

# Intersections

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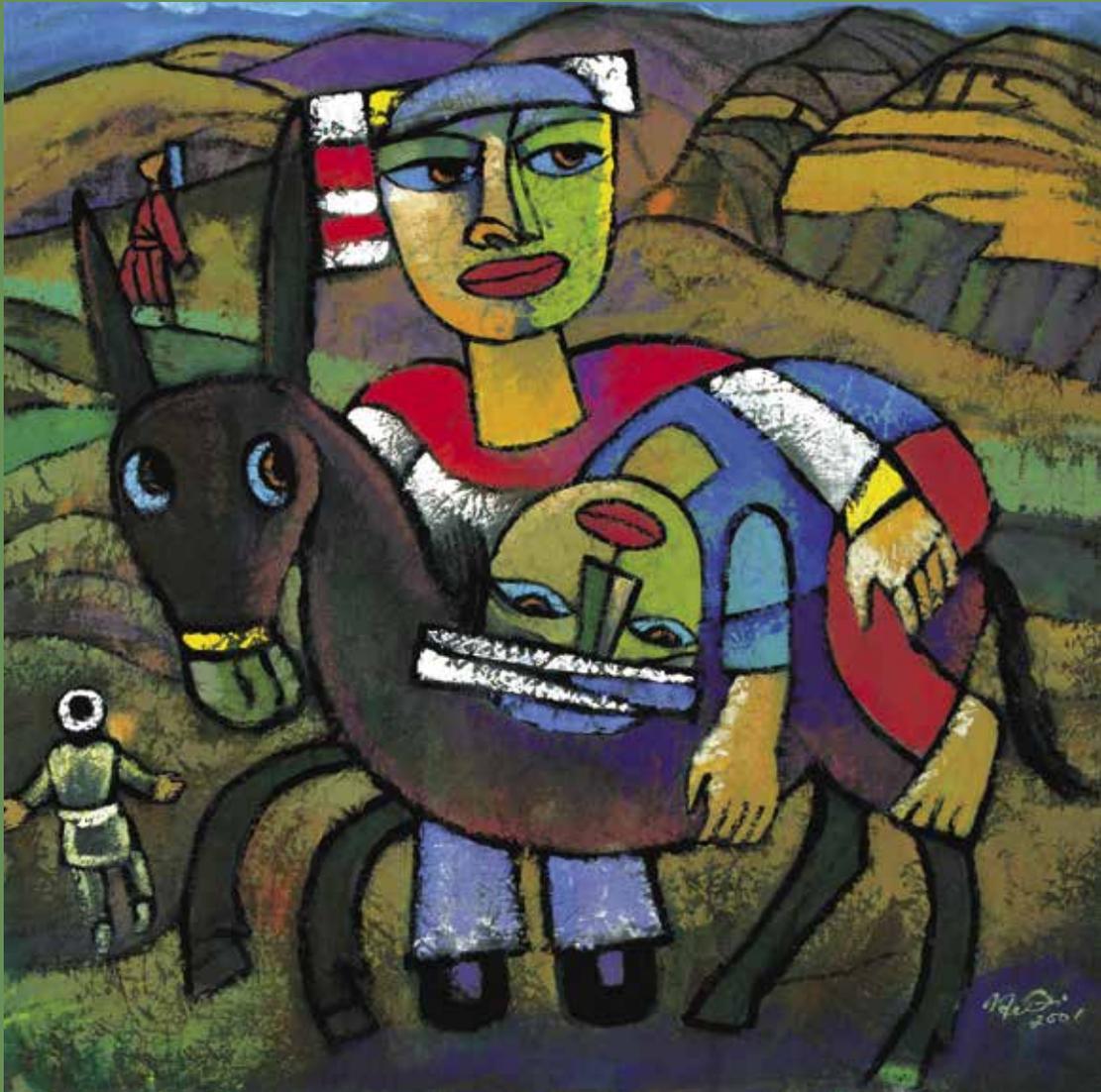
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SPRING 2021

# Intersections

Faith, Learning, and the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education



IN THIS ISSUE

## Learning Love of Neighbor

**Intersections** is a publication by and largely for the academic communities of the twenty-seven institutions that comprise the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU). Each issue reflects on the **intersection** of faith, learning, and teaching within Lutheran higher education. It is published by the NECU, and has its home in the Presidential Center for Faith and Learning at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, the institutional sponsor of the publication. **Intersections** extends and enhances discussions fostered by the annual Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference, together lifting up the vocation of Lutheran colleges and universities. It aims to raise the level of awareness among faculty, staff, and administration about the Lutheran heritage and church-relatedness of their institutions, especially as these **intersect** with contemporary challenges, opportunities, and initiatives.

## About the Cover and Artist

**Dr. He Qi**

***Good Samaritan***

He Qi hopes to help change the “foreign image” of Christianity in China by using artistic language and, at the same time, to supplement Chinese art the way Buddhist art did in ancient times. Biblical events, themes, and images permeate most of Dr. He Qi’s paintings.

His brilliant, colorful and highly contemporary paintings emerge unmistakably from ongoing Chinese contexts. He Qi blends Chinese folk customs and traditional Chinese painting with the western art of the Middle and Modern Ages, but adds his own spin, techniques, and style. He Qi’s art is thus a fusion of many traditions; one can find traces of medieval and Renaissance art, as well as the traditional Chinese crafts of paper cutting and weaving and hints of surrealism.

Currently a California resident, He Qi studied at Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing Art Institute in China, and Hamburg Art Institute in Germany. He is currently Artist-in-Residence at Fuller Theological Seminary (California) and a distinguished visiting professor at the Art Institute of RUC (Renmin University of China, Beijing).

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# From the Publisher



To celebrate being fully vaccinated (and my wife's birthday), my wife and I took a brief road trip to visit fully vaccinated friends outside of Louisville, Kentucky. During the drive, I heard an NPR news report about a podcast composed of diary entries written by teenagers during COVID-19. A

few of the teenagers read their own entries for the report. The readings expressed many feelings and described many experiences, but their diary entries seemed to focus on the anxiety they felt over having acted in self-interested or self-protective ways in response to the pandemic, instead of acting for the welfare of others. One teenager wrote in her diary of guilt about simply stepping outside. She knew that even a walk—for which she longed—during the height of the pandemic's shelter-in-place orders might exacerbate spread of the disease in her community.

I do not know whether any of the diarists were Christians or whether their moral perspective had been shaped by Christian teaching, as absorbed from their families' culturally Christian history. I do know, however, that their comments reminded me of the fraught history of Christians struggling to live out the ethic of love espoused by Jesus.

The Christian story includes a long history of missteps in the name of loving service to others. Some early Christians falsely understood that self-giving required a form of self-loathing, almost equating Christianity with

masochism. Christians have at other times haughtily delivered assistance to others mindlessly or sometimes arrogantly. Think here of the concept of noblesse oblige or the soiled clothing left at Salvation Army donation boxes.

