

2002

Rich Treasure in Jars of Clay: Christian Graduate Theological Education in Postmodern Context

Mary E. Hess

Luther Seminary, mhess@luthersem.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hess, Mary E., "Rich Treasure in Jars of Clay: Christian Graduate Theological Education in Postmodern Context" (2002). *Faculty Publications*. 319.

https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/319

Published Citation

Hess, Mary E. "Rich Treasure in Jars of Clay: Christian Graduate Theological Education in Postmodern Context." In *The Conviction of Things Not Seen: Worship and Ministry in the 21st Century*, edited by Todd Eric Johnson, 123–40. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002.

8

Rich Treasure in Jars of Clay

Christian Graduate Theological Education in a Postmodern Context

Mary E. Hess

The September 10, 2001, issue of *America* reported that “there are more than 300 professional Catholic lay ministry formation programs in the United States, with a combined enrollment of more than 35,000—about 10 times the number of seminarians in post-college studies and 13 times the number of men in deacon formation programs.”¹ Around the time I read that article I was part of a forum at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, in which one participant noted that “as many people are entering public leadership in the ELCA [Evangelical Lutheran Church of America] through nonseminary, nonjuridical routes, as are entering each year from all eight ELCA seminaries combined.”² This latter statement is more anecdotal than statistically verifiable, but it still highlights a trend similar to the one occurring in Catholic contexts.

What are the consequences of these trends? And what should those of us who care about and tend to graduate theological education—particularly in seminaries—do about these trends? I believe that the postmodern trends in our wider culture are at the heart of this shift, and while for some these numbers bespeak crisis, we ought instead to consider them a sign of ferment and opportunity. I would like to propose quite a simple definition of postmodernism, namely, that this is an era in which there is widespread rejection of claims to absolute knowledge, an era in which we engage most institutions with significant skepticism and concern about the ways in which languages of “power over” permeate our social and political spaces, and an era in which we greet “difference” with more openness, and even celebration, than was once the case.³ Perhaps these themes sound abstruse, but I hope to make clear both

what I mean by these phrases and how I believe they are shaping the context in which we teach and learn.

Let us begin by considering a “trio of triads” that I find useful for reflecting on education practices before moving on to examine two important challenges that graduate theological education faces in our current contexts.

A Trio of Triads

Each semester as I teach my introductory course in Christian education, we begin with what I call a “trio of triads.” These groups of three educational concepts follow us through the term and allow us to consider a whole host of issues in Christian faith nurtured from a common yet flexible perspective. Here, too, they are useful for charting a course through the bumpy waters of the post-modern excursion. The first triad I work with is very basic: Any learning event always rests on three elements—the context in which the learning is taking place, the people involved, and the purpose for which they have gathered (context, people, purpose).

The statistics with which I began this chapter suggest that at least one of these elements has shifted dramatically in the last few decades—the context in which graduate theological education takes place. People entering public religious leadership are no longer streaming through the doors of traditional seminaries. Preparation for this kind of religious leadership (that is, nonordained leadership) is increasingly taking place in contexts that are only loosely linked, if linked at all, to traditional institutions of theological education. Churches are “growing” youth leaders within their midsts, utilizing the expertise of their congregants who are trained for other institutions (such as businesses and non-profit organizations), or identifying very specialized forms of ministry (such as music ministry) that draw people from “secular” institutions.

There are many reasons behind this shift, but one of the most obvious is linked to a second element of this triad: people. Most seminaries were established to serve the needs of those preparing for ordained ministry at a time when people generally came to a sense of their call early in their lives. Most such students knew by the time they left college, if not high school, that they wanted to prepare to enter ordained ministry. They were most often young, male, and able to participate in a process of ministerial education that involved long stretches of residence on a campus interspersed with periods of intense practicum in a local parish. Seminary education was built around the needs of such students, and to some lingering extent it still is. Yet today the majority of students responding to a call to ordained leadership no longer fit this description. The *Fact Book on Theological Education* put out by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) notes that across all ATS schools, “more than fifty percent (51.95 percent) of the total head count enrollment was 35 years or

older. . . .” Women now account for 34.91 percent of the total enrollment across ATS schools, even though they are precluded from participating in some programs. At Luther Seminary our classes are now almost evenly divided in terms of gender.⁴

With this shift in both the people who are entering theological education and the immediate context in which it is taking place comes the third element of my triad: purpose. The reasons for which students enter graduate theological education no longer carry the uniformity of purpose that “becoming a pastor” once implied. Certainly many students enter seminary with precisely that goal in mind, but many others are preparing for other kinds of ministries or are at the beginning of a longer faith journey in which seminary is simply the first step in deepening their spiritual awareness and religious commitments.

Context, people, purpose. In introducing this triad, I used the notion of context very simply, but, as with any of these terms, there are both broad and deep elements contained within it. *Context* is a word that is increasingly used in theological education, but often with more than one meaning. At its root, the word has to do with “the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs.”⁵ We may speak of “contextual education” when referring to the parts of a seminary degree that require a student to work within a parish setting for a year before graduating. Yet we also talk about “reading the context” in various kinds of theologies, particularly those that have feminist or liberationist roots to them. I use the word *context* to closely parallel in some ways another oft-used word, *culture*.

Culture can be defined as all those activities that allow someone to give meaning to, draw meaning from, and derive meaning within a specific location. When we consider the shifts that are underway in graduate theological education at the moment, we have to take into account the ways the larger contexts in which our institutions are embedded are shifting, and here the word *culture* is particularly helpful. It is not just our student body that has changed; it is also the myriad cultural contexts surrounding and permeating our institutions that have changed.

