

Theological Education for Life Abundant
Our Shared Work and Our Perspectives upon It
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At this point in every conference, the people who have been sitting and listening deserve a story, so here is one that I received from a Lilly Endowment colleague years ago, Fred Hofheinz. It goes like this:

A new cathedral rector was prowling the grounds and came to the stone yard. He asked the first man what he was doing, and he replied that he was a stone cutter and that he was cutting a stone. He next came upon another worker who said that he was a stone finisher, who told the priest that he was dressing a stone. Then the rector ran into a man on the edges of the stone works sweeping in the dirt. He asked the man what he was doing, and the man looked up and said, "I am building a cathedral."

The theme of Life Abundant asks us to think about what we are doing and to what end.

In the University Theological School, and in the church, we know what it is to dress stones, but we don't know much about building cathedrals.

We know what the quotidian practices are; and as Dorothy Bass would remind us, we know they are important,

But abundance requires that we look up and contemplate the larger purposes for which we teach and learn...purposes even beyond the school itself.

What do we need from each other? What do churches and seminaries and university divinity schools need from one another? Encouragement to look up and see that we have a common telos.

We need to cultivate a disposition to look up, and situate ourselves in God's abundant world and give thanks.

Church folks and even what I might call the Christian despisers of the academy within its precincts often point to the guild orientation of the fields as a problem, but the guilds are probably no bigger a problem than in the church where choir directors, pastors, and youth groups, and property committees, and the women in the kitchen stake out territory that they think of as CHURCH.

The guilds and fiefdoms aren't so much a problem as is the lack of common telos.

I was struck yesterday when Chuck Foster said that "the faculty needs to be engaged in

the practice of their teaching for ministry.” In research universities we often cling to the aspect of life that we are good at (school) instead of humbling taking up the work that we are most needed at for-forming people for ministry that they too will never master.

There is a tragic aspect to this for some of us, as we see that our faculties are not practicing their faiths in their vocations, so much as practicing a learned craft. I wonder if this comes out of a fear, if you will, of admitting that you’d like to be resurrected, of admitting that you believe there’s something more to what you do than classes, books, and time observed in semesters.

Personally, though I am proud of my writing, my contributions to life abundant and participation in abundant life have come from my involvement in my students becoming people who help other people.

Again, this is not different in kind from what goes on in ministry. The most noteworthy sermon pales in life significance alongside some of the pastoral interchanges ministers experience surrounding death and grief, or addiction and recovery, in the lives of people we know intimately.

From time to time, I have as a dean received the complaints of my faculty colleagues about students. One common complaint goes like this: “They don’t know anything when they get to my class.”

My response is usually some version of “That’s why they are in your class” For you see it’s not where they are when they are admitted that matters, it’s who they become over a lifetime because of what we helped them become.

Note how much that problematic resembles pastoral experience (and disappointment in the church.)

I’m going to close with a word about the rich young ruler. There are three possible take-away messages.

Liberals tend to take away the idea that the rich must give up their possessions.

Conservatives take away the message “see, there is eternal life.”

I’d like to take away the lesson that when the young man called upon the *rabboni*, the teacher, Jesus “looked upon him with love.”

That’s the kind of teacher I want to be, the kind whose perspective draws me toward abundance.

I may be a church historian, but if I look upon my students with love, I'm building people.