

‘Learning to Sing in a Strange Land’: Practicing a Pedagogy of Conscious Relinquishment

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In line with the conviction that salvation is about the renewal of creation, not escape from it, Christian discourse about the Spirit points not to the exotic, ephemeral, or ecstatic, but to the messy, mundane and the material. This is the location of the Spirit’s dwelling. A spiritual life is a life lived in the nitty gritty of strained relationships, struggles for justice, the use of money, the cultivation of institutions with all their compromises, *and the contests about the distribution of power.*ⁱ

A lived experience

In 2001, I travelled with a small group of Uniting Church folk to a remote village in the North Luzon Province of the Philippines. We were a part of a South Australian Synod mission partnership team seeking to establish more meaningful ties with the United Church of Christ of the Philippines (UCCP). The village had one Protestant community church in a remote, fertile valley that strangely felt Western within its Asian landscape as it had adopted the liturgy, forms, and upbeat music of the West. Their own culture and language *were* celebrated, yet never fully integrated within predominantly Western expressions of worship.ⁱⁱ

As a pastor from the West, I was given VIP status. I had access to the village chief elder and his council, a privilege the resident female pastor did not enjoy. In fact, she was surviving without regular income, even though hers was a strategic placement. Her cashless stipend was a hut and a garden plot, which supplied fish, rice, and coffee. By way of significant contrast, my privileged status was assumed and deferred to repeatedly during our three-day visit.

Longer term, the partnership initiated by the South Australian Synod could not be maintained because of the unequal footing, no matter how hard we tried to address concerns from our end. In my mind now, the colonised remained trapped by continuing to practice acquiescent, *learned* ways. This was despite the UCCP advocating for its own internal integrity and my own modest attempts of continually stressing our essential equality in Christ coupled with *our* need to learn from Filipino culture.

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A BIBLICAL REFLECTION

Again, he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. (Mark 3:1–6 NRSV)

This text from the Gospel of Mark was the very first I exegeted as a theological student, albeit with a minimal amount of Greek and even smaller amounts of theological sensibility. Despite my limitations, the narrative left an indelible mark on me. Both the words and gestures of the Marcan Jesus woke me up to the sobering realities of spiritual resistance and even aggressive inclinations to *safeguard* bases of religious and societal power. Yet, not only that, the nuanced anger of Jesus also conveyed divine habitations of mercy, meaning that the distinct contrasts between the main characters became a place of needed decision making. Where would *I* stand in this ongoing narrative of hard-hearted religiosity opposed to yearned-for liberations of body and spirit? And what religious baggage would I be prepared to set down to follow more faithfully in Christ's life-bearing ways of love?

Mark's Gospel asks numerous existential, pressing questions, from the archetypal "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29a) through to the poignant "Could you not keep awake one hour?" (Mark 14:37b). At play within these and other textual examples lies an invitation to life via conscious *relinquishment*, that is, a repeated sacrifice of privilege, status, accumulated knowledge and landed power. "If any want to become my followers," Jesus said, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mark 8: 34b–35).

Philip Carter, an Anglican priest and spiritual director, suggests plainly, "The Jesus of Mark's Gospel provides very few answers: but the questioner himself . . . compels us to declare ourselves and to reveal where *we* stand."ⁱⁱⁱ In sum, this is a stance shaped by a responsive laying aside of all that which is familiar, thus controllable, and a taking up of that which is yet to come – the imagined, transformational *possible*. It is within this key principle of Christian discipleship expressed through the vocation of theological teaching that this paper seeks to find its *telos* and/or purpose.

