to be a teacher now means being a committee person, or academic politician, a conference goer, an administrator, a grant winner, a counsellor."<sup>24</sup> Basney discusses his attitudes towards attendance (he never kept attendance records) and towards the books he has read – "most of my books are nothing like *Walden*, of course, and I regret having bought them. They were expensive, profitless, and distracting."<sup>25</sup> Student dress

suggests to him that, however much a student may deny it, "the market in clothes (as in food and ideas) furnishes us all virtually identically . . . how intense a denial of human particularity this entails."<sup>26</sup> Reflecting on the use of time in class he considers that "a large body of systematic knowledge is [probably not] of much use to a teacher of undergraduates. Which means that a large part of our formal professional training is beside the point."<sup>27</sup> Now Basney, a self-consciously Christian professor teaching at a private institution committed to a particular tradition of Protestant Christianity, is not dismissing academic rigour or attention to a robust cultural intellectual heritage. He is concerned rather that too much attention to "scholarly esoterica" and academic commodification too often interferes with what is *not* beside the point: the fact that in the classroom, "*people are present*."<sup>28</sup> a young man with roller blades; a young woman passionate about her horse; a young woman concerned about teaching in schools with metal detectors at the door.

Teaching in a markedly different context, Shelley Shaver is another who recognizes the presence of *people* in the classroom. She teaches remedial writing at a California community college. Many of her students, she writes,

*are the first in their families to attend higher education. Their ages range from 18-year-olds who are here because they don't know what else to do after graduating (sometimes barely) from high school, all the way up to middle-aged re-entry students who want to advance at work or who suddenly need new employment skills after a divorce or an injury on the job. Almost all of my students work, many at minimum wage jobs, and all feel somewhat guilty for putting in hours at school that they could spend at work to help their families. Few of their friends from high school have any idea of the hard work at home that college requires. Some come from Southeast Asian countries and are trying to lead double lives that satisfy both their traditional parents and the society that surrounds them. I suppose my image of the typical community college student is someone in the mid-twenties age range who made C's in high school, graduated and worked for a few years at a fast food or sales job, and then realized that without further education, this was the end of the road.*<sup>29</sup>

She describes students "with the ambition to succeed in the world, but with no earthly idea of how to do it."<sup>30</sup> Her task is to give students not simply what she is convinced

they "ought to know" about writing – many of them, like my poor artist on roller blades, improve only minimally, however they struggle – but she tries also to foster disciplines necessary to effective job performance: punctuality, honouring commitments, meeting deadlines, cultivating attitudes other than an in-your face hostility learned when one has "never had a conversation where one person questions and talks and the other questions and comments back."<sup>31</sup> Shaver quotes Will Rogers: "people learn in two ways: . . . One is reading. The other is association with smarter people."<sup>32</sup> This, however, demands from the teacher not only "knowledge," but a sense of vocation as recognizing that a student is more than what he or she at first seems to be:

*Since many did poorly in high school, to a large extent their future success depends on their being able to construct a new identity in the community college . . . The major obligation of my job is to refuse to accept the negative identities they press me to buy into. I have constantly to let my students see that I perceive other personas for them, more creative, more promising.<sup>33</sup>*

In his own way, in a very different kind of institution with a different "market," Lionel Basney echoes this:

*What's going [in the classroom] is partly waiting. You talk with and to students, waiting for the moment of intellectual shock, or fear, or (more rarely) love, that means something has found its way in, or been allowed in, though the significance of this is the student's to state and may not be evident for years.<sup>34</sup>*

A friend says that too much teaching is nothing but the transmission of data from the professor's notes to the students' notebooks without going through the minds of either. Parker Palmer offers an alternative understanding of teaching such as is illustrated by the experiences described by Lionel Basney and Shelley Shaver in classrooms "with people present." "To teach," Palmer says, "is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced."<sup>35</sup> To summarize Palmer's theory of education fully is to recapitulate the discussion of different modes of thinking suggested by Douglas Hall's summary of Martin Heidegger, by the theorists of the Frankfurt school, and by the critical realism of Luther's "theology of the cross." It is also to move critical method and intellectual content into the experience of relationship in classroom community. Teaching that is merely the transmission of data is not a communication of truth but an obstacle to truth because it teaches "an objectivism that persists in making 'things' of

us all. This objectivism is quickly translated into political and social programs of division, manipulation and oppression."<sup>36</sup> According to Palmer, a teacher who counters these tendencies with "obedience to truth"

