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Informed and Formed by Theological Education

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores the author's experiences of both the contributions and the limits of the varied ways in which the meaning and purpose of theological education have been understood: as a habitus, as liberating praxis, as faith seeking understanding, as the clerical paradigm, as scholarship for the church, as spiritual practice, and as practical knowing. With appreciation for each, she concludes that theological education is a disciplined way of life in search of wisdom for our times.

Initially when I was asked to reflect on the meaning and purpose of theological education, my memories reached back to graduate school. But then I realized my story began in college when I declared my major to be “theology.” But wait: what about high school? I took a theology class every year, and then backwards to grade school In fact, there are many ways in which education in theology has shaped my entire life, all of which bear important meaning and purpose for me personally but also reflect the communities of discourse in which I have participated. Thus, each school I attended, the specific books and courses I studied, the individual teachers and the students with whom I journeyed — all bring to bear the meaning and purpose of theological education in a particular place and time. And yet to begin this story, I’ll have to start with graduate school.

In the 1980s when I entered graduate school at the University of Chicago, practical theology was being reconceived: application of theory to practice was out, the clerical paradigm was exposed and rejected, and the nature of theology as a practical enterprise was being debated. As part of our course work, we read a new book on the topic and hosted a

major conference about theological education.¹ Actually, my own introduction to this enterprise came in a conversation about the nature and purpose of theological education. We rallied around the new perspectives. “Yes!” my student colleagues and I cheered. “Out with Berlin and in with Athens! Liberation for the oppressed! All knowing is practical! Theology must be public and not only concerned about the church! The world matters to theologians!” My strongest sense of the meaning and purpose of theological education at that time was shaped by the authors we were reading: Hough and Cobb’s claims about Christian identity,² Edward Farley’s notion of *habitus*,³ and Don Browning’s insistence that all theology is practical “through and through.”⁴ I thus gathered that the meaning and purpose of theological education was *to give an effective Christian witness in the world*.

As I launched into my first job teaching theology in a small Catholic college, I put aside my newly found knowledge of practical theology and theological education. Though college theology teachers rarely refer to what they do as religious education, the fact is that much of my time was given to basic instruction about the Catholic faith. In this context, I came to think of theological education as *making sense of being a Christian in the world from within Catholicism*. I loved helping students make sense of the Christian story, why it matters or not, and what kind of life one lives because of that claim. I saw my task as upholding the basic Catholic notion that theology is *faith seeking understanding*.

Several years later, I took a position as a pastoral theologian in a Catholic seminary and theological school. I was excited to return to the field of practical theology and theological education, but I was puzzled about

1 The conference focused around the publication of the book by Joseph C. Hough, Jr. and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985). Additional books include: Don S. Browning, *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983); James N. Poling and Donald E. Miller, *Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985); Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling, eds., *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

2 “Christian identity is forged by the living practice of Christians in their world.” Hough and Cobb, *Christian Identity*, 49.

3 Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 31, 35.

4 Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995), 3.

my title. This led me on a long quest to figure out what pastoral theology is in the Catholic context, as I basically experienced it as the clerical paradigm Roman-style. I wondered why the language of practical theology was missing from the Catholic context, which led me to write an essay examining four key figures who offered three approaches to the nature of theological education and the practice of ministry: Don Browning (practical theology as practical reason), Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass (Christian practices), and Rebecca Chopp (liberation and feminist theologies).⁵ Each of these approaches spoke some truth to me about the nature and purpose of theological education, but was I to choose one?

I realized how easily I could be pigeon-holed when a senior colleague at a practical theology conference said to me, “I thought you were one of those practices people.” As I began writing and teaching, was I to take up one of these approaches and advance it at the expense of the others? As a young scholar, I experienced the meaning and purpose of theological education as the *pursuit of knowledge and scholarship for the sake of the church*, which basically meant locating myself in the discipline. Only later did I realize that my essay was largely autobiographical. I set out to clarify where I fit into practical theology and discussions of theological education, as each of the key figures and their approaches had deeply formed me: I wrote my dissertation with Don Browning, I worked for Craig Dykstra for several years, and my undergraduate theological formation was in feminist and liberation thought.