I teach at a large Lutheran (ELCA) institution in the upper Midwest, although I myself am a Roman Catholic layperson. Even two decades ago it was possible for students and faculty at this institution to rely on the culture surrounding the seminary to prepare students for entrance into theological study. “Christendom” might be a term that is no longer in much use, but just twenty years ago it was perhaps still descriptive of a certain kind of Lutheran reality in the northern reaches of midwestern America. We could count on our entering students to be familiar with the Bible, to have an understanding of their identity as Lutherans, and to be comfortable with basic worship practices. Our task as a seminary was to help students deepen these understandings and commitments and reflect critically on them.

Now we find ourselves at a different starting point. Many of our students have little if any familiarity with Scripture texts, Lutheran confessions, or the rhythms of Lutheran worship. In part this is because some of them are not Lutheran! But in part, it is also because those who are Lutheran were not deeply immersed in Christian education as children and may have come with college degrees in apparently unrelated fields (accounting, physical education, and so on).

Even this degree of unfamiliarity would not pose the kind of challenge we are facing if it were accompanied by thorough grounding in religious culture, ease of use and fluency with print discourses, and an ability to self-consciously reflect on personal experience. Instead, we have students who are fluent in digital technologies, with ritual experiences shaped by television and film and reflective patterns shaped more by sympathetic identification than by philosophical argument.⁶ In such a shifting culture, it becomes increasingly clear how context, people, and purpose come together and how influential they are within educational contexts. Certainly our earliest Christian educational leadership—such as Paul’s correspondence to the scattered churches—demonstrates an exquisite sensitivity to context and to the purposes for which one gathers in a Christian community.

If learning experiences are fundamentally shaped by people, purpose, and context, then seminary educators need to take note of the dramatic changes occurring in our midst. Many of us, trained in the rigorous print-based searches of scholarly pursuit, are uncomfortable with these changes and are more challenged than affirmed by them. We worry about the coherence of thought taking place around us, we struggle to tend our own disciplines at the same time we ponder how to make them relevant to students who have no interest in scholarly endeavors, and we sometimes fall into the quagmire of assuming that our own experiences—particularly in worship—are normative.

So what are we to do? If considering the triad of context, people, and purpose presents us with these challenges, perhaps the next triad—cognitive, affective, and psychomotor—can help us to address them. This triad utilizes terms that are drawn primarily from psychological disciplines. For my students, I sometimes begin by suggesting that a *modified* version of this triad—ideas, feelings, and actions—might make more sense to them. The key to this triad, however, lies in the recognition that learning always takes place in multiple ways. While in any given learning environment we might intentionally focus on one of these processes, the other two are involved as well.

During the time when seminary education took place within a more homogenous cultural context, and seminary students shared more in common than their differences, teachers did not have to attend quite so carefully to this tripartite learning model. Feelings and actions—the affective and the psychomotor—were a language that shared similar terms and were built into shared assumptions. A male teacher putting a friendly arm around the shoul-

der of a young male student in the context of exploring the unease generated by a historical-critical approach to a biblical text could be “read” as supporting that student’s struggle and encouraging the student’s pursuit of truth. In our current context, the same action could be read quite differently—and in multiple ways. Nonverbal gestural sign systems, what many of us call “body language,” differ among genders and between cultural locations. Now we must be more aware of them, more intentionally reflective of how we engage them, and more thoughtful of their multiple interpretations.⁷

Rather than being another problem, however, this is an enormous opportunity. The wider cultural contexts we inhabit, particularly those of the digitally mediated, globalized society that is increasingly the United States, are contexts in which nonverbal gestural sign systems are in a rich and abundant array of usage. As Adán Medrano and others have argued, we approach digital media in ways more akin to ritual practice than to print-oriented practice.⁸ This suggests that the kinds of traditions we represent, the meaning-making databases we tend, if you will, have never been more necessary than they are now. It also opens up vast new arenas for scholarly pursuit of fundamentally important questions. Finally, it provides a framework in which we can approach with a greater degree of respect and openness the students who enter our contexts, because we can be intentionally thoughtful about all of the levels on which their learning is occurring.

There is one final triad in my “trio,” and that is a group that Elliott Eisner first identified: the “explicit, the implicit, and the null curriculum.”⁹ Here again, I sometimes simplify these terms for my students, talking instead about those things we “intentionally” seek to teach, those things students learn “incidentally,” and those things that are taught and learned because we do not address them directly, what some have called “unacknowledged learning.”

When combined with the previous triad, this group is particularly helpful in identifying some of the opportunities present in the challenges we face in current contexts of graduate theological education. Consider, for instance, the ways in which students may be highly adept at “sympathetic identification” through their socialization in media culture, but quite unfamiliar with basic philosophical argumentation. Because liturgy in particular is such a multidimensional, experiential discipline, it becomes a helpful test case for this triad. For example, a teacher who begins a course by expecting students to do brief philosophical essays as a way to demonstrate their grasp of liturgical theology may find outside her door a line of students complaining about the irrelevance of such an assignment.

The teacher in this example intentionally designed an assignment to support students’ critical reflection on a crucial element of any pastor’s practice. The students, however, span the gamut from those who plan to be pastors, to those who are simply fulfilling a curriculum requirement on their way to doctoral studies. For the first group, the assignment strikes them on the implicit

or incidental level as a “misread” of their needs in the course, and if their emotions are engaged in opposition to the teacher, it becomes a serious problem to support their learning much of anything in that context. For the second group, brief essays may seem like a trivial hoop to jump through rather than a space in which to explore important theological issues. For both groups, the “feeling” level of the assignment sends an incidental message that the teacher does not respect them and does not understand their context. They may be spurred to any number of actions, possibly including outright hostility or disengagement from the course in all but the most passive mode.