*is a mediator between the knower and the known, between the learner and the subject to be learned. A teacher, not some theory, is the living link in the epistemological chain. The way a teacher plays the mediator role conveys both an epistemology and an ethic to the student, both an approach to knowing and an approach to living. I may teach the rhetoric of freedom, but if I teach it ex cathedra, asking my students to rely solely on the authority of 'the facts' and demanding that they imitate authority on their papers and exams, I am teaching a slave ethic.<sup>37</sup>*

Or to use an example from the discipline of Christian theology: "grace" taught with a pedagogy of shame communicates only a dogmatic formula to be memorized, not a sense of life to be lived in a community of freedom and hope; whereas enthusiastic instruction in the anatomy of a cat taught in a way that recognizes the dignity of a student in fact and in potential both liberates the student and invites her into community, even though the name of Jesus may never enter into the conversation.

This does not necessarily make of the classroom a "safe place." In *Teaching to Transgress*, Bell Hooks writes that the classroom is not and cannot be a safe place, not because we are vulnerable to shame, embarrassment, and exposure, but because effective teaching forces us to see the world differently than we have – or want to.<sup>38</sup> Few of us ever really seek growth willingly, Joseph Sittler once told us; "we are pushed, pulled, thrust, dumped into growth." My students from above the Mason-Dixon line are always distressed when I speak of the American Civil War as "the war of northern aggression" – as I too was once distressed to hear this. But, writes Palmer, the teacher who attempts not to transmit data but to communicate hope knows that "hope includes to recognize one's own sense of vulnerability and authenticity," and teaching becomes an act of prayer in the sense of prayer as "the practice of relatedness."<sup>39</sup> As a teacher and teacher of teachers informed by Christian spirituality, Palmer claims that

*truth is not a concept that "works" but an incarnation that lives. The "word" our knowledge seeks is not a verbal construct but a reality in history and the flesh. Christian tradition understands truth to be embodied*

*in personal terms, the terms of one who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Where conventional education deals with abstract and impersonal facts and theories, an education shaped by Christian spirituality draws us toward incarnate and personal truth. In this education we come to know the world not simply as an objectified system of empirical objects in logical connection with each other, but as an organic body of personal relations and responses, a living and enduring community of creativity and compassion. Education of this sort means more than teaching the facts and learning the reasons so we can manipulate life toward our ends. It means being drawn into personal responsiveness and accountability to each other and the world of which we are a part.<sup>40</sup>*

All the educators I've been discussing agree that such teaching is not therapy; that when a classroom conversation becomes "therapeutic" it is too often a manipulative exploitation of an inappropriate vulnerability. Nonetheless, Lionel Basney observes that there is in such a classroom a "wounding" – an intellectual and spiritual wounding, a violation, as Sittler said, of "intellectual innocence."<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, with careful attention that wound will be kept open because – I repeat Robert Bly – "in one's wound is one's brilliance." Thus in such a classroom, whether in the college of the church or the secular university supported by the state, two disciplines come necessarily into play for the one who stands in front of the room and is paid to be "teacher": the discipline of humility and the discipline of compassion; and both serve to invite the student more fully into a community of what Palmer calls "truthful knowing." He writes,

*In truthful knowing we neither infuse the world with our subjectivity (as in premodern knowing) nor hold it at arm's length, manipulating it to suit our needs (as in the modern style). In truthful knowing the knower becomes co-participant in a community of faithful relationships with other persons and creatures and things, with whatever our knowledge makes known. We find truth by pledging [commitment to what is known], and knowing becomes a reunion of separated beings whose primary bond is not of logic but love.<sup>42</sup>*

Humility is demanded of one who teaches toward hope as an element of truthful knowing because such truth is not a contained body of knowledge of which we stand outside and can master, but a matrix of ever-expanding relationships of which we are a part; humility is also

required of one who teaches toward hope because we are a part of that community of inquiry that consists of the class who has met for this hour on this day, and while we know that we have much to offer this group, we discover sometimes to our joy and sometimes to our embarrassment that we also have much to learn from them: and it is that that makes of the classroom a community of people getting together on the edge of something perhaps dangerous and volatile, but also exciting and even fun.

