

Theological Education for Life Abundant
Meditations on Teaching: Hopes and Dreams of a Wandering Scholar-Practitioner

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It is a privilege to participate in this wonderful conference. I thank Dorothy Bass and Ted Smith for all their work organizing it and the invitation to speak. I am especially grateful we're meeting here at Vanderbilt where we join others in carrying on the significant work in practical theology begun in the 1980s by Edward Farley.

Twenty-three years ago this past fall, I crossed the street from my doctoral program at the University of Chicago to join the faculty of Chicago Theological Seminary. Educated in Religion and Psychological Studies, with a dissertation on death and the moral life, I titled my first class, "Death and Dying: *Theologians Speak*." The subtitle reflects all the pretensions *and* yet deep love of the classical scholarly traditions that I brought with me as an aspiring graduate. I chose that subtitle, "Theologians Speak," because I wanted to signal that this would not be just another run-of-the-mill course on helping the dying. I wanted them to reconnect with powerful voices in the history and current scholarship in theology—Tillich, Kierkegaard, Augustine—that attempt to fathom finitude and mortality and all the guilt, shame, despair, suffering, and pain that they rain down on us.

What I discovered and have been discovering ever since, right up until this semester in which I'm teaching "Christian Spirituality and Pastoral Care" and "Qualitative Methods and Practical Theology," is that you cannot teach a course in pastoral or practical theology in the abstract, at a distance, theoretically, conceptually, as

a discipline or subject matter in itself. Not that I haven't tried. I tire of brushing up so close to human anguish and questions of how best to minister in the midst of anguish. Once in a course on the family, I even said to students: we are going to study the family in theory only. No papers on your own family's dysfunction. No, we'll just study the family in abstraction from your own experience and future Christian discipleship in ministry.

Right. As if one could. But this is the power and upshot of what I have come to call the academic paradigm. That we think we can and should teach our discipline or a subject in theory only.ⁱ

For this panel, we were asked to consider the implications of putting a faith-directed *telos*, such as abundant life, at the heart of our teaching. What would it mean for our courses, field, curriculum, ministry, discipleship, and society? What are the choices we've made through the very "*lived stuff*" of our teaching, and what do we commend to you? My time is short, so my point is pointed: Pastoral theologians, by the very definition of our field and the nature of our pedagogy, tend to keep our eyes closer to the prize of practice and pathos than those in other disciplines and I recommend this difficult laborious task be shared more justly across the curriculum.ⁱⁱ

Several years ago I wrote an essay on the state of the field of pastoral theology that described briefly what it felt like to cross the street from doctoral program to seminary. I experienced two surprises—a diversity of gender and race not reflected in the texts, peers, or faculty of my doctoral community and a gap between "academic study of religion and the social sciences and the peculiar discipline of pastoral theology."ⁱⁱⁱ My essay responded to the first surprise. But I left the second unanswered. In some ways, I

see the book, *For Life Abundant*, as part of what has become a growing answer from those in practical theology broadly defined over the past two decades.

Even in my first year teaching, I noticed the inequities of theological education. While I tried to sustain a foot in the practice of pastoral counseling while teaching, I noticed, “few of my colleagues felt the same tug.” Even then I wondered in my essay why new faculty interviewing for seminary positions in biblical studies or systematic theology don’t get “asked about their pastoral practice?”^{iv} Why only those in one area of the curriculum?

Few of my doctoral courses emphasized pastoral or congregational ministry. I’d never had a course in pastoral care before I began teaching it, although I had experience and credentials in chaplaincy, counseling, and congregations. But the “field of pastoral theology,” I reasoned in my essay, “is expected to be more oriented toward ministerial practice than other disciplines; at the same time it has struggled with the ambiguities” of this identity. Today I would question the assumption reflected here that this *telos* of teaching toward ministry is pastoral theology’s responsibility alone. Its ambiguities, I believe, should be shared across the curriculum.

The very appeal of psychology to mid-twentieth century pastoral theologians, for which they have been amply criticized, was precisely this—its facility at the intersection of theory and practice. Not unlike the appeal of ethnography and practice theory today, psychodynamic theory demonstrated vividly the possibility of bridging theory and practice in ways philosophy, hermeneutics, and doctrine did not. Psychology understood brokenness and transformation. It should be no surprise then that my first students gravitated more toward death and dying populist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross than

contemporary theologians. She had translated a theory of human nature and destiny into terms people could grasp.