On the other hand, a teacher could design the early part of a worship course with sufficient attention to the embodied nature of liturgy—perhaps requiring students to experience multiple forms of worship in various churches or asking them to be “visitors” in another tradition—and later require students to engage those experiences in a descriptive essay, then a more critical essay, and finally a philosophical essay that uses concepts drawn from liturgical theology to explore their experiences. In this scenario the students are being supported by first being invited into an experience, then asked to describe it in narrative form, then asked to reflect on it more deeply, and finally asked to explore that experience with a full complement of theological terms to draw on.

I can already hear the concerns my colleagues might raise: If we do all that, how can we possibly accomplish all we need to in a course? Isn't it important to challenge students and require them to live up to expectations, rather than to “dumb down” our approaches? How can we possibly design such assignments to meet the diverse needs of all our students?

Let me take each of these objections in turn. First, as to the concern about coverage of material, there is significant research from the last decade that suggests that students learn more when presented with less.¹⁰ That might seem counterintuitive, but consider the ways in which scholarly work often proceeds. A question begins to occur to you, and you ask yourself what your response to that question might be. If no answer emerges, your next response might be to ask a friend or colleague what their “take” on it would be, or you might go to a presentation at a conference or look for an article that deals with the general topic. Only after fussing around with it for a while do you begin to refine your questions, and then, and probably only then, you are able to turn to more focused and philosophical texts to help you structure your response.

It is almost a truism of adult education now that adult learners need to be supported into self-initiating inquiry. Another way to think about this would be to use Parker Palmer's description of the “grace of great things.” His argument is that we teach more by going deeply, even if narrowly, than we do by going broadly but staying near the surface.¹¹ Our students live in an information-rich, even information-saturated, environment. It is far more important for us to help them develop information-accessing abilities, information-critiquing abilities, and information-integrating abilities than it is to transfer content to them. So, as one

of my friends often puts it, we need “just in time” learning rather than “just in case” learning.

The second objection my colleagues might raise is the concern about challenging students rather than lowering content standards. This is an important objection, because educational scholarship also points repeatedly to the necessity of asking students to reach up rather than not requiring enough of them. The key here, however, is linked to the triad of ideas, feelings, and actions along with the “explicit, implicit, and null.” Far too often we make extraordinarily challenging assignments without recognizing how hard they are, let alone providing sufficient support to meet their challenges.

A case in point: We, as scholars and as representatives of historically grounded religious communities, often have personal histories of deep and prolonged experiences of worship that are complex, diverse in character, and richly meaningful. We come to teach worship with these experiences in our background, often with the assumption that our students will trust our knowledge and experience enough to accept our guidance as to what they need to know and how to go about learning it. Our students, on the other hand, often come from quite impoverished experiences of worship, perhaps having only one or at best two or three kinds of worship to draw upon. Many of our students find various other kinds of ritual—attending a film with friends, engaging in sporting events, activism—at least as, if not more, profoundly engaging as church worship.¹² They praise God and reconcile themselves with God in a range of ways we may only dimly fathom and for which we may have little respect.

Thus, they enter a worship classroom with some distrust, if not open suspicion, of the ability of a professor in an academic institution to speak to their ritual experiences with any knowledge or utility. When we teach from our background experiences and assume that they are shared, on an implicit level we are already sending the wrong messages. If we then refuse to engage our students’ questions—particularly those that have to do with digital media or various forms of music (both of which are issues of deep and constitutive importance to many students)—we teach through the “null” curriculum that we do not respect these experiences and, consequently, do not respect our students. It is thus a deeply challenging assignment we give to our students—to come into our classrooms and meet us more than halfway; to submerge their own experiences, intuitions, and instincts; to submerge the better part of their experiential resonances; and in turn to accept our claims and definitions as binding.

That is an extraordinarily challenging task, and it teaches a number of lessons I believe we do not want to teach. On the other hand, if we can invite our students’ experiences into our classrooms with sufficient hospitality and respect, we may be able to develop a shared language that could support them in coming to a deeper recognition of the shared riches of liturgical tradition, for instance, and the necessity of evaluating our emotional or experiential resonances against the hew and grain of our tradition. My argument here is that

we as teachers need to be aware of the “clay” with which we are encasing the riches of tradition. We must also be aware of the treasures our students may be unearthing if we could only collaborate with them.

The third objection my hypothetical colleagues might raise grows out of a deep concern for teaching in ways that have coherence and respect for students. Indeed, how can we teach in such a way as to meet the needs of all the diverse students in our classrooms? This is an important issue, and there is no simple answer. It is our task as teachers to provide coherence and substance for our students and to respect them in their diversity. These two goals can be in conflict. The tension between the two can be so strong that we may retreat into a standardized curriculum that does not fit anyone well but that at least has the virtue of being standardized. Or the tension can lead us to be “good enough” teachers, putting together materials that meet the needs of most of the students, most of the time. This has been the position I have tried to take in my own teaching. But ultimately, we must also take into account what Palmer calls the “grace of great things.” He argues that

We invite *diversity* into our community not because it is politically correct but because diverse viewpoints are demanded by the manifold mysteries of great things. We embrace *ambiguity* not because we are confused or indecisive but because we understand the inadequacy of our concepts to embrace the vastness of great things. We welcome *creative conflict* not because we are angry or hostile but because conflict is required to correct our biases and prejudices about the nature of great things. We practice *honesty* not only because we owe it to one another but because to lie about what we have seen would be to betray the truth of great things. We experience *humility* not because we have fought and lost but because humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen—and once we have seen them, humility is the only posture possible. We become *free* men and women through education not because we have privileged information but because tyranny in any form can be overcome only by invoking the grace of great things.¹³

One of the benefits of focusing on the “grace of great things” and the practices that go along with it is that it can free us as teachers to experience the humility of being in the presence of God. I am not the primary teacher in any learning environment; the Holy Spirit is.