A second essential discipline is that of compassion. For a number of years now I have at the beginning of August made a pilgrimage to Franconia, New Hampshire, to participate in the "Festival of Poetry" held on the farm on which Robert Frost lived following his return from England to the United States at the onset of the first world war. The director of the festival, Donald Sheehan, is simply one of the finest teachers I have ever experienced in action. His attitude toward teaching is summarized well when he writes that the festival seeks

*to articulate and practice a single principle as the key to each conference's success: the principle of compassion. For the most part, artists of all kinds are helplessly intelligent but only deliberately compassionate. The first morning of the Festival, participants are told that in workshops (indeed, in all their interactions) if they have to make a flash choice between sympathy and intelligence, choose sympathy: for sympathy – and here is the whole point – will increase the depth of intelligence. Love keeps seeing more; contempt is very soon blind. In this way, the Festival seeks to manifest the meaning of every fruitful relationship between artists. To the extent that each participant's primary aim is to make better not his or her own art but the art of at least one other person, one's own art grows stronger.<sup>43</sup>*

I believe that teachers and students in the university classroom are also "helplessly intelligent but only deliberately compassionate." The effective teacher fosters compassion, that of the teacher's for the students, that of the students for each other, and that of all for the subject under consideration. In such an atmosphere the classroom may become not just a threatening place of anxious competition, but a community of mutual vulnerability, cooperative critical inquiry, and authentic hope. When it works well, it resembles a jazz trio or a string quartet, playing under the leadership of one, but with the full responsive participation of all. Or that's how I imagine it.

And I want to believe that it is in such an atmosphere that one student can write freely about a miserable family Christmas, and another about the Fourth of July.

#### 4. THE MINISTRY OF HOPE.

This may seem impossibly idealistic. It is. I am fortunate to be teaching for a very healthy department in a state university that, while it is not ideal, is nonetheless a very good place. I am also a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, called to serve in a ministry of word and sacrament to the faculty, staff and students at this state university.

To develop campus ministry as a community of hope in this place is not simply to maintain "the consolation and conversation of the saints" as a place of uncritical piety, or of solace for those wounded, whether by the class which demands more than the student can produce, or by the professor whose challenges to the assumptions of faith are, as sometimes happens, barbed beyond propriety. It is however a place to learn of the community of faith through attention to the community's writings and to its history; it is a place in which to address hard questions that the university raises of faith; it is also a place to develop a community of ever-widening circles, that includes the earth and all creatures that dwell therein. What Parker Palmer says of the reality that *should ideally* be taught in the classroom, *must* be acknowledged in the community of

Christian belief:

The structure of reality is not exhausted by the principles of empiricism and rationality. Reality's ultimate structure is that of an organism, an interrelated, mutually responsive community of being. Relationships – not facts and reasons – are the key to reality; as we enter into those relationships, knowledge of reality is unlocked. Human beings are not the only participants in that community; but we alone are capable of participating in self-aware and articulate ways. As our capacity for conscious and reflective relationship increases, so does our knowledge. The deepest calling in our quest for knowledge is not to observe and analyze and alter things. Instead it is personal participation in the organic community of human and non-human being, participation in the network and accountability called truth.<sup>44</sup>

This may not happen in a classroom. But it can happen in campus ministry; and when I see students practice compassion for each other, when I see faculty involved in campus ministry tutoring and mentoring students in their discipline, when I see students practicing care for the whole of the earth and its creatures I know that it is happening. It, too, has its danger and potential for explosion; but it brings people together – and sometimes it is a lot of fun.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Scribners, 2000), p. 142.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book about Men* (Reading, MA: Addison and Wesley Publishing House Inc., 1990), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 396.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395.

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

<sup>6</sup> Richard Wilbur, "Advice to a Prophet," in *New and Selected Poems* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Publishers, 1988), p. 182.

<sup>7</sup> Gary Simpson, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 170.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>9</sup> So Gregory Baum, at the American Academy of Religion, in a panel discussion devoted to appreciation of his work, Toronto, Canada, November 25, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Sittler, *The Ecology of Faith* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961).

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), p. 35.