It is not only Christians who have been challenged by the call to love others for the sake of the common good. A fictional example of the struggle all around us is the character of Doug Forcett in the television sitcom *The Good Place*. In *The Good Place*, people lived unaware that a point system for doing good for others determined their placement into the "good place" or the "bad place" after death. The exception was Doug. He had figured out the system and was famous among the bad place demons for doing so. But as a result, Doug struggled in life with how to do enough "good." He lived a life of self-giving to the point that he was terrified to do anything for his own benefit because it might land him in the bad place. The theme is not an uncommon one as folks try to actualize the call to love others.

How does one embrace and actualize a loving, working concern for others with integrity and even with joy? Most persons in Christian and other religious or moral traditions have struggled honestly with the ideal of having a loving, working concern for others and the common good, like the teenagers who recorded their struggles in diaries during the pandemic. This is certainly true of the persons at NECU institutions during 2020 and 2021. The pandemic compels us all to consider how to put into action practices that enable our institutions to function without putting the common good of the wider community at risk. Reflecting on the experience will help build a better future, and this issue of *Intersections* is a step on the way.

**Mark Wilhelm** is the Executive Director of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities.

ABBYLYNN HELGEVOLD

# Teaching as an Expression of a Love Ethic

My introduction to vocational reflection came rather late. Prior to coming to Wartburg, my own experiences in higher education, both as a student and an instructor, were shaped by the culture of large, public, research-focused institutions. Up until my third full year of teaching, I had no direct experience with vocational guidance or mentorship, though as an ethicist and scholar of religion I often found myself working with ideas and questions closely tied to the concept of vocation. Fortunately, in 2016 I was able to participate in a vocation-focused Leadership Academy supported by the administration at my previous institution. Over the course of that year, I remember feeling embarrassed by the newness of my own vocational insights. As I dove deeper into my own vocational questions and quest, I was drawn to the powerful ethical pull of love. This call to love is expanded on most strikingly by the Danish Lutheran philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, but also elucidated by other religious and philosophical perspectives. Over time, the challenge and potential of *living in a loving way* became the lens through which I understood my personal and professional calling.

At first, I was nervous about exploring this at a public institution; talk of love seems beyond the constraints of the more rational and neutral values of our public spaces. As an instructor in religious studies at a public institution, I strove to make sense of what this could or should look like within a curriculum dedicated solely to the academic

study of religion. And, in all honesty, I was also anxious about appearing naïve or being caricatured as an uncritical, new-agey, peace-loving, hippie type. Of course, the last of these fears is almost laughable; anyone who has seriously investigated and/or experienced love in the context of our moral lives understands that choosing to love is one of the hardest things we do as humans.



“Anyone who has seriously investigated and/or experienced love in the context of our moral lives understands that choosing to love is one of the hardest things we do as humans.”

Still, I remain drawn to the idea of love as a virtue and a responsibility; in it is a bold affirmation of fundamental goodness that is life-giving in its generosity. It is also transformative in its challenge to life-numbing and destructive habits and practices. Education as an expression of love is education that is accessible to all in light

**Abbylynn Helgevold** is the Board of Regents Distinguished Professor of Ethics and assistant professor of religion at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, where she teaches courses in ethics, religion, and philosophy. Education and pedagogy are her enduring passions. In addition to starting this work on teaching as an act of love, her recent research focuses on macroaggressions from a virtue ethical point of view.

of their inherent and equal value; it is life affirming in its capacity to nurture and challenge; and it is grounded in an acceptance that goes deeper than performative concerns about success and failure.

Adopting an ethic of love as my basic orientation has greatly impacted my teaching and broader professional vision. When the opportunity to join the faculty at Wartburg College emerged, and as I came to learn more about the mission and vision of Wartburg and the distinctive qualities of Lutheran higher education, I found myself inspired by educational principles that aligned so well with my own calling. It is a great privilege to be able to teach and serve in a setting that is committed to an approach to education centered in the whole person, one that directly embraces ideals of interdependence and reciprocal human flourishing and that challenges destructive, culturally reinforced, judgments about worthiness and practices of exclusion in an effort to foster deep learning (NECU 8). Despite making this transition in 2020, during a time of great collective stress and upheaval, I remain inspired.

## Love and Critical Inclusion

One of the reasons an ethic of love is so appealing and challenging is because it is maximally inclusive. However, we all know that articulating principles and realizing them by living them out in our policies, deeds, and choices are different things. This is as true for institutions as it is for individuals. In the field of ethics, one of the most perplexing and challenging questions we

“A loving orientation to inclusivity and genuine acceptance acts as a prophetic plumb line against which we can measure our beliefs, attitudes, practices, and policies.”

face is the question of integrity—how does one come to consistently align one’s values and ideals with one’s choices and actions? Recently, this gap between ideals and actions has been highlighted by ongoing concerns about the persistence of cultures of exclusion and inhospitality despite professed values of inclusion, diversity,

equity and hospitality. A loving orientation to inclusivity and genuine acceptance acts as a prophetic plumb line (see Amos 7) against which we can measure our beliefs, attitudes, practices, and policies. An ethic of love is always calling for greater inclusion; imbedded in this call is the hopeful confidence in its possibility. When our failure to measure up is revealed, we are called to change course.

Already in my first year, I have been able to meet and work with colleagues who share a common concern to shift the culture toward greater inclusion. In addition to the task forces, councils, and formal and informal conversations, several of us are participating in a year-long inclusive pedagogy faculty seminar. Together we have been reading, sharing resources and experiences, and reflecting on our own teaching practices. We have begun to implement changes in our teaching. We have been called to examine our own habits, assumptions, and practices in an effort to gain a better understanding of the ways that we contribute to exclusionary practices that cut off access to and limit opportunities for deep learning experiences. In my own case, I have had to question the overall accessibility of my course as I redesign coursework, adopt new formats for assigned readings, and adapt instructional materials in an effort to make opportunities for learning genuinely open to every student in my class. I have been challenged to more deeply consider the impact of my students’ cultural backgrounds and educational histories on their ability to engage with course material and to connect with me as their instructor.

As Kevin Gannon claims in his “teaching manifesto,” this work is radically transformative and it is hard. Sustaining it requires clarity about core values and principles and a vision of transformation (8). My own source of sustenance in this work is the love ethic expressed in the dual love command, which is compellingly elucidated by Søren Kierkegaard in *Works of Love*. It is clear that the values of love and neighborliness are at the root of Lutheran higher education. For those of us who are motivated by such values, I’d like to suggest that we weave the language of love into our efforts toward inclusion as both a source of inspiration for and critique of our efforts.

Kierkegaard was gifted with an ability to *call out* his readers for their complacency and inauthenticity, while at

the same time *calling them into* spaces of honest reflection and reorientation. My first encounter with Kierkegaard felt a little like a punch in the gut followed by an intense moment of clarity and a call to honor the power of the demand. I had never appreciated or felt it quite that way before. Though

“It is clear that the values of love and neighborliness are at the root of Lutheran higher education.”

nothing can quite describe the process, it seems to me now like that THX audio sound in a movie theater (remember those?) when things begin to resound in their clarity. What once was a smattering of ideas and concepts became clearer, and more significant, than it ever had before. What I had experienced was a radical shift in perspective, which has been with me ever since.