Toward that end, I work to develop frameworks for learning events that are as flexible and choice driven as possible. In the beginning of any class, for instance, requiring students to develop their own learning goals in relation to the stated goals of a course helps to alert the teacher to ways in which the design of the course might need to be modified, or to individual students who might need extra support. Developing a syllabus that has a menu of assignment options can be one element of such flexibility, giving students the ability to choose assignments that match their intelligences and their learning styles, not to mention their diverse purposes in coming to seminary. Asking students to fill out

brief half sheets after a lecture, in which they must list one thing they have learned and one thing about which they still have questions, can make even highly scripted lectures an interactive process over time. These kinds of choices can increase the difficulty of a course because many students have been socialized into being passive learners. Yet the earlier they can be supported into taking charge of their own learning, the earlier it is possible to effect convergence along all the curricula (explicit, implicit, and null).

The trio of triads can in the end be defined as (1) the primary elements: context, people, purpose; (2) the learning domains: cognitive, affective, psychomotor; and (3) types of curricula: explicit, implicit, null. Each of these lenses helps point to some of the challenges we face in Christian higher education. But these are, in some ways, only lenses through which to view the difficulties. There are two profound challenges facing Christian higher education that we have only briefly touched on, and it is to these challenges that I now turn.

Thinking through Others

The first of the two challenges has to do with the ways in which we are essentially working “across cultures” in our teaching and learning. There are many ways to speak of this challenge—and many who have done so. In this chapter I will address only one such cross-cultural work, which regards the division of the print-based academy and the mass-mediated popular culture context outside of it. I have written at length in other contexts about this divide, but I believe that one of the frameworks by which I have engaged this divide—Richard Shweder’s—bears repeating.¹⁴

Shweder, a cultural anthropologist, has developed a four-part typology for the ways in which anthropologists “think through others.” His framework suggests they do so by thinking by means of the other, getting the other straight, deconstructing and going beyond the other, and witnessing in the context of engagement with the other. Each of these strategies follows upon the other, and so it is worth taking them each in turn. “Thinking by means of the other” has to do with engaging some aspect of the “other” as a means to learn more about ourselves.

Thinking through others in the first sense is to recognize the other as a specialist or expert on some aspect of human experience, whose reflective consciousness and systems of representations and discourse can be used to reveal hidden dimensions of our selves.¹⁵

Shweder’s first mode requires an honest acknowledgement of the ways in which the “other”—and here I am suggesting academic culture in relation to mass-mediated popular culture as “other”—can indeed be expert in some way.

Faculty at graduate theological institutions are familiar with thinking of ourselves as “experts” in various kinds of discourse and study that can reveal hidden dimensions of thought and reality. But how often do we acknowledge that popular mass-mediated culture might also have resources to bring to this task? Certainly our students are expected to recognize and grant authority to our expertise, but how often do we acknowledge our students’ fluency in the discourses of popular culture? There are rare professors who hire students to write web pages for them, for instance, or to serve as participant observers in ethnographic observations of youth culture. But even here, we, the faculty, hold the defining and controlling expertise.

Yet it is in media culture—no more evident than in the recent months since September 11, 2001—that the most relevant questions of faith are being debated. It is within digital media (a category that includes television, film, radio, and the Internet) that decisions are being made on questions of crucial communal importance. The divide between an academic religious culture and a digitally mediated culture was perhaps no more evident than in the three major rituals of grief and healing after September 11—the service in the U.S. national cathedral and the multichannel televised fundraising event put together by Tom Hanks and other Hollywood superstars. For many, if not most, Americans, it was the second event that was watched, talked about, and emotionally resonant. Our digital media clearly holds some kind of expertise that reveals hitherto hidden dimensions of who we are and who we want to be as a people. The last, the memorial service at Yankee Stadium, was presided over by Oprah Winfrey, arguably the high priestess of our media culture.

Shweder’s second mode of thinking through others is something he terms “getting the other straight,” by which he means “providing a systematic account of the internal logic of the intentional world constructed by the other. The aim is a rational reconstruction of indigenous belief, desire, and practice.”¹⁶ This mode of inquiry has so much in common with historical-critical biblical practice as to require no explanation here. Yet it is precisely this commonality—and the tendency to use historical-critical interpretive tools in isolation and thus send the implicit message of biblical “otherness”—that is most challenging to many of our students, since the conclusion they draw from using historical-critical tools can be that the Bible is a thoughtworld so different from ours as to be accessible only through the application of specialized tools. This same message is often sent, again unintentionally, by Bible studies structured in small groups of laypeople circled around an expert pastor who holds forth on the correct interpretation of a text.

Another example of this mode might be the way we seek in teaching worship to provide a “systematic account of the intentional world constructed,” not in this case by the “other,” but rather by us, in community. Media-studies scholars have over the last two decades shifted their understanding of how mass

media operate, from a model that might be called “instrumental” to one that is far more open to the expressive reception of media. No longer are media producers viewed as determining solely the meaning of any “texts” channeled through digital media; they are seen rather as only one partner in a complicated dance of the creation of meaning. One analogy these scholars have used to describe the ways in which we engage media is that of ritual. In this analogy, people engage digital media as a resource in meaning making, using a set of practices that seek to shape time and location in engaging various digital media. We can “get lost,” for instance, on the web, emerging hours later with no sense of time having passed. We listen to a background version of the radio, seeking to hear other people make sense of the day’s events while we make dinner or finish our commute.

How often do worship faculty ask students to think about the ritual implications of their media practices? This is an important question, perhaps no more so than now, when worship faculty are increasingly being asked to reflect on the use of digital media within worship. In what ways do our students’ socialization within media culture shape the discourses and patterns of practice we seek to facilitate within worship? It is just as important for us to be able to give a “systematic account of the intentional world constructed” by digital media as it is for our students to be able to do so of the world we seek to name and proclaim through worship.

