

GRACE FROM THE MARGIN

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My reflections this morning come from two chairs. I wrote this lecture sitting in the Vine Street Chair. It is a chair given to me by the youth group of the congregation I served for over twenty years of my life. The group felt that if I were going to go to a seminary to hold the Herald B. Monroe Chair, I needed a Vine Street Chair.

There is a red chalice with a St. Andrew's cross on the Vine Street Chair. This is a symbol of the Christian tribe of which I am a part. Around the chalice are the words, "Fun, Joy, Fellowship, Service, Friendship, Hope and Laughter." Underneath the seat are the names of those who were in the youth group.

The Herald B. Monroe Chair honors a beloved Regional Minister of the Region of Ohio for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It recognizes gifts of ministry by one of our churches great "pastors to pastors." Its purpose is to tap the resources of a person that has recent and long-term experience in pastoral ministry.

In some rather perverse way, the chair I hold and the chair that holds me describe my role in the seminary. I teach preaching and parish ministry in an academic institution whose purpose is to train

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leadership for the whole church. As I work to communicate my insights and skills, I am held by the lives of those who are living in and leading in congregations. The chair I hold invites me to integrate what I learned from thirty years of congregational leadership with the critical thinking of the academic community.

With these perspectives in mind, I will explore some issues of how we as a seminary might contribute effectively to the development of leaders for the church. I will explore the context and function of ministry, and how our educational process can contribute to the development of persons to minister effectively in that context.

CONTEXT

I begin with a quick analysis of the human purpose and human condition in the North American context.

Humans were created to love God and to enjoy God forever – so says the tradition. I believe that the deepest longing of the human heart is abundant life – that is, joy in God. I believe that the context in which we do ministry in our world is the same context that humans have always done ministry – among people who long to live life abundantly!

To live abundantly, or to be fully alive, means to have enough vulnerability and sensitivity to experience life's tenderness and beauty, and enough armor and numbness to not be overcome by life's chaos and terror. It is to be safe enough to relax and submit to the gift of love in creation and to be insecure enough to feel the adrenalin of adventure. It is to live in awe-filled wonder at the complexity and creativity of divine power.

Two conditions are essential for this abundant life. One is stability and safety; the other is change and adventure. The human soul seeks both. We seek a stable home. We search for a place that is familiar. We desire enough security and predictability that we are not constantly required to be on our toes. Home is where we can be back on our heels and not be pushed over – but if we do fall, there is an easy chair to catch us. It is a place of safety.

But, the human spirit also seeks adventure. We seek to discover the undiscovered, explore the unexplored. The human heart longs for the serendipity of surprise. We long for the new, the different. We are fascinated by that which is out of bounds, the bizarre, the peculiar, and the mysterious. The wild wonder of creation scares and seduces us at the same time. Strangers both attract and repel.

Life is lived on the margins between the safe and sustaining past and the fascinating and frightening future. Last month, many of us shared a tradition known as Christmas. It is a tradition that leans toward the slavery of sentimentality. It is a time when the familiar is reinforced. Traditions pile on traditions. Some feel smothered. Others feel secure. But, in the midst of the familiar are wrapped packages – surprises – new and different. The good Christmas is one in which one feels at safe at home, wrapped in tradition, and surprised by the delight of unwrapping the unpredictable.

Just as life is lived on the margins between the anchoring past and the uncharted future, human history is written on the margins between a defining past and a redefining future. The metaphor of Exodus encapsulates that history. The strong desire for the security of Egypt constantly tugs at the wandering masses. Food and predictability is frequently preferred over faith and uncertainty. The longing to be free is always accompanied by the hunger for certainty. The safety of slavery is always accompanied for the longing to live free.

Our faith declares that the living God who was at work creating a people in the womb of slavery is the same living God who is recreating people in the wilderness of freedom.

The human experience in the third millennium in North America is characterized by an imbalance in the yearning for the security of home and the exhilaration for freedom. The retribalization of global geography is a metaphor for the longing of the soul's geography. The absence of externally powerful forces holding together the tribal differences within them is resulting in a redrawing of all the maps imposed by the colonial powers of the last century. Tribes are reasserting themselves because people have a profound desire to be at home – to reclaim the stories and traditions and

symbols which shape their identity and center them in a sense of the sacred.

The absence of a strong sense of sacred presence in our culture has sent people scurrying for shelter in multiple religious and quasi-religious directions. Many people feel orphaned and unable to find a safe place to stand. Their spirits cling to any sense of hope that will secure them. Promises are plentiful in the geography of the spirit.

But it is hard to find home, for the future is emerging too fast for us to be at home. The new does not last long enough to become familiar. The revolution doesn't become ritualized. The musings of the futurists don't sink deeply enough into our lives to become the music of our souls.