A NEEDED DISCUSSION

I live and work within an ecclesial system alive to long-standing assumptions of superior knowledge conveyed through right belief (orthodoxy) and right practice (orthopraxis). So widely presupposed and *embedded* are they that they're rarely scrutinised, internally or externally. And like the village experience I began this paper with, acquiescence is often the default position of those subjugated or *colonised* by those assumptions. Yet this is not simply an issue of race and culture but also, as Isabel Wilkerson argues, a matter of *caste* – that is, of where one fits or is fitting within a hierarchical enforcement and continual reinforcement of social and economic ordering.^{iv}

Similarly, contemporary theological scholars such as Cindy S. Lee^v and Willie James Jennings^{vi} have offered critiques from within their own nondominant religious cultures that are well familiar with the machinations of white, Western, and male-dominating ones. Despite the long-standing oppressive realities, neither author is totally dismissive of Western systems of education and formation, nor do they suggest that irreconcilable perspectives and practices exist. That said, each yearns to see the reformation of *two* worlds, those of whiteness *and* non-whiteness. For the latter, this means a renewed confidence in cultural and vocational embodiment for those long conditioned to adopt imposed roles and identities. And for the former, this means more than token compacts based on conceptual or ideological grounds. In sum, there needs to be tangible change – bodily, structurally, *and* economically – a conscious relinquishment of established power and landed influence for the sake of deeper levels of human belonging and flourishing. It occurs to me, then, that classroom teaching is not exempt from such radicalised patterns of Christian discipleship and reform.

Whiteness's educational power and influence are regularly expressed through binary, propositional, goal-driven, and self-sufficient modes of relating to life and faith. In pedagogical terms, such a disposition finds its home in the expert teacher who stands and delivers from the imposing rampart of certified knowledge. This ostensibly one-directional style of communication also tends to be laced with anecdotal and selective material that serves only to reinforce the teacher's elevated status. Very little conversation is invited from the students, and any uncertainty on the part of the master instructor is well concealed. We just keep on talking and gesticulating.

Admittedly, whilst something of a caricature, this all-too-common approach to teaching Western-based theology is but a distortion of potentially *formative* educational processes, according to the analysis of Willie Jennings. Well structured as it may first appear, such an approach, he argues, works against a communal deepening of heart and mind. Indeed, it represents an exercise of *reinforcement*, not incremental openings, before the mysteries of the Christian faith. As an African American and a long-serving former dean of Duke Theological School, Jennings offers a discerning commentary and suggested redirections. He asks,

What exactly is the [present] distortion in formation? . . . It is a distortion that forms between two things. On one side there is an image of an educated person that propels the curricula, pedagogical, and formational energies of western education, and especially theological education. That image is of a white self-sufficient man, his self-sufficiency defined by possession, control, and mastery. On the other side, many people respond to that image by promoting a homogeneity that aims towards a cultural nationalism. This quest for a cultural nationalism or cultural sovereignty inadvertently keeps us captured in the formation energies of white self-sufficient masculinity.^{vii}

In this highly regulated pedagogical system, conceptualities tend to be presented as self-evident truths by teachers who are highly qualified to convey them. The 'little by little' (*paulatim*) of intellectual and spiritual formation stressed within the writings of major Western reformers^{viii} is given short shrift due to marketplace forces that seek near immediate, measurable results both in educational and economic terms. Furthermore, in such functional environments, God readily becomes the detached object of enquiry rather than the subject matter and *indweller* of the yearning heart and mind. With these one-dimensional practices in mind, Cindy Lee states,

I believe western ways of spiritual formation have failed to form us as human beings. Historically, the church prioritised preparing souls for the afterlife but failed to form us to be healthy human beings in this life. The church overemphasised teaching the right beliefs but, in doing so, failed to form us to be people who ask God questions. If we don't learn to ask God questions, we don't allow God to reveal Godself to us but allow others to define God for us. Spiritual formation *is the inner transformation* we need to be better human beings.^{ix}