- <sup>13</sup> Hall, "The Modest Science: Christian Theology, the University, and the Church" (*ARC: The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University* Vol. 24, 1996), p. 29.
- <sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 23.
- <sup>15</sup> Hall, "The Modest Science," p. 7.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- <sup>17</sup> Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 39-59.
- <sup>18</sup> Hall, "The Modest Science," p. 25.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36f.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- <sup>23</sup> Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation," Thesis 21. In Timothy Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 31.
- <sup>24</sup> Lionel Basney, "Teacher: Eleven Notes" (*The American Scholar* Vol. 71, No. 1, Winter 2002), p. 75.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 80.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> Shelley Shaver, "What They Need" (*Southwest Review* Vol. 86, Nos. 1&2, 2001), p. 194.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> Basney, *op. cit.*, p. 80.
- <sup>35</sup> Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education as Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1983, 1993), p. 68.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- <sup>38</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 9.
- <sup>39</sup> Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- <sup>41</sup> Sittler, "The Wood's In Trouble" (*Discourse: A Review of the Liberal Arts* Vol. 1, no. 3, July 1958), p. 149.
- <sup>42</sup> Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
- <sup>43</sup> Donald Sheehan, personal correspondence, July 2002.
- <sup>44</sup> Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

## THE IMPROPRIETY OF JESUS' TEACHING: THE WOMAN AT THE WELL AND THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES

Susan O'Shaughnessy Poppe

I dedicate my message to the women and men who worked against nearly insurmountable administrative resistance to put on the performance of Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* March 8<sup>th</sup>, and to those 800 students, faculty, and members of the community who came to the performance, half of whom had to be turned away, and to one young man, perhaps a student here, who in the discussion that followed the performance asked a probing question. He asked what resources in Christianity might be brought to the struggle to end violence against women and the silencing of their sexuality. Perhaps the story of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well gives us reason for hope.

Would that I had the courage of Socrates, the cunning of Odysseus and even the wrath of Achilles this morning as I address my friends and colleagues in defense of values central to our work as scholars, mentors, citizens, and Christians, the pursuit of truth and the protection and support of those whose voices would be silenced, whose suffering would be ignored and whose justice would be denied.

Perhaps my fondest wish today is for the "indecent" of Jesus of Nazareth whose impropriety was necessary to his ministry. Often it seems he took special care to offend against proper conduct. This was evident when he journeyed through Samaria, stopped at Jacob's well and asked that shameful Samaritan woman to give him a drink. She was no stranger to impropriety, it was the only way she could survive. She suspected Jesus was a prophet because he knew her life story, her sexual history and her pain. She believed him when he said he was the source of living water and drank her fill. That is why she left her water jug behind when she went to the city to tell the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be Christ?" (JN 4:29). "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony...And many more believed because of his word" (JN 4:39, 41).

For the woman at the well, the mark of Christ was the invitation to be known and the power to speak. She who had been shunned, ignored, and silenced; she who was unwelcome at the well during civilized hours; she who was no stranger to impropriety, was chosen to speak. Moreover, when she speaks, she tells everyone that he knows all about her. The people in the city who shun her and force her to

the well in the heat of the day because they know the kind of woman she is, somehow listen to her now. This is miraculous. And still more amazing, they believe in Jesus on account of what she says and follow her back to the well. They go to see a Jew, Jesus. Being only half-Jews themselves and a people shunned by Jews, they must expect him to treat them as they treated the woman until now. They want to see how their own stories might be known and their lives recognized by Jesus. Jesus gave them the living water to drink and accepted their invitation to stay in Samaria for two days. Jesus' solidarity with them, despite how Jews were supposed to treat Samaritans, was the sign to them that he was the Christ. The bonds of sexism and racism had held the woman at the well and the Samaritans in silence. Jesus undermined both forms of oppression in his visit to Samaria. His scandalous recognition of the woman and the people of her city showed his love for them and brought liberation.

Recently I heard several stories that reminded me of the woman at the well. One was a story of a Bosnian woman who had been raped with a rifle by a group of enemy soldiers. She was frightened that they would fire the rifle inside her. She was humiliated, brutalized, and shocked. After the assault, she was shunned by her community and forced to wall up her shame inside herself. Years later a woman named Eve Ensler asked to tell her story. I like to imagine that the woman raped in Bosnia felt relief and empowerment when Eve asked her to tell her story. I pray that like the woman at the well, she was liberated from her shame when she was invited to share her experiences. By retelling the stories of woman and girls of all ages, nationalities, races, and religions, who are silenced by custom, war, assault, the church, synagogue, and mosque, by their husbands, bosses, religious leaders, and others, Eve intends to bring healing and a confident voice to those who attend a performance of her play, the *Vagina Monologues*.