Because we can't feel safe and secure in the home emerging, we are driven to dig through the rubble of the known world and sort through the stories which have sustained our parents. Or we draw into ourselves and look for strength in isolation. We move inward to the soul and backwards to the memory.

In a world that is evolving in microseconds, it is very difficult to feel at home.

The context for ministry in our culture, then, is like all times – among people who long for abundant life. It is among people who seek a balance between home and adventure – safety and change. We work with people who long for the presence of a merciful and compassionate God but who know in their bones the reality of chaos and terror. We live with people who long for either Eden when the peace of innocence is restored or the Reign of God when all is made right with creation, and in the shalom of sufficiency all is secured.

But, while we share a common human condition with our ancestors, the speed of change in our time creates an increased sense of anxiety and thus a more intense challenge for ministry.

MINISTRY

Now, with this context, what is the role of a spiritual leader or minister?

The minister stands in the shoes of Moses. That is, between the fearful chaos of an unknown future and the sustaining traditions of the past – both places of the living God. The role of the minister is to stand between the traditions of the past as embodied in the lives of the “old-timers” in the church and the dreams of the young women and men in the congregation. It is to stand between the community of faith in which God is made manifest in memory and the community of creation in which God is made manifest in emerging reality.

In other words, to be a minister is to be homeless – to be in but not of the world – to be “in” but not “of” the community she serves. The minister’s role is to lead the congregation in its boundary relationship with the rest of creation. To be a leader is to always be part of and yet, *not* part of. The Codes of Ethics of each of our religious communities clearly defines distinctions between clergy and laity – some in terms of the sociology of power, some in terms of the sacramental service. A minister’s location in this world is in a kind of *no-man’s-land* on the edge of different realms.

And the role of the minister is to be an agent of reconciliation. That is, to help God and humans discover their need for each other. It is the role of the minister to speak of one to the other in such a way that the divine recognizes the human within itself and the human recognizes the divine within itself. This is done through bi-directional speech. To preach the word is to articulate the divine action in ancient times in a way that the modern eye can recognize the divine action in *our* world. To pray is to articulate to the divine the human condition in such a way that the divine integrity is claimed in the current human condition.

The minister not only stands on the boundary between human and divine, but, in the human community, the minister’s role is to mediate the margins between different tribes and cultures. Whereas many of our forebearers in the North American pulpit had to stand on the margins between traditional cultural and emerging modern mani-

festations of culture, our role is more complex. There is not a monolithic cultural norm that is embraced by the vast majority. Women and men are struggling to define reality in terms of different biological and cultural experiences. The shrinking globe and the growingly diverse church is requiring the reconciling activity of God to be present on the margins between young and old, women and men, rich and poor, gay and straight, healthy and ill, powerful and powerless within the same congregation.

To facilitate this reconciling process, one needs to develop organizational and leadership skills which help mediate and empower new vision and life. Ministers must know how to analyze the cultural values being expressed and then offer structures which help a person's gifts be given in service to the common mission of the church – the mission of blessing the world.

Now, this kind of marginal management, this tending of the boundaries, has profound consequences. When it is done with grace something new is born. The intercourse between differences always has the potential to create new life. The passionate engagement of differences creates the electricity of passionate creativity. It is not neat and clean and calculating. It is struggling and wrestling with all the attendant pleasure and pain. Being present at the margins when the holy other engages the human other is not the most peaceful work.

When the engagement occurs, the possibility of the new emerges. When the stranger wrestled with Jacob it wasn't a pretty picture. The dust was flying so anyone observing from the outside couldn't see the struggle. That is how these engagements are. They take place in the cover of night under sheets of secrecy. But, out of the struggle came a new creation – a new man, a new name, a new nation – and out of that struggle, an eternal wound. When the tradition of the past and the tug of the future meet and kiss, something limping, vulnerable, and new might just emerge. A clash with the other creates wounds and scars through which God creates healing and blessing. Crosses and tables with broken bread and wine litter the gathering places of healing communities around the globe.

Creativity is exhausting and painful. Giving birth, or just being in the midst of the birthing process, can wear on the body and

soul of the participants. It is hard to get a consensus in the midst of it. I remember when I was “coaching” my wife at the birth of our third child. I was told to be firm and kind. I was. But somehow, in her struggle, it didn’t feel very kind. It seemed to her that I was insensitive to her pain. (Clearly I didn’t have a clue as to what kind of pain she was in.) She developed an amazing new vocabulary of intense language, which broke through my arrogant assumption that I knew what I was doing.

Effective ministry within our context is exciting, messy, painful, confusing and hard. But it is the kind of work and wrestling that results in the joyful satisfaction of attending the birth of new creation. It breaks down the walls of propriety and we experience the intense joy of knowing the real human and divine reality.