## Upbuilding through Education

One of the most meaningful ways that Kierkegaard’s thought shaped my own love ethic was through his reflections on the statement in 1 Corinthians 8:1 that “love builds up.” In reflecting on what it means to say that love “builds up,” Kierkegaard underscores the importance of our presuppositions. Love in its true expression will presume and affirm a goodness already present in the other. This affirmation builds the other up. Love, in its generosity, leads with affirmation, and upbuilding love consists in this affirmation. To be built up is to be strengthened and empowered; it is to experience being welcomed and accepted. When you are loved by another, Kierkegaard states, “even when you doubt yourself, doubt that there is love in you, [the loving person] is loving enough to presuppose it.” Through this presupposition you will be liberated from the weight of this doubt to trust in the goodness that is affirmed by this love (224).

Kierkegaard here reminds his readers that we love best when we bring forth love in others by *presupposing its presence* in the very ground of their being. To cultivate upbuilding love requires us to turn inward and examine our own presuppositions or assumptions about others and

it challenges us to start from a place of affirmation and acceptance. There is great power in this. In an educational setting, this presupposition acts as a counter-narrative to a range of destructive messages about worthiness, value, and lack of belonging that serve to exclude. A truly inclusive educational setting will be one in which participants are built up in this deeper sense. The affirmation expressed in upbuilding can go a long way toward supporting students’ agency as they understand themselves to be valued members of a learning community.

Using upbuilding as our plumb line, we ask: how often do we come across instances that do not measure up? How often do we, usually unintentionally, communicate messages that tear down and exclude? Do our assignment policies and grading practices communicate to students that they are here to be judged and to have their shortcomings pointed out in a way that amplifies their concerns about worth and belonging—or do they communicate a message of support and inclusion? Because upbuilding is tied to our presuppositions, Kierkegaard reminds his readers that anything we do or say has the potential to build up or tear down. When we look carefully at things like our syllabus language, what presuppositions about our students are revealed? Do they align with our shared educational principles?

One effective inclusive pedagogical practice that can contribute to creating an upbuilding educational setting is collaborative expectation setting. By encouraging students to establish mutually agreed upon expectations about the learning environment, we affirm students’ interest in their own learning and their experiential wisdom. This presupposes that their experiences and insights are valuable and that they have a genuine interest in their own education. As Kevin Gannon notes, such practices can help instructors become better able to “use [their power] in ways that work for, rather than against, student learning” (88). Students are invited in as allies and collaborative learning partners. When instead we give them “paragraphs vividly describing the consequences for a litany of specific cheating scenarios,” we communicate that “we are expecting them to do something wrong, that we expect them to pounce on any opportunity to game the system, that we see them as adversaries” (118). In moving toward greater collaboration with students we move toward more opportunities

for upbuilding. If we lead from affirmation, what we say and how we say it changes, and these shifts in perspective can go a long way toward creating an environment that manifests genuine hospitality and inclusion.

“If we presuppose and affirm the good in our students rather than rushing to judgment, we are likely to learn more about who they are, what is going on in their lives, and how to support them.”

Keeping our attention focused on upbuilding can be especially important when things “go wrong.” When mistakes or poor choices are made, it can be easy to slide into what Gannon calls an “adversarial” stance that further serves to undermine deep learning experiences, growth, and engagement (116). Addressing problems with students that range from poor attendance to plagiarism or cheating from a place of affirmation opens up possibilities for problem solving and supporting agency. If we presuppose and affirm the good in our students rather than rushing to judgment, we are likely to learn more about who they are, what is going on in their lives, and how to support them. Perhaps they’ve disengaged from their own learning because they overburdened by repeated microaggressions that consistently serve to point out their lack of belonging. Maybe their anxieties about how to pay for their education are overwhelming their capacity to prioritize their learning experiences. Shifting from a punitive to an upbuilding stance changes the nature of the relationship we have with our students; it invites us into a space where we can acknowledge that the lives we live are complicated and difficult and that we are each more than the sum of our poor choices and mistakes.

## Concluding Reflections

My inclusive pedagogy seminar has made its way through a range of discussions about the need for and examples of inclusive pedagogical practices. Throughout, I have been continuously struck by the ever-present need to remain humble and critically reflective about our own assumptions and presuppositions. These are at the root of everything—and what grows out of that root makes all the difference.

Unexamined presuppositions can work to sustain exclusionary practices that have an enduring impact on our students and our environment. As we strive to reduce and remove our harmful assumptions, we do well to focus on strengthening those that have the capacity to build the other up. The Lutheran theological tradition that informs the “common calling” of the NECU emphasizes a “radical freedom” that consists in “a freedom from false ideas about earning one’s own worthiness and a freedom for a life of service to and with the neighbor” (NECU 4). Embracing the freedom to choose the way of upbuilding love in our interactions with others is one important means by which we can create inclusive interactions, which in turn extend that experience of radical freedom to each of the students we encounter.

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CARLA FLENGERIS

# Keeping Close from a Distance: Pandemic Reflections of a Library Coordinator

The library at Luther College, University of Regina is the smallest of four academic libraries on campus. It employs me, a part-time assistant, and four student assistants who keep the library operating in the evenings and on weekends. This year, Luther College celebrates fifty years of being on the university campus as a federated college of the University of Regina. But our history actually extends to 1913 with the founding of Luther Academy, a high school which relocated to our present city and began offering university level courses in 1926.

As I write this, we are approaching what our chaplain calls our “COVIDversary.” At 5:00 pm on Friday, March 20, 2020, I closed our library doors for what we thought would be a few weeks. Although the Spanish Flu had temporarily

and needed stability and reliable information. It was the very void a library was meant to fill. And I had just locked the doors. Ours had been one of the last units on campus to remain open—my staff and I were still madly scanning, packing, loading everything we could identify as crucial for our students’

success. Taking a 4100 square foot library and moving it, its collection and services online or to our individual homes was not easy. Additionally, this was happening at a particularly critical point in the winter semester: research papers and projects were in full swing, classroom library instruction was in peak demand. This was the time of the semester when I typically cleared my schedule to accommodate one task only—to sit down with students one-on-one, ensuring they had a focused research question, guiding them towards the resources they needed, and helping them manage their anxieties along the way. I took my cues from the Luther College mission and vision: “a commitment to retaining the personal atmosphere, individual attention, and sense of community that only a small university can offer.” How was I going to retain this “personal atmosphere” or nurture this



“How was I going to retain this ‘personal atmosphere’ or nurture this ‘sense of community’ from behind a computer screen in my basement?”

shut down Luther Academy in December 1918, this was the first time in the University of Regina’s history that people had been sent home. Our university community was hurt

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“sense of community” from behind a computer screen in my basement? I was a Library Coordinator without a library. What was I coordinating?