As a general rule, practical theologians examine practice. So it seemed a natural step among the participants in the project that led to *For Life Abundant* to examine our own teaching practices. So partly driven by the nature of practical theology itself, the authors of this book stumbled on one of its key insights: our own teaching practices significantly influence the problems and could shape the solutions to revitalizing theological education and Christian ministry. This led to other maxims. Theology is formed in the thick, concrete details of what we do on daily basis behind the closed doors of our classrooms, our own *habitus*, so to speak. How we teach Christology or worship or Christian history and whether we teach these subjects from and toward pathos and practice matters. We can learn as much about the nature of practical theology from how practical theologians teach as from theoretical attempts to define the term. What we know in practical theological pedagogy might be valuable for the rest of the curriculum.

The only concrete depiction of an actual teaching practice in the 1980s practical theology literature of which I'm aware is Don Browning's teaching exercise in *Fundamental Practical Theology*. He insists students engage a person who has an inside experience of the problem under investigation.^v We have come a long ways from this. But we are still only at the beginning of understanding how the habits of our classroom and institutional ecology forms theology or what a practical theological revolution in seminary teaching might involve.

The subject nature of coursework in pastoral theology *forces* us to abide by practice and to think forward to the larger purposes that our discipline should serve and

without which are disciplines mean little. It is easier and safer to teach a subject as subject only. It is also valuable. Knowledge in itself has a place. Just not an ultimate place. It is penultimate to the question of use and power. How will this knowledge be used? To what use am I giving these students? What difference will it make? Or the question that quintessentially defines practical theology: So what?

I now know, as I never understood before, that I should not teach a course without asking to what end am I teaching? I teach not just for the sake of the subject matter. Nor do I teach merely for the sake of my own discipline, except perhaps when teaching doctoral students. But, even then, a practical theology course divorced from practice rears its ugly head as kind of ludicrous. There we have in a nutshell the dilemma of the recently funded doctoral programs in theology and practice. *How to keep them genuinely connected to practice as more than an object of study?*

It is time that scholars in theological education turn our interrogation of systemic structures of domination on the culture of theological education. Few of us would deny the status and power given some areas of the curriculum, some kinds of scholarship. Why have academics shied away from analyzing the hegemony and hierarchy of knowledge in our own midst? The constraints of the fourfold structure of theological education have been loosened, thanks in part to work in practical theology. People across disciplines have felt the “lure of the practical” in Mary McClintock Fulkerson’s words and have turned “away from the hermeneutical, or the study of texts” to lived religion.^{vi} But we have not yet analyzed our own practices. In Fulkerson’s words, what is the “impact of the social location of theologians” themselves as “members of the professional managerial class”? What are the dynamics of class within our own walls? Try as we might it is hard

to empower those the academy routinely disempowers, including and perhaps especially those who stand with their backs against the wall of ministry with those in anguish. Part of the problem, according to Fulkerson, is that those who rely on a “MacIntyrean definition of practice have refrained from recognizing the racialized, genderized, and otherwise power-laden nature of Christian tradition.” They have also ignored the “work of the so-called ‘practical’ field” even as this work has “resonance with the earliest sense” of *theologia* as “knowledge of God, and therefore a kind of transformative wisdom . . . not reducible to a scholarly form of reasoning.”^{vii}

What then might I commend? I commend a greater fluidity across the disciplines and just distribution of the labor of teaching toward practice and the work of translation and transition into ministry. Sharing the labor of living toward a richer *telos* also means expanding definitions of theology and its unfortunate conflation with systematic theology as a discipline, something Farley pointed out over twenty years ago in *Theologia*.^{viii} Authors of *For Life Abundant* suggest a more concrete, less cerebral, cognitive *telos*. We also suggest that the problem of academic disciplines is not one of fragmentation and reunification of theology as “one thing,” but of recognition of theology’s multiplicity. Just as in the overused example that Eskimos have many words for snow, so also should we recognize theology as multivalent. Academic theology is only one kind with a particular and sometimes limiting social and political location. Like liturgy, theology is the work of the people in many contexts for diverse purposes.