Eve Ensler allows her play to be performed on college campuses for free for one month each year. She is committed to ending violence against women by the year 2005 and needs the help of college students and others to get the word out. What a wonderful way for her to ask academic institutions to examine their commitment to the liberating power of liberal education. Sometimes, the

academy whose sated goal is the free pursuit of truth, in its institutional structures and policies and in its struggle to maintain its place of privilege often times neglects this goal, for fear of offending against propriety and for fear of offending donors, parents, church officials, or perhaps even for fear of discomfiting itself. Eve and those who perform the *Vagina Monologues* wish to liberate women and their sexuality from the subtle and silent bonds that seal off women deep within themselves.

It is our mission as a college of the Church to defend and preserve academic freedom. Let us remind ourselves that it is also the mission of Christ to break the chains of oppression by means of inflicting discomfort on a person's of power or privilege who despite a generalized friendly feeling in their hearts toward women, people of color, and gays and lesbians, remain complicit in that oppression by their taking up a position proper and pure by customary standards.

May God give us the courage to speak about sexuality, about our bodies, about sexual violence and rape. May God give a troubled conscience, a compassionate heart, and inspired deliberation to those who have the power to grant or deny requests for space and resources to perform the *Vagina Monologues* or bring *The Laramie Project* to campus. When we are in the presence of those who silence others by subtle and overt means, may God give us the wit, presence of mind, and the courage of to speak out and act out against them. When others have the courage to speak out, let us not leave them alone. Let us stand with them even at the risk of our social status, our popularity, our careers, our physical safety. Let us love one another as Jesus loved us - as he loved the woman at the well.

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**A RAINFALL OF QUESTIONS  
COLLECTED IN THE FORM OF A POEM**

**Sig Royspern**

Are you ready for your next decade? Why not put it off for a year or two?

I talk of nothing besides my possessions — so why don't I consider myself an addict?

I feel so sorry for the water strider — or does he go swimming in the dark of night?

Magnolias have been blooming on this earth for millions of years. Why don't they report  
that on the evening news?

Why are fish slippery only when someone tries to hold them?

Did it occur to you that moths fly to the moon because they mistake it for my lamp?

Why hire one man to be a priest and another man to rake the leaves?

Are weeds really uglier than flowers?

Can you find me a store that sells a spring wind? Did you check the yellow pages?

Which is worse — to get an education we can't afford or to afford an education we don't get?

Are students also pleased with themselves when, having paid for their groceries, they leave  
them at the store?

Are you considering a spiritual pilgrimage? So, why not?

What if life were as sweet as melons and as crunchy as oats?

A good simile is as hard to find as what?

## RESPONSE TO BISHOP OLSON AND PRESIDENT TIPSON

Robert Benne

I would like to respond to two articles in the Winter 2002 issue of *Intersections*, which I found to be even more helpful than usual. All the articles are worthy of response but there is no space for such an expansive effort. The first article I want to grapple with is "The Marks of an ELCA College" by former Bishop Stanley Olson. I found his marks very helpful and I especially appreciated his examination of ELCA college mission statements. However, the section on "Christian Faith at Every Table" had some troublesome assertions. Though Olson says that "insights and questions spawned by the Christian faith can be welcomed in all discussions and forums," he later obliterates the epistemological grounds for a Christian voice in such conversations. In an unhelpful—but not unusual—interpretation of the two kingdoms teaching, he cedes all genuine epistemological claims to secular "knowledge of people and the world in which we live." This suggests that the academic life of an ELCA college is totally in the left hand kingdom and therefore not open to the insights and claims of faith. Olson takes away in his theological statements what he affirms in his earlier pedagogical ones.

While I agree that there is no such thing as a Lutheran biology or Lutheran economics, the Christian faith (Lutheranly construed) certainly ought to have insights and claims that can enter the conversation at the biological and economic tables. There is a Christian intellectual tradition that makes claims about human nature and action. Those claims ought to be given voice in a church-related college; they are unlikely to be taken seriously in a public college. For example, Reinhold Niebuhr's explication of the biblical/Christian view of the nature and destiny of humankind is a profound reading of human nature that can and should enter discussions in psychology, sociology, economics, or any of the other social sciences and humanities. Christianity has a view of human nature that can offer wise insight in every conversation. Niebuhr's writings are in fact a debate with views of human nature that dominated the thought of the time.