Shweder’s third mode of thinking through others, at least from an anthropological point of view, involves “going beyond the other.” Many educators would identify this mode as “critical reflection,” which indeed has a lot in common with Shweder’s description:

It is a third sense, for it properly comes later, after we have already appreciated what the intentional world of the other powerfully reveals and illuminates, from its special point of view. “Thinking through others” is, in its totality, an act of criticism and liberation, as well as discovery.¹⁷

It is this third mode that I believe we as teachers are most anxious to support our students in “getting.” Yet it is Shweder’s assertion—and mine as well—that this is properly achieved only after first moving through “thinking by means of the other” and “getting the other straight.” Earlier I pointed to some of the problems that can occur when teachers ignore the affective and psychomotor components of learning, or when we refuse to consider the implicit or null curricula embedded in our teaching. These are the same dilemmas that emerge when teachers move too quickly to “going beyond others.” We face an enormous opportunity in the postmodern context if we can bring our analytical and creative minds to bear on the issues that appear before us, on the questions that our students bring to us. But this opportunity contains within it an abyss of difficulty if we move too quickly to the critique of digital media, for instance, without first considering digital media

from within their own frameworks of meaning. Similarly, we can invite our students into shared ritual leadership, or we can refuse to respect their own learning and contexts and simply try to transfer our own understandings to them. The latter stance will drive more people out of the church than it will invite in.

Yet there is an important step here, as Shweder acknowledges, a step that can be deeply respectful—that of moving to think beyond digital culture. This step requires us to think beyond and through institutional religious culture as well. Sociologists point to the deep skepticism members of the Gen-X community have toward institutions. Often that skepticism is expressed primarily toward religious institutions rather than media institutions. Perhaps we could respectfully invite young leaders within Gen X into religious institutions, thus in some ways bringing their criticism “inside,” while at the same time encouraging them to turn their critical lenses onto media institutions.

Shweder’s fourth mode of thinking through others is “witnessing in the context of engagement with the other”:

In this fourth sense of “thinking through others,” the process of representing the other goes hand in hand with a process of portraying one’s own self as part of the process of representing the other, thereby encouraging an open-ended self-reflexive dialogic turn of mind.¹⁸

This last mode of engaging the “other” is the mode with which we in religious institutions have the least experience. Far too often we engage in conversations across differences—whether ecumenically or in interfaith dialogue—from the arrogant position of having the truth rather than from the humble position of confessing that the Holy Spirit is ever at work in the world, continuing to reveal God to us. Again, if the months since September 11, 2001, have taught us anything, I would hope we have begun to learn that supporting religious identity formation that is too rigid has the effect of creating terrorists rather than of bringing us to our knees in awe of all that God has created among us.

Perhaps the clearest example of the way in which we as theological educators “witness in the context of engagement with the other” can be found in the ways we as teachers embody the deep humility of a teacher who is drawn to teaching because she is drawn to learning. As much as Martin Luther fought to keep hold of critical reason in relation to Scripture, it was also he who most liberated Scripture from the tyranny of an elite educated class of interpreters. Bible studies that are open circles of inquiry, shaped by the evaluative criteria of a historically grounded tradition but open to the emerging questions and life experiences of contemporary readers, exemplify this “open-ended, self-reflexive dialogic turn of mind.”

The End of Education

The final challenge I find deeply embedded in the examples used at the beginning of this chapter is the third leg of the first triad—that of purpose. What is the “end” of graduate theological education?

Up until 1994, Luther Seminary’s mission statement read:

Luther Northwestern educates men and women to serve the mission of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Congregations and ministries throughout the church rely upon this seminary for well qualified and committed pastors, teachers, and leaders. The church and the public look to Luther Northwestern as a center of Lutheran theological reflection.

Now it reads: “Luther Seminary educates leaders for Christian communities: called and sent by the Holy Spirit, to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ, and to serve in God’s world.” There is an evolution here, as well as clear implications for our work together as faculty, students, and staff. This shift reflects an intentional broadening of our institutional vocation and our sense that public leadership in the church takes more forms now than it did in previous decades.

Hanan Alexander writes that “education is not about acquiring just any knowledge, but that which is worthwhile; and to judge the worth of something requires a vision of the good.”¹⁹ Part of what is sustainable and exciting about graduate theological education in our contemporary context is that we have a vision of the good—perhaps in shorthand form, this vision would be “the reign of God.” But we need to translate this vision, or at the very least embed it, within our understanding of the “good” in relation to our vision of theological education.

For many decades graduate theological education has been strongly shaped by the dynamics of scholarly guilds, by the shape and construction of higher education more broadly construed, and even to a certain extent by the rubrics of “scientific positivism” afloat in the larger cultural spaces. It is difficult to find a way to move within those forces with sufficient clarity and vigor. What would a curriculum look like that has at its heart “educating leaders . . . called and sent . . .”?

Alexander notes that “the purpose of learning is to enhance one’s moral insight, not increase one’s material worth; to become better at *living well* or *practicing a valued craft*, not at *earning a living*. Professionals who graduate from educational institutions require not merely *practical skill* but also *purposes for which to practice*.”²⁰ At the heart of the dilemmas we face in graduate theological education is the articulation of the “purposes for which to practice,” purposes that must be sufficiently compelling and resonant to students who are socialized in digital media culture.²¹

On the face of it, I can not conceive of a more compelling educational “end” than Luther Seminary’s current mission statement. But I also know that many students find it difficult to figure out what is meant by “witnessing to salvation,” particularly if we intend to do so “in God’s world”—which extends beyond the walls of the local church. A generation of people socialized within a mass-mediated popular culture, in which explicitly theological language was most often represented as belonging only to a few vehement fundamentalists, must now work to find ways to reclaim explicitly theological language that has resonance with their own experiences and that speaks within their own contexts.