Correspondingly, Jennings is emphatic about the goal of all theological learning: "Formation. Formation. Formation."^x This emphasis does not discount the value of rigorous thought, but it does suggest that knowledge is not an educational end. Rather, theological education must serve the higher purposes of what Daniel Aleshire describes as "a wisdom of God and the ways of God,"^{xi} as might the theological teacher who is called to be a purveyor of such wisdom, that is, a living example of congruous reflective thought and graced Christian practice.^{xii} Significantly, formation conceived and understood in such integrative and relational terms is dependent upon conscious, repeated relinquishments. As deciduous trees shed their leaves every autumn for the sake of another vitalised spring, so might teachers and students of theology welcome their repeated *unforming*. Or, stated in more positive terms, "Think the limit," a phrase used by Willie Jennings at a recent conference in Sydney. This conscious and even rehearsed state of limitation, he suggested, represents a pushback against Western, white assumptions of limitlessness so far as intellectual progress and human endeavours are concerned. Jennings is echoing Bonhoeffer's famous dictum that to follow Christ is to be bidden to come and die with him: "dying into the Christian life is thinking or embracing the

limit,” which in sum is a rejection of all forms of domination because the “other person is the limit God sets for me.”^{xiii}

Practically and pedagogically speaking, the ‘other’ is primarily the student who, oftentimes, is the unwitting target of their teacher’s presumptions, both in terms of academic ability and even character. Only recently I made a hasty judgement about a student’s inability to articulate their faith perspective in conversant ways with his peers. Yet as the semester unfolded and the student’s self-confidence grew, his summaries about complex class conversations went well beyond my own ability to draw disparate threads together into an accessible and memorable whole. There was nothing left for me to say. More summarising words from the teacher – the default, technically correct position – would have only confused the issue and devalued the student in question.

Theological faculty members have a great deal of power (symbolically and practically), in other words, so it is incumbent upon those of us called to the profession to engage in the same formational processes expected of students. Daniel Aleshire is very clear on this point:

If faculty are to teach students in a formational way, then they need to attend to the intrinsically religious aspects of their intellectual and pedagogical labour. One can teach the content of Christianity in a less than Christian way, but one cannot do so *if the goal is Christian formation*. What might be considered a Christian way of teaching? I think it involves certain virtues and careful stewardship of intellectual effort.^{xiv}

In fact, Aleshire goes on to list four essential virtues – humility, faith, self-denial and charity (love).^{xv} Of the last he states, “Charity is an educational virtue, as professors take students seriously, respect their humanity, treat them with respect, and hold students accountable with demand and compassion.”^{xvi}

At the theological college where I teach, increased enrolments of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students have represented both an opportunity and challenge to Aleshire’s key pedagogical principle of charity. For no small amount of time, understanding and patience is needed with individual students, particularly in the University regulated area of assessment. For example, written, English assessments in what might be the fourth language of the student who may come from an oral/narrative-based culture are becoming increasingly problematic to grade, making contextual or hybrid revisions a necessity.

In sum, the pedagogical principle of accountable and compassionate charity is imperative but it can also be stressful. Recently I failed a CALD student’s semester-long endeavours, despite repeated attempts to accompany them through the stipulated learning outcomes and congruent assessment tasks. Even as I write, I feel a deep sense of frustration and even failure in the pit of my stomach.

EMERGING WAYS FORWARD

It would be beneficial, therefore, to practice divestments of so-called *composite* epistemologies in favour of fossicking for, and arranging creatively,^{xvii} that which Jennings describes as “fragments” of theological knowing – slivers, glimpses, “hints half guessed”^{xviii} – rather than furthering the pretence that one is able to comprehend and then communicate a grandiose whole. In many instances, this partial seeing is the well-established domain of the poets, so it might involve elevating *theopoetics* to at least the same level as theological prose and perhaps even transcending it.

That is not to say that every ministry student or teaching colleague I encounter welcomes such a fragmentary approach. Many students begin studying at my own theological college with the expectation of a needed *system* of belief, wherein all the various parts of the curriculum constitute a comprehensive and persuasive whole. Over time, however, and with the perseverance of the pedagogy I have sought to commend throughout this paper, I have witnessed a gradual, yet happy admission of the indispensable place of mystery in faith and in the practice of Christian ministry.