PERSON

What kind of person does it take to function on that margin? Where does one get the energy to endure the constant sense of confusion and homelessness which one feels when one is dealing with the real pain and struggle of human life? Where does one get the laughter to drink deeply from the well of human absurdity and the tears to cry at the sheer human pain? Where does one get the armor to keep from being cut to the quick with each child he buries and at the same time be sensitive enough to hear the stifled cries of persons locked in their prison of expectation and exploitation? How does one have the *chutzpah* to keep going up to the mountain to face God and then return to the people to hear their pain and fear?

To be a spiritual leader means that one must have a deep well from which to draw. I had a recent conversation with Fred Craddock, Dean of Disciple preachers, about the how to help people become effective preachers. Dr. Craddock reported a conversation he had some years ago with a person who is now one of the leading preachers in our nation. She didn’t think she could preach. Dr. Craddock told her that to preach well one needed a “big interior life.” I believe he is right, not only for effective preaching, but for effective

spiritual leadership as well. To endure and flourish in ministry one must be able to embrace the fullness of life within oneself.

Life is large. It is paradoxical. It is both pain and pleasure. It is both destruction and creation. It is both male and female. It is both joy and sadness. In the beginning were both day *and* night. And they are of equal size.

To be a spiritual leader is to embrace this large life, to learn to experience *all* of life as gifts of creation, to allow the membrane of one's soul to feel the pain and joy of stretching. All too often, ministry has been shrunk to the size that can be managed. Our fear drives us to close out life. Our compulsion for the ideal and the perfect drives us to limit what we will take in. We become obsessive perfectionists.

Writer Anne Lamott believes that "perfectionism is based on obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a whole lot more fun while they're doing it."²

The desire to keep things neat and controlled has shrunk church life to a group of people who look and think alike about most things and who refuse to talk about their differences. But a deeply spiritual life is one that drinks in the *whole* of life and leads others in their journey through that life. It is able to receive the gift of chaos as well as order because each is present in the reality of God. A spiritual leader has visited the depths of hell in her own soul and survived. She therefore knows empathetically the hell of her parishioner. She can share that pain because she knows that nothing can separate her from the love of the creating God she longs to know. Spiritually grounded leaders live in reverence and awe of the whole of the created and creating world.

The tension within the leader between the sustaining stories of tradition and the soaring yearnings of the spirit produce vitality. Struggling between suffering and joy with a heart that dances with the

²Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), p. 28.

light and color fires the spirit. Life lived on the edge is one that can excite and invite others into the expansive life for which they long.

How do you grow the interior life? How do we as a seminary help a student to grow the interior life so that he can embrace the size of creation?

EDUCATION

We must first accept the interior life as it is in the people who come to us. Most of us have the size of interior life we can endure. Some children have had their interior selves bound like some cultures bind the feet of girls and women. Some children have developed very effective armor to protect them from the abuse of primary caregivers. Flexibility is limited. To force stretching threatens tearing and destruction.

But all of us also long for an expanding life – a more abundant life. We hope to experience more of the reality of the divine. Persons come to this place to grow. The growth of the interior space is spiritual. Interior space is sacred. It is the right of each individual to protect that space, and develop it as they are able.

Most people are willing to allow that interior space to expand if they do not feel that the new life within it will destroy the essence of who they are. Women are willing to embody a growing fetus because they believe that the interior of their bodies have the capacity to be stretched without being destroyed. If we who are faculty introduce the world we steward in our work in such a way that the student feels that they will be destroyed, they will resist space expansion for all they are worth. But, if introduced with sensitivity and care, I believe people will open to it. If it is introduced with the passion and energy which comes from persons who have been gracefully transformed by it, then students will be more open to receiving it.

Education is the introduction of new seeds into the interior space. In an educational institution, that interior space, which is the home of the soul, is approached through the door of the mind. The

mind takes the information about God it is given, and, combining it with experience, filters it so that it can be digested in the soul. If we who teach can share information in a way that the student can see the stranger as not a threat but as a messenger from the divine, then students will be more likely to be stretched.

We who work here are charged with the sacred responsibility to be good stewards of the stories and structures of faith which we have inherited. The church values the academic disciplines of theology, Bible, history, sociology, psychology, and organizational leadership and management. To study and to organize thought about these gifts from our ancestors is a sacred task. To share it is to invite the student into a vision of creation which our faith declares is intended by God. That vision then becomes a new space in which the student can offer her gifts to bless the world.

When these disciplines in theological education are shared with students in a context in which they feel relatively safe, there is a chance of new life being grown within the interior self. Most of us are much more willing to accept strangers and sit with them at a meal if we feel that we will not be destroyed by the encounter. Most people are transformed by the presence of the new within them. We are more likely to receive it and appropriate it – even if it is difficult – when it is offered in grace.