The opportunity here is vast and can be recognized even in the commercial success that puts books such as Kathleen Norris’ *Amazing Grace* or Roberta Bondi’s *Memories of God* on the local megabookstore shelves. People are hungry for language and experiences, beliefs and commitments, that are deeply rooted in historically grounded religious communities. For that hunger to be fed, however, people also rightly seek respect for their own positions.

Which brings us back to the statistics with which I began this chapter: “currently there are more than 300 professional Catholic lay ministry programs in the United States with a combined enrollment of more than 35,000—about 10 times the number of seminarians in post-college studies, and 13 times the number of men in deacon formation programs.”²² I also noted my colleague’s anecdotal reflection that “as many people are entering public leadership in the ELCA through non-seminary, non-juridical routes, as are entering each year from all eight ELCA seminaries combined.” These statistics point both to the willingness of people to enter public leadership in their communities of faith *and* to their refusal to participate in graduate programs that do not respect who they are and the contexts in which these programs are embedded.

How can we take seriously each of the legs of the “trio of triads” I pointed out earlier in this chapter? How can seminaries in particular, but Christian higher education more generally, participate in bringing our enormous resources to the task of equipping and sending leaders for Christian communities? Alexander discusses Lee Shulman’s core set of competencies that “spiritual pedagogues” require:

Subject-neutral critical thinking skills that transcend disciplines and traditions, the subject-specific thinking of their own ethical tradition and of relevant cognitive traditions, familiarity with at least one empirical discipline that teaches the fallibility of its results, and appreciation for aesthetic forms of representation that celebrate creativity and hope. They also need what Shulman calls “pedagogic content knowledge”—intuitions learned from experience about enabling others to inquire as well as the inquiry skills themselves.²³

Several years ago, we at Luther Seminary undertook a major revision of our curriculum, a revision spurred in large measure by our growing recognition

that the contexts around us were changing and that the students coming to school were changing. I offer a description of our efforts not as a prescription for any other institution, but as an example of the way one institution has tried to support such competencies. It should also be noted that I work from a description of our ideal practice, which is lived out with various degrees of commitment in daily life.

To begin with, we decided to move away from “departments” that focused on particular disciplines and instead formed just three “divisions” of our faculty: Bible, history and theology, and leadership. These divisions also parallel, in some ways, a threefold movement in our curriculum: learning the story, interpreting and confessing, and leading in mission.

It is too simple to say that each division has responsibility for one of these movements—Bible for learning the story, for instance—since there are elements of each movement in all three divisions. But it is true that the key emphasis within the Bible division has been on deep engagement with sacred text, and that within our history and theology division, significant time and effort is given to helping our students trace how our communities have interpreted and confessed the faith—and continue to do so today. Our leadership division, which is made up of what in the past might have been the “arts of ministry” faculty (religious education, homiletics, pastoral care, worship, and so on), is now engaged in a vibrant conversation about what “leadership” means in a community of faith. How can we speak of collaborative leadership, for instance, and what does it mean to work with ideas around embodied and performative practice?

Let me examine in turn each one of Shulman’s competencies. First, “subject-neutral critical thinking skills that transcend disciplines and traditions.” As Shweder notes, before one can “think beyond the other,” one must first get inside the other’s position, understand its core logics, experience its central emotions, live within its commitments. At Luther we support the development of critical thinking skills by working with students to learn the basic “scales,” so to speak, of the tradition they will soon play improvisationally. We still require our M.Div. students, for instance, to take both biblical Greek and biblical Hebrew. These languages are then taken up into various Bible, theology, and leadership courses in ways that help students parse the central grammars of our tradition sufficiently deeply so as to be able to play with its margins and extend its translations. In this way, the skills these students learn are brought to bear on various disciplines within Christian higher education.

We also work with more than the cognitive, particularly in our requirement that students participate in Discipleship, a core set of courses that provide small-group Bible studies as a way to reflect theologically on their daily experiences. We require that all students participate in cross-cultural immersion experiences. This latter requirement grows out of an understanding that critical thinking requires a grasp greater than one’s own context. Finally, we have worked

for the past decade on establishing a master's program in Islamic Studies at Luther. This program supports students who want to concentrate in that area and is also a rich resource in the wider curriculum for supporting students' thinking across traditions. I am not arguing that all seminaries should do the same, but I *am* suggesting that it is crucial that our students, who are called from and will be sent to communities of faith in a pluralistic world, have familiarity with respectfully engaging in ecumenical and interfaith dialogues.

The second competency Shulman says students need is "subject-specific thinking of their own ethical tradition and of relevant cognitive traditions." One entire movement of Luther Seminary's present educational strategy is the "interpreting and confessing" strand. This component of our curriculum seeks to develop within our students a deep appreciation for, and a concomitant ability to confess within, their tradition's core faith witness. Many of the courses in this strand are quite similar to courses in ethics and history at other institutions. But our worship course is situated in this strand as well, and our senior biblical theology course is an IC (interpreting and confessing) course. These courses require students to work at the level of feelings and actions as well as that of ideas. The courses also regularly draw on leaders from outside the the curriculum as teachers, or at least as featured guests on a particular topic.