Indeed, a radicalised humility lies at the heart of Christian spirituality (Matt. 5:1–5, 20:16), as does seeing “dimly” as into an ancient mirror (1 Cor. 13:12). This way of wisdom, mused T. S. Eliot, can only be traversed by a conscious way of *humility and ignorance*, which is Eastern in both premise and application, that is, an *apophatic* mode of being.^{xix} However, is such a trajectory realistically possible for Western educators and their higher education providers? That’s doubtful in the short term. For any significant change will involve *unforming* long-established patterns of thought, practice, and highly protected structures such as policies, curriculums, assessments, and degree certifications. Still, at core (and perhaps *at best*), students will need to see greater degrees of vulnerability within the teacher, whose disposition will be as a co-learner and co-disciple – a gatherer of random fragments, not the dispenser of polished systems of belief. Such vulnerability lies in trusting the *veracity of incompleteness* within an educational system that values the cogency of contested argument. But, as Jennings observes astutely,

There is the fragment formed by faith itself. This is the first fragment. We have the words of Jesus, the words of the prophets, the stories of Israel, the lives of so many who have called themselves Christians through the centuries—their thoughts in texts, reports and second-hand reports, deliberations, confessions, decisions, meditations, interpretations—everything is in slices and slivers, pieces, and shards. We have no whole here—no whole picture of ancient Israel, or the prophets, or their families, or Jesus, or his family, or early, middle, or late Christians, or the entirety of their thinking, no full uncovering of their desires, angers, frustrations, hopes, and dreams. No complete picture of any theologian, or heretic, or faithful or unfaithful priest, monk, nun, missionary, mystic. All of it is merely fragments, large and small. Every teacher knows this. Build a syllabus, year after year, and you will sense this. Teach a class, counsel a student, present a point, resist an idea, applaud an insight, and all of this will be revealed.^{xx}

Secondly, and as a direct consequence of the above positioning, a renewed appreciation and practice of the contemplative way is encouraged. Contemplation here means an attentiveness to otherness and a desirous capacity to engage with it *affectively*. Within such a way, God is not the object of research; rather, the Divine remains the subject and dynamic centre of all. Mere objectifications of God draw us readily into conceptual abstractionism and give credence to socially damaging dualisms, whereas “attention animated by desire” (Simone Weil)^{xxi} leads incrementally into the self-revealing, unitive heart and mind of God. In that sense, ‘I yearn therefore I am’ becomes a more accurate and pressing statement of Christian expressive being and missional purpose, a contemplative stance by which the “mind dwells in the heart,”^{xxii} thus creating a sacred space for being beheld and beholding. This radically open stance counters the Western propensity to mere speculations about God within the din and clutter of the restless mind. Rowan Williams says most things better than the rest of us:

To approach life in the presence of the Holy with the mindset that looks for possession and power is to begin to cut oneself off from life; yet most of us will recognise that this is painfully familiar in the language and practise of religious bodies and religious individuals (ourselves very much included) . . . contemplation is not supposed to be an activity among others, an additional skill to learn or chore to take on; it is that ‘going within’ in order to release a fundamental orientation to what is real. It is in this sense that contemplation is . . . a profoundly Christological matter, entering the mind of Christ, learning to inhabit a dangerously different world that – if we let it – will change everything we encounter in the world of familiar daily experience.^{xxiii}

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Whiteness and what it both philosophically and theologically represents is fast reaching its endgame. Linear, individualistic, competitive and bifurcate frameworks of belief/knowledge are demonstrably counterproductive to a common future for planet Earth and its inhabitants. That the Christian church of the West still willingly resides in these working assumptions makes practicing theological education complex and even exhausting at times. It is as if we are constantly wading upstream, *against* fresh mountain flows. Facilitating ways and means of *wise Christian thought and ministry practice*, here understood to be the development of the capacity to perceive fragments of God’s *shalom* and to rehearse them in real time, is a more meaningful way forward, I believe.