Within hours, it became clear: I was coordinating information delivery, just in new and different ways. University operations across the province moved into virtual spaces, but university libraries continued to provide vital services with barely any disruption. With the help of the other three academic libraries, my own staff, and the immeasurable expertise of my campus library colleagues, we embraced new buzzwords: *pivot*, *mobilize*, and *touch base*. We rolled out chapter and article scans, a curbside pick-up system and home delivery service of our physical collection. We streamlined our virtual consultation methods, revamped our events to online formats, and upped our social media game. We switched our instruction delivery methods to Zoom, made videos and LibGuides. We promoted the existence of our online collections, bought new ones, and tapped into resource-sharing partnerships, such as HathiTrust. We stressed the benefits of institutional repositories, open access and open educational resources (and watched those benefits finally “sink in” to faculty), and held workshops on how to design them. We increased the frequency of our regular meetings and formed new working groups.

“Something had not ‘mobilized,’ or ‘pivoted’ to the digital realm—an important group of people with which I had yet to ‘touch base.’”

I saw my campus colleagues (albeit on screen) more often than I ever had before, and the synergy was amazing and heartwarming. Many of us envision these online services continuing for years to come, regardless of when or to what extent in-person instruction resumes—precisely because they are so valuable. Libraries had been preparing for this shift for decades and I am incredibly proud of how nimble we were and continue to be. So, why was I left with this feeling that the online universe was completely out of sync with the spirit of my job? Something had not “mobilized,” or “pivoted” to the digital realm—an important group of people with which I had yet to “touch base.”

The start of a new semester at the University of Regina means, for me, a new set of library “regulars”—that little group of students and library users who are waiting for me at the door when I arrive to open it. (The makeup of the group changes every semester, along with course schedules.) Within a few weeks, this group learns my opening procedures and silently starts to pitch in: the first few people through the door turn on the workstation computers, someone carries in the daily newspapers and hangs them on the old wooden rods, one might even slide a ream of paper from behind my desk and start filling the photocopiers and printers. I rarely know their names, they rarely know each others’ names, and apart from pleasantries, there is little or no interaction. But what they all have in common is a need for early morning privacy and isolation in proximity to one another. I realize now that this group was practicing social distancing before it was a thing. I would wait until the third or fourth week into the semester before introducing a Friday morning ritual—a box of doughnuts that we would pass around as we each quietly settled into our desks and daily routines. We would become fixtures in each others’ lives for the rest of the semester. It was a community.

Another custom at the start of each fall semester is first-year orientation. In fact, in addition to Orientation Day, Luther College offers an advanced, two-day program called UPREP. This past August/September, I welcomed these new students and introduced them to campus libraries via Zoom. I never saw their faces come through the library door. I never learned who I should keep the tiniest watchful eye on for signs of homesickness. They are now a few weeks away from crossing the threshold into becoming second year students, but they have yet to see the library as a place to gather and to seek out answers and connections. I wonder if they ever will.

Part of my daily routine in the library is to get up from my desk at the top of every hour and walk through the entire place. I meander through every row of computers, every row of study tables, every aisle of bookshelves. It is not a patrol. I am not concerned with what is on their computer screens, or what may be going on in that blind spot in the stacks. I pretend to push in chairs that have gone astray or scoop up paper coffee cups left behind. But the real purpose is to try to make eye contact and smile at every student in there.

Much of the time, I come back to my office with little more than an armful of old coffee cups. I have resented these walks more times than I care to admit. They are disruptions to my work and the more pressing tasks. Nevertheless, I keep to this hourly schedule because of those times I get smiles back. And at the next hour, on my next walk, one of the smilers will make eye contact first. And the following hour, they will shyly ask for help finding journal articles. In the library world, this is a model of library service known as “roving” or “roaming” reference librarianship. For me, it is something far more natural—being in the same space.

Once the student has made contact, I pull up a chair to conduct a “reference interview” (another unnatural library term). The end goal of these interactions is for the student to walk away with the skills and/or information they need—another satisfied customer. But these experiences are so much more. When the student describes the assignment to me, what topic they have chosen, their plan of attack (or lack thereof), I can decipher how well they are doing in the course, how well they are doing at university in general (whether they are thriving or hanging by a thread), and if they need additional support (academic or otherwise).

These hourly walks seek out the students waiting to *ask* for help, but also occasionally reveal *cries* for help. Despite being communal spaces, libraries also offer quiet privacy and often attract people, like the regular morning crowd, needing a combination of both. The student who is fast asleep on their laptop is working two jobs to pay for the courses that they are too tired to attend; the student sobbing into their hands has just received their first failing grade and the hopes (or parents’ hopes) of med school might be

“After thousands of hourly walks, you learn when to mind your own business and when to put a hand on a shoulder.”

over; the student making tiny cuts to their forearm misses family overseas. After thousands of hourly walks, you learn when to mind your own business and when to put a hand on a shoulder.

Whether these encounters are standard reference interviews or an accompanied (and somewhat urgent) walk down

the hall to our pastor or to counseling services, they spark a relationship. The student who gets a good grade because of their stellar journal articles will come in to give me high fives. The student who had to have the tough conversation with their parents about med school will come in to tell me “it wasn’t so bad” (but they could still use a hug). None of this translates to a virtual space. I have spent much of this pandemic mourning the loss of these relationships, trying to figure out how to light those sparks from afar.

“I have spent much of this pandemic mourning the loss of these relationships.”

Something else I have done during this pandemic is worry. Our closure is a temporary measure that keeps all of us safe. I know that. Nevertheless, our campus counseling services have never been busier; student anxiety is through the roof; academic misconduct is at an all-time high (most studies cite stress as the number one predictor for student cheating). Not all students (or faculty or staff, for that matter) are thriving in this online environment. We all know the challenges—loss of loved ones, loss of financial stability, loss of social supports and childcare supports, inadequate access to technology. It is a long list. Students have never needed our support more than they do now. If those hourly walks have taught me anything, it is that students are hardwired to wait for us to come to them. They will seek out help if they are desperate but would prefer that we make the first move.

The majority of students who seek my help now, in this virtual space, are usually upper-level students that I had already established relationships with (pre-pandemic) and they typically reach me by email. My contact information and availability are well-advertised. I have struggled to reach those first-years. I have struggled to reach the ones who may have stumbled upon us looking for a communal, private space.

I have tried. Early on, I ended each Zoom instruction session by staring straight into the camera and explaining that I was here to help, and not just with the stuff we had spent the last hour discussing. I think the only thing that sparked were feelings of unease—it probably came across

as creepy. A campus library colleague had moderate success working with an instructor to make a 15-minute Zoom chat with a librarian mandatory to their participation mark. When I do hear from student names I do not recognize, I am thrilled and I sign off my responses with something like: "I know you're busy with this paper, but when you have a minute, I'd like to know how you're doing. And please come in and introduce yourself when we're back on campus." Sometimes I never hear from them again—like walking back to my desk with the empty cups. But sometimes I receive lengthy responses—the spark. I can now slide up the chair.