FORMATION

When we in the seminary are graceful stewards of our material, and when we introduce it to the students in a way to increase the size of their interior space, we make a contribution to their formation as spiritual leaders.

We help them become theocentric humans. They need to know that they will not be fully at home anywhere but in God. To be at home in God is to be at home in all of creation. It is to be at home in the mountains of extreme spiritual joy, on the plains of daily duty, and in the wilderness suffering. It is to live as if God is not only in the sense of presence but also in the sense of absence. We help them

know both *kataphatic* theology, which is what we can say and sing, and *apophatic* theology, which is an affirmation of silence and submission. To be a theocentric leader is to be one who can take the whole of creation – both its abundance of silence and darkness, and its abundance of word and light – as a gift from the creating God.

To be a person who grows in God, the leader must not only *mentally know*, but also *know in practice* the disciplines that shape that centered space. Those disciplines are multiple, but there are a few I believe to be critical.

One is the *discipline of detail* – a disciplined attentiveness to the created reality that embraces us. This discipline listens deep down to the creating center of silence.

Another is the *discipline of hunger* – hungering for a whisper that assures us of presence in the midst of our fear of the abyss. Fasting from food and language opens deep interior spaces.

Another is *disciplined hospitality* to the stranger – openness to what we fear with the confidence that we will meet God even in our fear. Strangers stretch and feed us.

Another is the *disciplined practice of Sabbath* – openness to time that does not manipulate but celebrates. People are not managed but enjoyed.

Another is the *discipline of prayerful study* – careful work to discover the wisdom of the ages in the traditions of the faith. Mental expansion opens the heart to greater reverence for the creating God.

Yet another is the *discipline of humor* – possible only in genuine humility. Humor is a holy perspective that keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously and thus enables us to survive with grace in the crazy complex creation God has given us as home.

When we who teach model these practices, and when we steward our material well, we will help students discover the God-centered reality that has a Jesus shape. A Jesus-shaped center helps a person become what Edwin Friedman calls a “self-differentiated person.” Friedman contends that leaders of spiritual communities must see themselves as separate and individual, not just an extension of past expectations or current desires. When a person is centered in God, she is a “non-anxious presence” whose demeanor helps reduce

the anxiety of those with whom she works. Decisions made in the absence of intense anxiety are usually better decisions.

To have the strength and courage to minister on the margins requires that one not only accept that creation for what it is, but love that creation in the same way that Jesus did. A Jesus-shaped theology is one that is structured to love in the warmth of tender embrace and in the agony of terrible pain and death. It is one who endures through the wedding parties and the wilderness sufferings. It is a love that is merciful and does not judge another unworthy of God's gift of love. A Jesus-shaped love is one that is tenacious in wiping the wounds of the dying even when one is tempted to climb the steeple and test the holy.

CONCLUSION

Last Christmas Day I visited my daughter and her family in Dallas. Before the sun rose, I slipped out past the easy breathing of my year-old grandson. Inhaling the crisp air, I walked the neighborhood as the coffee pots began to brew.

The morning creased the wrinkled clouds on the horizon. The sun pierced the winter cold and bounced off a still autumn tree. The houses, probably thrown up in a week were nested in pick-ups and SUVs. Christmas lights were dripping off the eaves of the houses.

There were large plywood cutouts in many of the yards. There were Santas and elves and candy canes huddled around Marys and baby Jesuses. Angels watched in frozen wonder and wise men knelt in rigid humility.

As I wandered, I realized that this is the world in which we minister. We gather with sincere people who are struggling to discover meaning on the margin between the realms. Like little Elian Gonzalez, they are stretched between worlds that want them. We try to help them discover the holy in that which seems purely commercial. We care for people who struggle to discover what is worth their allegiance. We cry with them when their trust in the world they've constructed collapses around them. We help them sort

through the debris of shattered idols looking for sacred sand for folding into a new structure. We laugh with them when they discover the folly of assumed power. We struggle with them when what they thought to be sacred was found to be hollow and without sustaining presence. We ache with them as they watch the certitude of faith sink into the mystery of confusion. We hold them when life comes unglued and they do not have the energy to hold themselves.

In living in the community of faith as a person living on the margin, we seek to help those with whom we work discover the grace that creates and sustains enlarging interior space. We offer perspectives which come through the lens of our faith in the God who acts in creation to create and recreate life within the divine image and destiny. That perspective offers hope in darkness and transformation of suffering into blessing for the world.

This is not always an easy task, but it is the task of those who respond to the call to ministry. It is a task that is exciting and challenging, satisfying and exhausting, and requires people who are seeking the life of the spirit – a large life of growing and grace. That is the kind of person we seek to educate and form as we minister on the margin between our tradition and discipline and the church in which God is calling the faithful to bless the world.