Yet practicing divine coherence and mercy is a *contemplative* or reflective undertaking. It involves a seeing and hearing at levels not found in clichéd or selective sound bites. It demands an inner attentiveness and stillness. It also demands the courage of cruciform embodiment and willing divestments of moral, epistemological and landed power. It invites the mind to yield in order to more fully engage the yearning heart. To teach well in the name and way of Christ, therefore, is to share from that sacred and expanding centre.

NOTES

- ⁱ Geoff Thompson, *Disturbing Much, Disturbing Many: Theology Provoked by the Basis of Union* (Northcote, Victoria: Uniting Academic Press), 56, emphasis added.
- ⁱⁱ Following a Sunday morning church service, an older male from our team and I were invited to participate in a traditional ‘chicken dance,’ replete with costume and taught steps. At the time I had little knowledge of how privileged we were to be given access to such a traditional, Indigenous ritual.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Philip Carter, *Journeying towards Faith: Becoming What I Am* (Bayswater, Victoria: Coventry Press, 2023), 26.
- ^{iv} Isabel Wilkenson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (London: Penguin Books, 2023). Wilkenson writes, “Caste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. They can and do coexist in the same culture and serve to reinforce each other. . . . Caste is the bones, race the skin. Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place. . . . Caste is fixed and rigid. Race is fluid and superficial” (74).
- ^v Cindy S. Lee, *Our Unforming: De-Westernizing Spiritual Formation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).
- ^{vi} Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).
- ^{vii} Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 6–7.
- ^{viii} St. Bernard of Clairvaux is but one example. John Calvin also used this phrase within the context of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, arguably a non-monastic handbook for Christian formation. See Matthew Myer Boulton, *Life in God: John Calvin, Practical Formation and the Future of Protestant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 22–28.
- ^{ix} Lee, *Our Unforming*, 4, emphasis added.
- ^x Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 4. Jennings adds, “Formation is an elusive thing to see in practice. It is the shining goal of all education, especially theological education. . . . Education and theological education kill the lie that people don’t change. Formation happens, people do change, even if that change is not easily perceived by impatient eyes” (4–5).
- ^{xi} Daniel O. Aleshire, *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 82. Aleshire’s full stated goal of theological education is “the development of a wisdom of God and the ways of God, fashioned from intellectual, affective, and behavioural understanding and evidenced by spiritual and moral maturity, relational integrity, knowledge of the Scripture and tradition, and the capacity to exercise religious leadership” (82).
- ^{xii} Aleshire, *Beyond Profession*, 114–17.
- ^{xiii} Willie Jennings, “Where Is the Limit in Bonhoeffer?” keynote speech at the XIVth Bonhoeffer Congress, Sydney, NSW, 17 January 2024.
- ^{xiv} Aleshire, *Beyond Profession*, 114, emphasis added.
- ^{xv} Aleshire, *Beyond Profession*, 115–16.
- ^{xvi} Aleshire, *Beyond Profession*, 116.
- ^{xvii} In the context of creative writing practices, Vinita Hampton Wright, in *The Soul Tells a Story: Engaging Creativity with Spirituality in the Writing Life* (Downer Grove, IL: IVP,

2005), offers a helpful working picture of such creative 'arrangements': "In a general sense, every human being is creative. The trait is not always flashy. Often it is not called by its true name. But when you take the stuff of life and rearrange it so that it matters, so that it does good things, you're acting creatively. At those times when you are breaking a sweat to make life work better, you are most like the God who created you. You don't have to come up with a new idea in order to be creative. All you have to do is find an old idea and apply it to a new moment or group of people, a new problem or situation" (17).

^{xviii} T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," in *Four Quartets* (New York: HBJ, 1988), 44.

^{xix} T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," in *Four Quartets*, 29.

^{xx} Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 32–33.

^{xxi} Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* trans. Emma Craufurd (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2009), 125.

^{xxii} Cynthia Bourgeault, *Eye of the Heart: A Spiritual Journey into the Imaginal Realm* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2020).

^{xxiii} Rowan Williams, Foreword to Sarah Bachelard, *A Contemplative Christianity for Our Time* (Singapore: Meditatio Press, 2020).