As I reflect on this COVIDersary, I realize how much I miss those hourly walks, and that they were my way of practicing servant leadership. When they led to a reference interview, I never told students what their thesis should be, nor did I read their scholarly articles for them. When non-academic trouble bubbled up, I did not counsel, or offer to talk to professors, parents, or employers. I was never a servant to students, a superior, a guardian, or even a friend. And I do not need to be any of those things now. I listen, I am curious, I take their concerns seriously, and I guide them to the resources and expertise they need. I *can* still do that from my basement. Many library workers deeply feel our responsibility to teach students something (as we should); however, at the end of this pandemic, what will matter most will not be that they learned how to cite a book in APA, but that they learned, perhaps by example, to support, trust, and advocate for each other. That is what I will spend the rest of this pandemic doing: supporting them through the ways I know how (information gathering,

evaluating, delivery), trusting that they will ask for help when they need it, and advocating for them when professors and administrators forget that schoolwork cannot always be a student's top priority.

The adaptability demonstrated by academic libraries deserves to be applauded and I am proud of my part in that. But, to say we did not miss a beat suggests that we are merely information repositories. When we lost our physical space, we lost our community and, for me, it felt like a huge hole at the center of the entire operation. The next few months will be focused on uncertainty, health and safety,

"I realize now that those hourly walks were not disruptions to my work, they were my work, and I will never again take them for granted."

and the current and potential budget cuts that need to be managed. I know it will take some time to build back that unspoken, unacknowledged camaraderie of the morning "regulars." Demonstrating our importance to students who completed their first-year without setting foot in a library will be challenging. I will come up with new ways of expressing a smile behind a mask and when I pull up a chair, it will be from a safe distance. I will rein in the high-fives, the hugs, the communal boxes of doughnuts. But, I realize now that those hourly walks were not disruptions to my work, they *were* my work, and I will never again take them for granted.

SARAH RUBLE

# Preaching in Christ Chapel on Yom HaShoah: Reflections on Interfaith Relations at a Lutheran College

How does a Christian preach a homily for Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day? An invitation in 2019 from the Gustavus Adolphus Bonnier Chair of Jewish Studies presented me with that question. The chaplains' office at Gustavus had scheduled the Yom HaShoah service in Christ Chapel. My colleague, who was organizing the service, decided that since the event was being held in front of a cross in *Christ* Chapel, a Christian should preach. Fair enough, but what to say?

What follows is my homily and then a few reflections about why I chose to speak in a distinctively Christian idiom at a remembrance framed by Jewish tradition and how that might offer one (but only one) way of thinking about interfaith interactions on a Lutheran campus.

## The Yom HaShoah Homily

Today, we are gathered here, in Christ Chapel, before this enormous cross, to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day. I'm tempted, on this day, to ignore whose name we stand under and what we stand in front of. It seems, in many ways, like a good day for general religiosity, for what is in common. But that might be too easy for those of us who claim a tradition wrapped up in the horrifying history of antisemitism, a tradition whose few righteous Gentiles

cannot outweigh the many more whose apathy and collaboration made what we commemorate today possible.

So, in this place and before these symbols, I want to ask what it would mean for Christians to be able, truly able, to pray with Jews the prayer we just prayed. To pray to a God "who is full of mercy, who is Justice of widows and Father of orphans." To pray that that God would not be silent. What does it mean for Christians to pray about justice with Jews, to pray to a God of justice with Jews on a day we remember the Holocaust?

Not infrequently—in classes, in churches—I hear something that goes like this: the God of the Hebrew Bible is wrathful, but the God of the New Testament is loving and forgiving. This comment tells me that the speaker has not read very far in either the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, that he or she has certainly never gotten far in the Psalms or to the book of Revelation. It is also a reminder of one way Christians have derided Jews and Judaism: by depicting Jews as interested in wrath and punishment—even as Christians used the comparison to rationalize Christian's own wrath toward and punishment of Jews.



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But the comment is also, I think, a very telling Christian self-diagnosis, albeit an unintentional one. God's wrath, when it appears in Hebrew Bible or New Testament, is usually related to God's justice. God's wrath is not that of an arbitrary tyrant, suddenly flying off the handle, but that of good God steadfastly opposed to that which harms others, particularly the weak and vulnerable. God's wrath is, then, part of God's ultimate purpose of rectification, of saying no to all that is wrong with the cosmos, to making right the world. That many Christians separate the wrath of God from the love and forgiveness of God is a tell. It tells that we all too often want to be justified, want our own justification, but we don't really want justice, particularly not if it will cost us anything. We want forgiveness, not rectification; we want ourselves *declared* right, not the world, and ourselves, *made* right.

It is, I assume, fairly obvious why, say, a German Christian in 1945 might be more interested in forgiveness than rectification. It might be less obvious why any of us in this chapel who are Christians would have the same problem. None of us were Nazis. We were not the SS. We may feel like we can pray this prayer without a problem.

But I wonder. The orthodox rabbi Irving Yitzchak Greenberg said that the Holocaust was a revelation for both Jews and Christians (249). He meant that in the traditional sense of revelation, of something new being revealed in the world. I too would call it revelation, but perhaps in a slightly different sense. The Holocaust revealed us Christians to ourselves. It showed us our traditions and our faith, not as we say that they are but as they are, as they have appeared in the world. And what it showed was horrifying. It showed that, for most Christians during the 1930s and 1940s, so much of what we say happens through Christian faith and practice didn't happen.

Baptism did not teach us to recognize a family that isn't about blood and kin—or blood and soil—but one made and named by God who started that family with Abraham and never abandoned it. Eucharist did not form us in God's way of self-giving love. Prayer did not open us to the cry of the hurt and the oppressed.

No, I wasn't a Nazi, I wasn't in the SS. But I'm invested, deeply invested, in a tradition revealed by the Holocaust to be largely morally spent or incredibly malleable to evil or—and this one is terrifying—an incubator of the hatred that

made the gas chambers possible. A tradition that too often becomes allied or even identical with nationalism in all its hideous forms. I've committed myself to being formed by a tradition that so poorly formed a lot of people who I have to imagine were a lot like me that they cheered a madman, ignored the disappearance of their neighbors, and, in some cases, ushered them into gas chambers. And it is finally that that for me is so hard to look at. That there are things to which I am deeply committed, beliefs or ways of seeing the world to which I cling that might be deeply broken in ways I might not fully recognize. So, please, for me God, justification, not justice.

That may all sound like an argument against Christianity *en toto*. It isn't. What it is is an argument against a Christianity that only hears, for itself, God's *yes*. Karl Barth, the twentieth-century theologian, argued that the Cross was God's *no* contained within God's *yes*. It is God's *no* to all that is wrong with the cosmos and God's *yes* to redeeming the whole creation. Christians are often really good at half of that. Or, better put, really good at accepting half of it for ourselves and leaving the other half for other people. Guess which half. I think in order to pray well with Jews—as well as with any other people Christians have wronged, particularly when we have done it explicitly as Christians—we have to be willing to hear God's *no*, God's *Nein* to us. We have to hear that there are parts of us that cannot be part of a rectified world. There are ways of our being, ways of our seeing things that cannot be part of a final justice.