The problem in Olson's understanding of the two kingdoms doctrine is that he narrowly limits the Gospel to the proclamation of justification. Rather, the Gospel has to be

taken as the whole Trinitarian faith which includes many magnificent Christian insights into the whole of human existence. That whole vision (the Right Hand Kingdom) then engages the secular insights and claims of the Left Hand Kingdom, much in the way that Muilenberg describes in his "Welcome Strangers." Ceding all intellectual input to secular sources in the Left Hand Kingdom is a disaster for Christians who want to be thinking Christians. Such an interpretation of the Two Kingdoms will aid in the secularization of church-related colleges, as it has in the past.

I also welcome President Tipson's long and serious grappling with the book *The Future of Religious Colleges: The Proceedings of the Harvard Conference on the Future of Religious Colleges*, as well as his more general engagement with my work, part of which I have had a chance to share at Wittenberg. His description and analysis of the book are exemplary. Then, however, he reflects on issues that continue to occupy his concerns. I would like to respond to his reflections.

First, Tipson suggests that I believe that "more is better" regarding the institutional church's control of its colleges. I really don't believe that. Rather, I believe that the college itself has to commit itself to a lively relation to the vision and ethos of its sponsoring tradition, which will obviously mean the recruitment of people who know the vision and embody the ethos. It is much more impressive when colleges do that on their own and for their own intrinsic reasons than when colleges submit to more church control, which isn't very likely anyway. I, for one, was happy that Roanoke was an independent Lutheran college when St. Olaf College's nominations for board membership had to be submitted to the ELCA churchwide assembly, where a coterie of activists kept raising questions about the nominees. More formal control is not something I promote, assuming of course, that there is decent representation for the church on the college's board.

However, I do think "more is better" with regard to the college making the vision and ethos of its parent tradition more publicly relevant to its own academic and social life. One could perhaps reach a saturation point where the

tradition's contributions became suffocating or oppressive, but such is not the problem at our ELCA colleges. Many have so marginalized the presence of Christian intellectual and moral claims that little is left. In such a situation I think "more is better," with the proviso that that "more" be well done and intellectually persuasive.

Later on he seems to take me a bit to task for suggesting that it is important that at least two or three Lutheran colleges maintain a robust—or what I call a "critical mass"—relation to their Lutheran heritage. Well, if you grant (and I'm not sure that Tipson would grant this) that a sponsoring Christian tradition—its vision, ethos, and the persons who bear them—might in principle have a noticeable and positive effect on a cooperating college or university, then it would behoove us to have at least a handful that are recognizably Lutheran. We will have many Wittenbergs and Roanokes who assure a certain kind of Lutheran/Christian voice and presence in their educational enterprises. I, like, Tipson, find these kinds of colleges attractive and worthy of the name "church-related colleges." But I also believe that several more pervasively Lutheran colleges of quality will indeed "represent a gain for the church and for higher education."

Tipson also raises the question of rather we protest too much against the secularization process. There were great gains in that process, he argues and I would agree. He asks whether anyone in his or her right mind would suggest that the USA would be better off "if Harvard had remained committed to its Puritan roots." When we denounce the secularization process Tipson thinks we are at the same time "overstating the gains and minimizing the deficits of education at religious colleges." These are good points. We do not want to go back to some golden age where the engagement of faith and reason were presumably done right. In most cases there wasn't such a time.

But I would hazard the opinion that Harvard would be better off if it hadn't completely jettisoned its Christian heritage. If Harvard's enlightenment would not have been so militant and its Christians so inept perhaps the university could have more soul with its current quality. I can envision a Harvard that actually might have been better. There is some wisdom in William Buckley's dictum that he would rather be governed by the first hundred persons in the Boston telephone directory than by the Harvard faculty. A bit more soul may have mitigated some of the elitist arrogance of that university.

President Tipson shies away from the more "robust"

relation of a college to its Christian heritage that many of us commend. He worries about too much religious intensity. He likes the rigor, critical capacities, and objectivity of Enlightenment models of education that might be threatened by stronger role for Christian intellectual claims. He thinks a Baylor and especially a Calvin are as much to be shunned as models of higher education as Ohio State.