Shulman's third competency is "familiarity with at least one empirical discipline that teaches the fallibility of its results." This particular goal is perhaps one we have struggled with the most. Currently our curriculum includes a class at the beginning of each student's course of study entitled "Reading the Audiences." This course brings sociological theories, particularly in the areas of demographics and cultural studies, to the task of congregational study. Students are challenged to describe in numerical terms the community in which a specific church is located, with presentational charts that utilize spreadsheets and other more quantitative software. Many of our students find this course particularly challenging and resist the idea that such empirical work could have anything at all to do with proclaiming God's Word. Yet a central issue in understanding statistics, demography, and other such empirical disciplines is learning how to critique and modify unstated assumptions. Such work teaches, as Shulman notes, "the fallibility of results" and is thus crucial to nurturing the deep humility that must always be at the heart of any Christian confessional stance.

"Appreciation for aesthetic forms of representation that celebrate creativity and hope" is the fourth of Shulman's competencies. This competency is thoroughly embedded in Luther Seminary's explicit curriculum through worship courses that study architecture, Bible courses that utilize images as interpretive tools, preaching and rhetoric classes that work with poetry and other forms of literature, but it is also present in our "implicit" curriculum. Daily chapel, for instance, is an important, if yet implicit, part of Luther's curriculum, and we strive to have this central worship experience draw on a multitude of aesthetic

forms and frameworks. Music varies from elegant Bach choruses accompanied by full organ to more spare and informal praise bands. The cross is represented in a multitude of ways, from the large bronze crucifix permanently installed in our smaller chapel, to the Taizé painted crucifix that was temporarily in our larger chapel, to representations of the cross in a myriad of other media. We are also beginning to experiment more directly with digital media and electronic representations.

Shulman's final competency is "pedagogic content knowledge"—intuitions learned from experience about enabling others to inquire as well as the inquiry skills themselves. This is by far the most difficult of the goals we have set. How do we support our students in conscious and intentional reflection on their patterns of inquiry? How do we help them move beyond their own *self-knowledge* into learning from experience in supporting others? We do not yet have full answers to these questions, but our central intuition is that this kind of work can and must spread beyond the usual classrooms of a seminary. Already we are beginning to build relationships with churches, parachurch organizations, and other kinds of community institutions in which religious leadership flourishes. We have always had a "contextual education" component to our curriculum, but recently we have been working to ensure that our entire curriculum reflects "learning congregational leadership in context."

As I have noted, when the context around us is one of continual and rapid change, our educational leadership must be flexible, outward oriented, and deeply connected to the communities from which our students are called and to which they will be sent.

Hanan Alexander writes:

Our very lives and those of our communities must become the intensive spiritual hothouses that summer camps represent. I call this *organic community* because there is a natural flow of complementary and mutually reinforcing ideas and ideals, study and practice, from the home to the neighborhood, the school to the synagogue, the youth group and summer camp to the cultural center and the social welfare organization. Communal norms can only be transmitted when the study, practice, and celebration of goodness is valued as highly by parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and neighbors as it is expected to be valued by their children.²⁴

Although Alexander is writing in a Jewish context, I believe his words are equally compelling in a Christian context. We know the powerful impact Christian summer camps have on people. We can work toward a similar organic community that supports graduate theological education. Why is this important? Because in the broader cultural climate we face a context in which "reasoning by sympathetic identification" and learning embedded in practice is far more common than philosophical argument. Evangelism now does not look like a well-reasoned argument as to why Jesus Christ is our Savior. Evangelism

now looks like many different things: the music of U2, the melodrama *West Wing* on network television, WWJD bracelets, and Bill Moyers on television. None of these examples are controlled by, or even promoted by, historically grounded, institutionally shaped communities of faith. In the last five years there has been an explosion of energy in using the Internet to communicate faith, and hundreds of thousands of sites have emerged with all sorts of information—accurate as well as highly misleading or even false—on religion. When we attempt to build the “transition community” (to use Bruffee’s phrase²⁵) that higher education can be, we must be mindful of the socialization our students have already encountered, and we must speak in the languages with which they are most familiar if we are to have any hope of teaching them any other languages. We must also ensure that that community does not end at the seminary walls and that the leaders we are educating continue to educate us.

Paul once wrote: “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Cor. 4:7).²⁶ In a postmodern context those of us who tend to graduate theological education must, at a minimum, practice a deep respect for the meaning making going on beyond our walls and continue to be open to all of the ways in which the Holy Spirit continues to work within and among us. Only by doing so will we be able to support all those who are “called and sent by the Holy Spirit, to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ and to serve in God’s world.”

versity Press, 2000), 269, 278, 273, and 285, respectively.

Lest I confine comments on churchgoing and behavior entirely to English-speaking countries, I note also Myers' citation of an international study of Jews in Israel, Catholics in Spain, Calvinists in the Netherlands, Orthodox in Greece, and Catholics in West Germany "consistently found that highly religious people tended to be less hedonistic and self-centered" (270).

20. See Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

21. I am not discounting the reality that Christian rituals, like other rituals, can be misguided and evil in their effect. Rituals can be dangerous exactly because they are effective, and not all ritual is good—think of Hitler's diabolically effective use of ritual. Church rituals, to the church's shame, have played a role in inculcating bigotry as well as altruism. In South Africa, for instance, the segregation of eucharistic observances by race paved the way for apartheid. Such possibilities, in my estimate, only underscore the need for the church to appreciate—and properly discern—the power of its worship.

22. The classic account of this bereft political condition, and subsequently of the God-responsive church as the only true polity, is Augustine's *City of God*, book 19.

23. All quotations in this paragraph are from Robert Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 98–99.

24. I quote the translation and wording of my own communion, the Episcopal Church: "Holy Eucharist Rite II," *Book of Common Prayer*, 362.

25. Cited in David McCarthy Matzko, "The Performance of the Good: Ritual Action and the Moral Life," *Pro Ecclesia* 7, no. 2 (spring 1998): 200.

26. Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (New York: Seabury, 1983), 161. Dix is by no means idiosyncratic on this reading. The Anglican-Roman International Commission on Eucharistic Devotion, for instance, parses *anamnesis* as "the making effective in the present of an event in the past." Cited in Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Works of God* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 258.

27. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 258.

28. Liturgical theologian Todd E. Johnson reminds us that the opposite of anamnesis, "re-member," is not forget, but "dis-member." Anamnesis reconnects us with the living God—re-membering us as part of the body of Christ.

29. Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, trans. John H. Yoder (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1967), 43.

30. See the excellent treatment of this subject by Marva J. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 24–29.

31. On this point, see Oliver O'Donovan's magisterial *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: Cam-

bridge University Press, 1996); and Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), especially chapter 1, "Europe and the Theologico-Political Problem," 3–9.

32. For development of these and related points, see my *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), especially pages 76–93.

33. Bell, *Ritual*, 182.

34. See Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 55.

35. Bell, *Ritual*, 241.

36. *Ibid.*, 244.

37. For argument and demonstration of this contention, see my "The Theology of Consumption and the Consumption of Theology: Toward a Christian Response to Consumerism," in Rodney Clapp, *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), 126–56. Also, the extraordinarily insightful theological reflections of Philip D. Kenneson suggest both profound and down-to-earth ways to foster faithfulness in an age of advanced capitalism. See his *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

Chapter 8

1. From "News" in *America* 185, no. 10 (10 September 2001): 4.

2. My memory of a conversation that took place in a Luther faculty forum on September 29, 2001.

3. This is my paraphrase of Robert Kegan's quotation of Burbules and Rice's formulation of post-modernism, found in Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 325.

4. Louis Charles Willard, ed., *Fact Book on Theological Education*, The Association of Theological Schools, for the academic year 2000–2001 (Pittsburgh: ATS, 2001). It is noteworthy that Roman Catholic lay ministry programs, such as Loyola University Chicago's Institute of Pastoral Studies, consistently have 70 percent female students.

5. Taken from the definition for "context" in *Merriam Webster's Dictionary*.

6. Thomas Boomershine noted in a presentation that he gave in Ottawa, Ontario, in May 1999 that in our contemporary cultural contexts, we reason "more by means of sympathetic identification than through philosophical argumentation."

7. See chapter 9 of this book.

8. Adán Medrano, "Media Trends and Contemporary Ministries: Changing Our Assumptions about Media," (presented to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands, Hilversum, The Netherlands,

May 6, 1998). Available online at: <<http://www.jmcommunications.com/english/medrano.html>>.

9. Elliott Eisner, *The Educational Imagination* (New York: MacMillan, 1985).

10. Maryellen Weiner, *Improving Your Teaching* (Sage, 1993), as cited by the "Tomorrow's Professor" listserv, available online at: <<http://sll.stanford.edu/projects/tomprof/newtomprof/postings/73.html>>.

11. Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 107–8.

12. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

13. Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, 107–8.

14. See, for example, Mary Hess, "Media Literacy as a Support for the Development of a Responsible Imagination in Religious Community," in *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, ed. Daniel Stout and Judith Buddenbaum (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2001), 289–311; and Mary Hess, "The Bible and Popular Culture: Engaging Sacred Text in a World of Others," in *New Paradigms for Bible Study* (New York: ABS, forthcoming).

15. Richard Shweder, *Thinking through Others: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 108.

16. *Ibid.*, 109.

17. *Ibid.*, 109–10.

18. *Ibid.*, 110.

19. Hanan Alexander, *Reclaiming Goodness: Education and the Spiritual Quest* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 173.

20. *Ibid.*, 184. Emphasis in original.

21. By "practice" I am not in any way making a theological claim about the outcome of our call. Rather, I am pointing to a logistic issue—what flows from our redemption on a daily basis? What are the fruits of the Spirit in this context?

22. *America* (10 September 2001).

23. Alexander, *Reclaiming Goodness*, 186.

24. *Ibid.*, 205.

25. Kenneth Bruffee, *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

26. I do not think it is a coincidence that one of the most popular crossover hits from a Christian rock band in recent years is a tune from the group Jars of Clay.

Chapter 9

1. The Congregations Project (funded by Lily Endowment and housed at Rice University) that is researching multiethnic Christian congregations identifies a "mixed church," or a multiethnic church, as a congregation with "at least 20 percent of its members

providing racial or ethnic diversity." *The Christian Century* 118, no. 7 (28 February 2001): 6–8.

2. *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, ed. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Joseph F. Kett, and James Trefil. 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin: 1993), 412.

3. See Kathy Black, *Culturally Conscious Worship* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000).

4. See *ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 83–115.

6. See Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989).

7. Edward Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences* (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural, 1990), 43–50.

8. For further exploration of these concepts see Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995); and Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences*.

9. Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz coined the term "kindom" in "Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s," in *Life Every Voice and Sing*, ed. Susan Brooks (Thiselthwaite and San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990).

Chapter 10

1. The multiple forms within the Lutheran family are a good example of this. See the chart inside the front cover of E. Clifford Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America, 1914–1970* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972).

2. Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig, "Henry Melchior Muhlenberg: Friend of Revivalism," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 72, no. 4 (fall 1992).

3. Martin E. Marty, "Ethnicity: The Skeleton of Religion in America," *Church History* 41, no. 1 (March 1972); and Gerald Brauer, "Regionalism and Religion in America," *Church History* 54, no. 3 (September 1985).

4. Sidney Mead, *The Lively Experiment* (Harper and Row, 1963).

5. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1921).

6. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976 and 1981).

7. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1937).

8. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

9. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

10. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

11. Nancy Ammerman, "Bowling Together: Congregations and the American Civil Order," 1996, lecture posted at <http://www.asu.edu/clas/religious_studies/home/1996lec.html>.