Yes, there is ultimately a yes, but it isn't a yes to everything we are without remainder. Rather, it is a yes to God making us the kind of people who can live in a rectified world. It is God's assurance that, in God and through God, all shall be well and all manner of things shall be made well. God will make things well—which means that I do not get to hold onto my sicknesses, no matter how dear they are to me. To pray this prayer I have to be willing to pray that those parts of me, even the ones I treasure, that cannot be part of a world made right will cease to be. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he talked about cutting off a hand or gouging out an eye—an interesting part of the New Testament for those who think Jesus never said anything that wasn't nice. God's *yes* to justice and *no* to all that stands in its way might demand amputation for us.

I'm not exactly sure what that will mean, what limbs we might lose. And maybe that is as it should be, that one of the things to which God says *Nein* is to a Christian tendency to certainty about ourselves. Not about God, but about ourselves. A certainty that suggested to Christians, fairly early on, that we didn't need to learn from Jews, that we only needed to talk at them, to tell them how they had missed the messiah. A certainty that we could understand a first century Jewish man without help from third-century and tenth-century and twentieth-century Jews. A certainty that we were privileged interpreters of our own virtue, our own godliness. A certainty that told us that we had no need to ask other people what it was like to have to live among us.

I'll admit that something about preaching in this chapel, really any chapel, on Holocaust Remembrance Day feels wrong. It feels wrong to be in front of a cross, in front of the table, in front of the font. Maybe not these very Christian things today of all days.

But, on the other hand, it is I think right to lay out Christian practice and preaching in front of Jewish friends and colleagues. Not because they need to hear our sermons, but because we need them to hear God's *Nein* to us. If part of what the Holocaust revealed is that we need to hear that no about ourselves and cannot tell it to ourselves, then we need to listen to people who, often to their own horror, know us all too well. We need to listen when they tell us that what we say about God can't be said of the God of Abraham and Isaac so we need to stop saying it, when they tell us that we are making them less so that we might be more, and when they tell us that our way of telling our story makes it sound like neither our story nor our world has need of them. We need to hear what rectification might look like and what it might mean for us from people who know both our capacity for injustice and God's thirst for justice. And then, perhaps, we can truly pray.

## Reflections on the Homily

"Please don't make your homily about the righteous Gentiles," a colleague said to me. I would like to think that she knew I did not really need the advice—that even without it, I would not have used my eight minutes on Holocaust Remembrance Day to talk about "good" Christians—but I also understood why she made the plea. She'd heard a lot

about good Christians from what you might call the "professional" Christians on my campus—those of us (I am one) who by virtue of official position, education, or training, are called upon to explain why the college's Lutheran heritage is good for the college as a whole. We explain that the Lutheran tradition with its emphasis on knowing and loving creation for God's sake provides a firmer foundation for the liberal arts than the market and claim that Luther's theology (as opposed to say, that of the reformer from Geneva) invites the free exploration of ideas and a commitment to religious diversity. Because we know that many of our colleagues come to campus with some wariness about a church-related college, we highlight what is positive in the tradition (everybody say Dag Hammarskjöld!) and our differences with those "other" type of Christians (let the reader understand). We take pains to show that our faith demands justice and compassion, openness and inclusivity. We're good Christians.

As a professional Christian, I think there is a time and a place to emphasize what is positive in our tradition, to assure colleagues that the college's heritage complements the liberal arts and academic freedom. But I also recognize that the desire to emphasize what is good can go wrong. Repeatedly explaining the goods of the tradition can lead us into a defensive posture, a sense that we are under threat (not—mind you—the kind of defensive posture those "other" Christians have, certainly not) while ignoring that we literally own the college ground. It's *Christ Chapel*, after all. This posture, in turn, can tempt us to deflect criticisms of Christianity. Those critiques apply to those "other" Christians. The not good ones. The ones from those *other* institutions with those *other* politics. The unrighteous ones. Yet while the people on our campuses who hear our explanations—the people whose services take place in a multifaith chapel that bears no religious symbols, who probably do not have a religious leader paid by the college on campus, who must miss class for their religious holidays—may experience some of what we say as assuring (we have a multifaith chapel, you can ask for your religious holiday off), they might also find it tone deaf (really, the Christians are playing defense?) and difficult to critique. How do you tell the people who are assuring you that their tradition underwrites all the goods of your college that they aren't always what they imagine themselves?

I had a non-Christian colleague tell me about being stopped on a stairwell by a professional Christian so that the professional Christian could tell her about how good the good Christians had been to her tradition. All while mispronouncing her name.

Christians do have a practice intended to counteract self-deceit: confession. Certainly, on our campus, many of the professional Christians engage in confession as both an ecclesial practice and, sometimes, a professional one. I am a U.S. religious historian. In my classes, I discuss many Christian wrongs.

But the reality of the ecclesial practice of confession is that it is ecclesial—taking place among Christians—and the reality of professional confession is that it takes place in a classroom, where I'm an "expert." Just as I have some choice about what to confess (or what to think about while I intone "what we have done and what we have left undone"), I have control over what books I assign, and what narratives I tell. As historian Lauren Winner notes, all Christian practices have the capacity to deform for they all suffer "characteristic damage," or damage that "is proper to the thing which expresses the damage" (3). Perhaps one way to think about confession and its characteristic damage is that it reinforces the notion that we know what we have done wrong, that we know the truth well enough to tell the truth about ourselves.

I do not see a future in which I will not need to explain the potential goods of the Christian or Lutheran tradition to people on campus. Students, faculty, and staff certainly aren't coming to campus with more knowledge than they used to about Christianity nor with less (understandable) skepticism. But I am also wary of the dynamics created by the need to explain and defend and I am uncertain that the normal modes of "confession" suffice to check Christian self-deceit or that they create space for people well-positioned to catch our falsehoods to tell us about them.

What I do see as a possibility is an occasional practice of non-mutual "confession" by Christians in front of people from other traditions (or no tradition). And, here, confession not necessarily referring to specific harms (when we commit specific harms we should, of course, make specific confessions), but confession in a more Augustinian sense, of a truth-telling about ourselves. We should create time and spaces where we invite people to listen to us tell what

we understand to be the truth about ourselves and then offer to hear them if they say "that is not how we experience you; that is not who we know you to be." To hear them say it and to not protest, to not bring up Bonhoeffer, to not talk about Corrie Ten Boom. I am not necessarily thinking of a formal practice—a ceremony or ritual. Perhaps—to take a pedestrian example—it means that we ask colleagues from other traditions and no tradition to read what we say about our Lutheran heritage or the goods of the Christian tradition in our college materials (ideally, we also compensate them for their time). Or it could be a practice we undertake when circumstances arise—when we are asked to preach for Holocaust Remembrance Day in front of a cross.

To be clear, I am not calling for a mutual exchange. For reasons both historic and theological, I would not call for a mutual truth-telling (remember: preaching about the Holocaust in *Christ Chapel*). Nor am I suggesting a frequent practice. It is not the job of people from other traditions to make Christians honest; it is not their job to tell us about ourselves. Thus, we could only ask for witnesses to our confession as a favor, a gift to us that we could not reciprocate (although we might be able to compensate), one predicated on our certainty (and perhaps that of the giver) that history suggests that we cannot be trusted to name the truth about ourselves by ourselves and that that failure harms us and all who must live with us.