I detect here a rather unchastened Enlightenment spirit. True, like Tipson, I do not want to reject some of the important gifts of the Enlightenment—a commitment to reasonable criteria for scholarship and research, an effort at objective inquiry, and a devotion to excellence in following those criteria and efforts. The Enlightenment project has offered the world a great gain in knowledge. But in recent days it has become clear that it has unwisely rejected other ways of knowing and has overestimated its transcendence over historical traditions. Indeed, it is a limited tradition with a history of its own, in spite of its claims to universality. It smuggles into its methods and claims many philosophical and religious assumptions that are not fully justified; those assumptions are often based on a faith of its own. For example, if a church follows biblical studies based solely on the historical critical method that church will soon find its convictions about the Incarnation and Resurrection severely undermined. That does not mean we should not use the historical critical method; it simply means that we recognize its dangers and limitations.

We should not be supine before the claims of the social sciences and humanities. Their methods and claims are loaded with philosophical and religious assumptions. John Milbank characterizes the grand social sciences as "anti-theologies," explicitly offered as world hypotheses radically different than the Christian. Again, we do not want to construct Christian social sciences but we do want to critique the current versions, and discern which are more or less compatible with Christian claims. At the very least, we want to engage them from a Christian perspective.

Lutherans have been charged with being quietist toward the political world on account of their flawed interpretations of the two kingdoms. Those flawed interpretations can operate in the educational sphere so that Lutherans—and many other Christians—simply accept the secular claims of the day as sacrosanct. That is nonsense. An alert Lutheran college should engage in mutual critique between the claims of faith (which are intellectual) and the claims of secular approaches to college. Respect for the accomplishments of the Enlightenment, yes!; uncritical acceptance, no!

Not every faculty member need do such engagement, but on the whole the Lutheran college should recruit a significant number of faculty who are interested in and support it. Further, not every class or course need be characterized by such engagement. Indeed, too much would prevent the educator from getting at the recognized knowledge of the field. But there are many opportunities for the secular claims to dialogue with Christian claims. Students wonder about questions that are conducive to such a dialogue. The methodological foundations of almost every intellectual endeavor need to be scrutinized critically, and Christian claims can be a part of that process. For example, texts in business ethics often operate without religious perspectives. But many business people are serious religious people who want their faith to be relevant to their life in the world. A business ethics course in a Lutheran college ought to incorporate those religious perspectives. Rather than asking for a privilege for religious perspectives, as Tipson suggests, I'm asking for the inclusion of such. And it would seem reasonable to include that sort of perspective in many

areas of inquiry. That would indicate to students and parents alike that their faith is being taken seriously, not that it is being privileged.

I want to end on a point of agreement. Tipson laments the lack of interest in and support for the colleges and universities by the parent churches themselves. I couldn't agree more, though I am aware—as is Tipson—of how important the indirect support from wealthy Lutheran donors remains for our schools. But the bishops and pastors of the church will have to get serious about our schools, for if they are not serious it is unlikely that the schools themselves will indefinitely remain connected to their religious heritage.

Finally, I think it just great that so many Presidents of our Lutheran schools are thoughtfully grappling with these important questions. They are too important to be left to the church.

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# ELCA COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES



**Augsburg College**  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

**Augustana College**  
Rock Island, Illinois

**Augustana College**  
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

**Bethany College**  
Linsborg, Kansas

**California Lutheran University**  
Thousand Oaks, California

**Capital University**  
Columbus, Ohio

**Carthage College**  
Kenosha, Wisconsin

**Concordia College**  
Moorhead, Minnesota

**Dana College**  
Blair, Nebraska

**Finlandia University**  
Hancock, Michigan

**Gettysburg College**  
Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

**Grand View College**  
Des Moines, Iowa

**Gustavus Adolphus College**  
St. Peter, Minnesota

**Lenoir-Rhyne College**  
Hickory, North Carolina

**Luther College**  
Decorah, Iowa

**Midland Lutheran College**  
Fremont, Nebraska

**Muhlenberg College**  
Allentown, Pennsylvania

**Newberry College**  
Newberry, South Carolina

**Pacific Lutheran University**  
Tacoma, Washington

**Roanoke College**  
Salem, Virginia

**St. Olaf College**  
Northfield, Minnesota

**Susquehanna University**  
Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania

**Texas Lutheran University**  
Seguin, Texas

**Thiel College**  
Greenville, Pennsylvania

**Wagner College**  
Staten Island, New York

**Waldorf College**  
Forest City, Iowa

**Wartburg College**  
Waverly, Iowa

**Wittenberg University**  
Springfield, Ohio