Well, the truth is that I didn’t choose—I still find each of these frameworks interesting and engaging for our work in theological education. I wanted to pursue a way of thinking that drew upon these ideas, methods, and commitments. But it’s also true that our scholarly identities are formed through relationships with colleagues, participating in particular communities of discourse, and adopting certain loyalties and commitments. For instance, in my current context, theological education is primarily *preparation for ecclesial leadership* in Catholic parishes, schools, colleges, hospitals, and social service agencies. Because it takes place in a Benedictine Abbey, we also talk about theological education as the *pursuit of wisdom*, though at times it is difficult for us to make the connection between the two.

⁵ Kathleen A. Cahalan, “Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education and the Church’s Ministry,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9/1 (2005): 64–94.

In the early 2000s, I was invited to be part of a collaborative project on theological education and practical theology—an experience that has been pivotal in furthering my understanding of theological education.⁶ Out of the initial work grew a second collaborative book project, *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is and Why It Matters*.⁷ Here the authors worked to bring together various strands of practical thinking, drawing upon the nature of practical reason, practices, and liberating praxis. As we studied practical wisdom, phronesis, and practical know-how, we realized that this kind of knowing is embodied, situated, imaginative, communal, and participatory, but that it largely stands in contrast to the prevailing epistemologies of the academy—those in which we’d been shaped and continue to pass on to our students. So, we set out to do something rather distinctive in our writing: we decided that each of us would write an essay on how we learned practical knowing and wisdom in our own lives. In other words, we had to *show* it, not just write about and footnote it.

I decided to write an essay about prayer, in particular the practice of *lectio divina*. As a child, I was drawn to pray with the Scriptures and had been reading the daily liturgical readings each morning. As a teen, I found a small book on prayer, which taught me *lectio*, and I have continued to practice this ancient method as an adult. In writing the essay, I reconstructed my life’s narrative about spiritual practice and realized that my theological education actually began as a child. My formation in Catholic schools included contemplative silence as well as the new liturgy, and through these practices I have always felt a deep calling to prayer.

In the process of writing, I discovered that in “showing” my spiritual practice I had also exposed a deep fault line in my life and work: my daily *lectio* remained fairly disconnected from my work as a theological educator despite the fact that I wrote my dissertation on prayer and worship. I realized that my theological education did not honor the kind of knowing that arises from spiritual practice. It taught me the history and need for a theological *habitus*, but it did not teach a practice. I’ve come to appreciate

6 Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

7 Dorothy C. Bass, Kathleen A. Cahalan, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, James N. Nieman, and Christian Scharen, *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016). My “show” chapter is titled “Swimming: How the Practice of *Lectio Divina* Heals and Transforms,” and my “tell” chapter is titled “Unknowing: Spiritual Practices and the Search for a Wisdom Epistemology.”

that it is only by spiritual practice that we can come to know certain things about ourselves and our life together in God. And one of the things we come to know is the God of unknowing. I realize now that much of our formation is in abandoning our conceptual frameworks about God in order to know God truly. I've come to believe that the purpose and meaning of theological education is to *learn a disciplined way of life that intentionally grounds everything* that I do, in particular my writing and teaching vocation, *in God's gracious and redemptive love for the world.*

My calling as a theological educator has been shaped by differing understandings of the meaning and purpose of theological education, each with its own contribution as well as limits.

- I understood *theological education as a habitus* but in my formal training was not given a practice to sustain it.
- I had grasped *theological education as liberating praxis and witness to the world*, but I also realized the limits of critical reason to fashion a more just society.
- I claimed *theological education as faith seeking understanding*, but I understood and taught this as the mastery of ideas.
- I knew the limits of *theological education as clerical paradigm*, but on a daily basis in my teaching, my horizon largely remains church ministry.
- I have pursued theological education as *scholarship for the church*, but I have also been caught short by my desire for self-gain.
- I was schooled in *theological education as spiritual practice*, but I never felt it was legitimate to take into the academy.
- I have come to grasp *theological education as practical knowing* only to realize the impoverishment of my own practice and the disconnection from my teaching and writing.

At this point, I would still rather not choose. Each of these ways of approaching theological education has real merit as well as challenges for my context—the school, the faculty, the students—and for myself. I realize that these meanings and purposes are largely penultimate and that I must continue to strive to be formed in God's ways for the sake of God's world so that I might form students in that way too. What I would most like to embody is *theological education as a disciplined way of life*, a real pursuit of

Informed and Formed by Theological Education

wisdom in our times. But my story continues. I am only beginning to see the implications of this for my teaching and calling.

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