My sermon was, among other things, one attempt to talk truthfully about Christians in front of people well positioned to know if I spoke truthfully. It was, I hope, a recognition that some of what I do in my professional life on my campus, indeed, precisely what I do in service to both my faith and the campus, can deform and malform me. There might be righteous Gentiles. It is dangerous to suppose that we are them.

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LINDSEY LEONARD

# Down and Out: First Year Students Encounter Lutheran Theology

They arrived as they always do: high on independence, terrified of freedom, looking for a place to belong. They carried with them bins, and bags, and boxes full of stuff (so much stuff!) labeled carefully, dutifully, with their name and hall assignment. A printed orientation schedule and a stack of forms tucked neatly in a folder lay on their dashboard. The lanyard around their neck held a college student ID, the ultimate signal of first year status.

They also arrived with cautious eyes above masked noses (for those who didn't need correcting). They carried with them six months of disappointment and heartache; with it, almost unbearable amounts of anticipatory grief. Some didn't bother bringing winter clothing, sure we'd be sending them home before the temperatures ever dropped. Others didn't bother coming at all. The heightened sense of uncertainty created a haze of reluctance; better not get too close, too comfortable, or too confident—knowing all too well how quickly this can all be taken away.

Fall of 2020 required all of us—staff, faculty, students—to reach deep into our (nearly depleted) reservoirs of perseverance. We resumed mitigated life on a college campus in ways that on the surface felt familiar but were often unfulfilling. The triage we found in the Spring was continuing, and some of the greatest concern was felt, specifically, for the first-year students. What a time to move into college, to be met with such a monumental transition during an international health crisis, to be asked to

take on another challenge in an already challenging time.

At Wartburg College, all first-year students are enrolled in a first-year seminar course, called Inquiry Studies or IS 101. In addition to being the cornerstone for the first-year transition, IS 101 seeks to welcome students into an academic community by introducing the value of a liberal education. Curated by the IS 101 teaching team, students interact with an anthology of essays, book chapters, manuscripts, and poems throughout the course. This IS 101 Reader is organized using the college's mission pillars: leadership, service, faith, and learning.

Effective first year seminars center opportunities for active involvement, social integration, personal reflection, personal meaning, and personal validation (Cuseo). Done well, students are met with content and pedagogy that upholds these five learning processes. Recognizing that the circumstances of the world and the environment in which these students were beginning college, and valuing Cuseo's research, we made two additions to the IS 101 Reader just before it was published for the Fall 2020 cohort. The first, a piece written by the Dalai Llama titled, "Prayer is Not Enough," which ran in the *New York*



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*Times*. The second, a reflection and story penned by Paul Kingsnorth titled *Finnegas*.

Through readings and discussion about the coronavirus pandemic, using these two additional works as a backdrop, first year students heard the call for a unified response toward a global crisis. Many could express deep commitment to wearing a mask, following campus policy aimed to mitigate the spread, and holding their community accountable so that everyone could be safe. Even with a student body comprised almost entirely of traditional students (age 18-22), class discussion about remaining vigilant in the fierce protection of those most vulnerable were prevalent; these are not times to be selfish. No matter how uncomfortable, inconvenient, or unwanted this exercise in compassion is, the call to consider and serve the neighbor was a sentiment much discussed and well honored. Consideration and service to the neighbor—a theme had surfaced that would transcend the current topic.

As part of a new community, often more diverse than the homes from which they came, first year students were invited to consider and reflect on stereotypes by reading the transcript of Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie's TedTalk *Danger of a Single Story*. They were also participants in a workshop on microaggressions (what they are, how they happen, what to do when one occurs). Through this IS 101 content, students were called to consider their privileges (everyone has privilege!) and reflect on ways that those identities hold unearned yet clearly given power in our society. Students quickly understood that there is another pandemic plaguing America, and this pandemic wasn't a new one; black people have been fighting the effects of slavery and racism and bigotry for years.

"Consideration and service to the neighbor—a theme had surfaced that would transcend the current topic."

These conversations around racial injustices in our nation are challenging, especially when done in a students' first term. Yet we must be bold in commitment to be a part of the work of antiracism—work that starts in the head,

takes roots in the heart, and serves through the hands. In considering the stereotypes of which they held, students begin to understand their own biases and learn to interrupt their thinking—work of the head. By acknowledging their privilege, they see themselves as both part of the problem and part of the solution—work of the heart. At our predominantly white institution, many of our students have been able to separate themselves from the direct effects of racism. Now, though, they are offered the tools to no longer be complicit in systems that uphold discrimination and white supremacy. Antiracism is work of the hands, and another example for what it means to serve the neighbor.

"Antiracism is work of the hands, and another example for what it means to serve the neighbor."

Every year, a common read is selected campus wide as an opportunity to increase engagement through shared experiences. This year, we selected *Climate Justice* by Mary Robinson. After learning about what climate change is, what contributes to global warming, and what can be done to slow the effects, students discussed Robinson's work, which engages the reader in stories from across the world to illustrate how those who contribute to climate change least are affected by it the most. Students considered how closely climate change reform is connected to policy, how policy is connected to people with power, and how people with power often only have a sliver of narrative for how others live (clear connections here with Adichie's piece). Students reflect on how, beyond the devastating Iowa derecho and some hotter hot days and other colder cold days, their daily lives may be free from the deep pressure to change habits that can clearly impact climate change. However, the truth is clear that communities, tribes, families, and lives depend on a swift and coordinated world-wide effort by all global citizens to prioritize practices that lead to reduced emissions; we *all* must be committed to doing the work so *all* may flourish. Climate justice, too, is care of neighbor.

Each fall, our campus pastor accepts the invitation to speak to the first-year cohort about what it means to

“By recognizing and taking seriously the injustices of climate change, in no longer being complicit in racism, in masking and distancing to protect those with the most weakened immune system, students were interfacing with Lutheran theology, which directly calls us to serve our neighbor.”

be attending a Lutheran institution. Students learn that there was a time that Lutheran institutions were only for Lutheran students and sought to produce Lutheran pastors. However, that is no longer the vocation of Wartburg College (but it is okay if they decide to be Lutheran in the end). Pastor describes that the Lutheran heritage informs a belief that everyone, every student, has a vocation, a calling, a purpose. Because Lutheran theology is rooted in *sola fide* (faith alone), the way to honor God is to live out our commitment through our vocation. Because God’s love and grace comes all the way down to us, we are freed up to go out and serve our neighbor.

By recognizing and taking seriously the injustices of climate change, in no longer being complicit in racism, in masking and distancing to protect those with the most weakened immune system, students were interfacing with Lutheran theology, which directly calls us to serve our neighbor. In embracing this theme, we were all reminded that Jesus’ gift freely given liberates us from reaching for God in attempts to achieve salvation; instead, the Spirit has come all the way down to us, and this “frees us to love

our neighbor and promote the common good” (ELCA). Now, more than ever, we are called to be part of a global response to every pandemic rooted in the “down and out”.