This rehabilitates Friedrich Schleiermacher’s image of the tree in the direction suggested by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner. It suggests a reading that moves away from practical theology as crown or philosophical theology as roots, a hierarchy where one or

the other assumes a superior position, toward a more organic, ecological reading of the tree image as a model of circular and mutually interdependent movement.^{ix}

In other words, this effort to redefine theology and share the labor of teaching toward practice is not a “ruse for turning the tables,” as James Nieman says, and imposing a “new hierarchy with practical theology or some of its forms “at the peak.”^x Rather it’s an attempt to locate power at a variety of junctures in the life of Christian faith. Since theology “always occurs locally,” as Nieman argues, the “challenge is to define theology broadly and flexibly enough to be recognizable across different times and places as well as various expression of the church.”^{xi} In addition to the widely recognized “speculative” and “regulative” roles of theology in academic and ecclesial contexts, theology has always had a “discursive” or what I’d would call a practical role with what Nieman describes as a “dynamic intent.” (205). It is action-oriented. It offers, renews, sponsors, produces, regulates, influences, etc.. This redefinition allows us to see, in Nieman’s words, “practices as disparate” as what people wear, how we manage finances, and how we sing hymns as “also . . . assertions of theology.”^{xii} It allows us to ask, as our conference plenary speaker Charles Marsh asks in his book on the civil rights movement in Mississippi, “how do ordinary southern towns become theatres of complex theological drama?”^{xiii}

For its part, practical theology provides what Nieman calls a “reality check” or what church historian Roger Haight calls a “credibility test,” or what doctrinal theologian Karl Rahner calls a “testing of the spirits” or a “critical function in respect of the other theological disciplines.”^{xiv} It keeps theology engaged, as Nieman says, “accurately and amply with the local realities, sorrows, and hopes of actual assemblies of the faithful.”^{xv}

Others across Christian history, such as Martin Luther in the sixteenth century or Seward Hiltner in twentieth, have suggested analogous shifts in theology's location and definition. Such redefinition challenges the academy and church, then and now, because it asks for a redistribution of power, something we know from experience with racism and sexism that does not and will not come easily or even peacefully.

Ultimately this has implications not just for seminaries but also for graduate schools that prepare faculty for seminaries and for congregations that receive seminary graduates. This fall I received an email from a graduate of our Department of Religion who wishes she had benefited from such a transformation of doctoral education. I close with her words because they express in a snapshot of the fallout of the academic paradigm and my hope for the future:

When I was a graduate student in the . . . department, I was not allowed to talk theology or anything close to it. This was absurd to me since I came to Vanderbilt out of the United Methodist ordained ministry. Students like me were/are encouraged to whip out academic treatises on subjects only marginally related to the church. Should we want to relate them to the 'so what' we were discouraged. I was able to watch and appreciate [another faculty member who] centered in on faith communities and made this stuff relevant, but even today the academy awards cerebral and not so much pastoral work. It was fun last summer to present at the Oxford Institute of Wesleyan Studies. It was through blending that experience with my teaching sabbatical in Tanzania last year that I reconnected with my roots. There is nothing like living with people suffering to put the academics into perspective!!

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- ⁱ A highlight of my death and dying course was when a seasoned Jewish student took over the class and offered up a vivid depiction of practices of mourning unfamiliar to most of the Christian students in the room.
- ⁱⁱ This would entail closer attention to what several people described during The For Life Abundant conference as the *ecology* or *culture* of theological education.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Miller-McLemore, "The Human Web and the State of Pastoral Theology," *Christian Century*, April 7, 1993, p. 366.
- ^{iv} Miller-McLemore, "The Human Web," p. 367.
- ^v Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. x-xi, 72-74.
- ^{vi} Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Theology and the Lure of the Practical: An Overview," *Religion Compass* 1, 2 (2007): 302.
- ^{vii} Fulkerson, "Theology and the Lure of the Practical," p. 300.
- ^{viii} Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).
- ^{ix} Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, *Prelude to Practical Theology: Variations on Theory and Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), pp. 2-3, 68-69.
- ^x James Nieman, "Theology in the Sermon," 2007 manuscript, p. 4. In practical theology, theology is "mainly performative, using words that do what they say (as when forgiveness is directly enacted by uttering 'I forgive you'). Academic theology is more reflective in form, considering from some measure of remove what has first been said performatively (as when reconciliation is extensively elaborated)."
- ^{xi} James Nieman, "Attending Locally: Theologies in Congregations," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 6/2 (fall 2002): 202.
- ^{xii} Nieman, "Attending Locally," 206.
- ^{xiii} Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 3.
- ^{xiv} Nieman, "Theology in Congregations and How They are Studied," manuscript, p. 7; Roger Haight, "The Church in Two Languages," manuscript, pp. 6-7 (ask Jim if these have been published); Karl Rahner, "Practical Theology within the Totality of Theological Disciplines," *Theological Investigations*, Volume IX, Trans. Graham Harrison (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 103, 104
- ^{xv} Nieman, "Theology in Congregations and How They are Studied," manuscript, p. 7.