They arrived as they always do. Unsure of the purpose of IS 101, eyes rolling with the consideration of liberal learning as having immense value, weary of what it means to be attending a Lutheran institution. They began to read, think, and write about the many pandemics—not just the most obvious health crisis, but also the pandemics of racism and climate change. They came to see that they are “called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish” (NECU). For our first-year students, the “COVID class”, as well as liberal, Lutheran education as a whole, teaches service, citizenship, connectedness, and compassion. That education has never been more applicable, or more valuable, or more transformative.

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DREW TUCKER

# (Re)Defining Vocation: Gladly Challenging a Vocational Giant



Many students don't arrive at our universities with a clear understanding of vocation, and especially not one that reflects the Lutheran approach to vocation. Some evidence suggests this is because use of the English term *vocation* has dramatically decreased in common parlance since

its height in the sixteenth century (Google). You can do a simple search of this yourself using Google's Ngram Viewer, which analyzes the use of words in tens of millions of print publications since 1500.

In our ecumenical context, confusion also can arise since Roman Catholic traditions typically use *vocation* to refer to the specifically religious callings of priesthood, marriage, or celibacy, while Protestants typically refer to God's call in a broader sense. Since Roman Catholics make up a majority (or at least, a significant minority) of self-identified students on many of our campuses, this almost certainly makes an impact on the conversation. It also puts the onus on NECU institutions to clarify what we mean by vocation and to offer a compelling definition that invites students, faculty, and staff to see vocation through a Lutheran lens.

It seems to me that the greatest challenge is that, often by tacit support or silent disregard, we've ceded the

ground of vocational clarity to other voices in the field. Perhaps the most famous of these vocational gurus is Frederick Buechner, who, in his book *Wishful Thinking*, defines vocation as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (Buechner). Far be it from me, a not famous (though I hope not infamous) college pastor, to challenge this giant in the field of vocation. But as David thought when he faced Goliath, and Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton vocalized on stage, I'm not throwing away my shot. Simply put, Buechner's vocation definition, and specifically his focus on gladness, is insufficient for colleges, universities, and religious institutions in the twenty-first century. Rather than gladness, *meaning* should be the cornerstone of our definition of vocation.

## Important and Insufficient: Experiencing Joy

For most in Gen Z—who comprise the majority of undergraduate students on our campuses—the word *glad* is practically synonymous with happiness. Now, don't get me wrong. I believe there's far too little happiness in our world, especially one plagued with the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism. Gladness is not something we should avoid, nor is it something we should ignore. It is, in fact, what makes Buechner's definition so attractive.

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If there are things that can make me happy and meet the profound needs of the world in which I live, surely I would want to participate in those vocations.

On the one hand, then, taking joy in an activity certainly doesn't preclude that activity from being one of your vocations. Many things we do inspire joy within us, while also serving a deep and abiding purpose. As a college pastor whose students recently received full-ride-plus-stipend graduate school offers, who just started their dream jobs, who just invited me to perform their marriage ceremonies, I frequently feel gladness in this vocation work. For that, I am deeply grateful.

On the other hand, gladness is not something that should solely define the central purposes of our lives. God calls us, at times, to things that have holy purpose and are deeply meaningful, and yet bring no gladness. I think back to the times where couples asked for prayer in deep moments of sorrow at the loss of a child, or to the people who sought support after experiencing assault. Those, too, were my vocation. I was in no way glad, and yet, they were deeply meaningful moments full of holy purpose.

Another concern (and one that almost certainly seems ridiculous coming from me) is that the conversation around vocation is often controlled by straight, white, cisgender, Christian men with at least middle-class wealth. You know, people like me. Of course, from within our privilege, we can focus on happiness. We've got time to ruminate on such things, the means to pursue them, and audiences to listen to our conjectures as if they are categorical imperatives. Certainly, all people have the capacity for gladness, but not all people have the luxury to focus on it as a primary mode of purpose or existence. Such a focus on gladness doesn't account for the holiness in work that requires toil, and even suffering, to meet the needs of our neighbors, nor does it attend to the ways that others have found meaningful purpose despite oppression and marginalization. That's why, in my forthcoming book on vocation, my primary conversation partners are Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, along with people who are Queer and of religious and spiritual traditions other than Christianity. Simply because they have not controlled the conversation on vocation does not mean they have no wisdom to share; in fact, there is profound purpose for vocation that we've

often ignored through a narrow focus on predominantly white, Christian, male, affluent approaches to vocation.

## Decisive: The Flourishing of the Neighbor

Despite my critique, there is also some harmony with Lutheran vocational theology and Buechner's definition. Consider Luther's thoughts in "The Freedom of a Christian": "In all of one's works a person should... contemplate this thought alone: to serve and benefit others in everything that may be done, having nothing else in view except the need and advantage of the neighbor" (Luther 520). Five hundred years later, Buechner echoes this concern that Luther penned in 1520, namely that the world's needs are the paramount purpose of vocation. Our neighbors—not just humanity, but all of God's creation—have needs which may be met by the work we have to offer. Luther reminds us that, since God in Christ guaranteed we need not work for our own salvation, we are empowered instead to serve the bodily needs—mental, physical, emotional, civic, economic, political, relational, familial, and others—as the primary locus of and reason for our work. Wingren, in his *Luther On Vocation*, offers this helpful paraphrase: "God doesn't need our good works, Luther said, but our neighbor does" (Wingren 10).

"Our neighbors—not just humanity, but all of God's creation—have needs which may be met by the work we have to offer."

It is the needs of our neighbor, the images and works of God in the world, that guide our vocations. Since gladness is not always found in meeting these needs, how can we understand vocation in a clear way that connects our purpose to the needs of our neighbors? I propose this working definition: *your vocation is any meaningful, life-giving work you do for the world*. This highlights a few key factors.

First, vocation is at least theoretically possible in any work that we do. Vocation isn't limited to monetizing skills, or biological families, or public deeds. We hold multiple

vocations simultaneously as family members and friends, as citizens and workers, as volunteers and as earth keepers.

Second, the definition asserts that vocation is found in work that is meaningful, especially meaningful to you. Again, not all things we are called to make us happy, but all things we are called to have meaning that connects with our identities and our values. It doesn't bring good parents gladness to discipline children, nor are good teachers glad to give negative feedback on assignments. But those moments of correction are full of meaning as we participate in the identity and vocational development of those under our care. I am not alone in this framing. For instance, Marsha Rehm offers the notion of vocation as meaning-making in her foundational article "Vocation as Meaning Making Narrative." The proposed definition ties together Rehm's valuable thread with Buechner's attentiveness to the world's deep needs, but with a twist.

Third, then, rather than utilize the language of need, this definition instead echoes Jesus's words from John 10. Christ came to give "life to the full" or "abundant life." While that's categorically different than the work we're called to in our vocations—I can't guarantee anyone's salvation, including my own—as images of God (and for some of us, as followers of Christ), we're called to do work that reflects the God that we love. To meet needs is to give life, but to speak about meeting needs in the twenty-first century can sound too close to a toxic charity approach that creates or supports an unhealthy dependency. To give life intends to enable freedom, to honor the integrity of those that give and receive.

One distinction that's worth noting is that your vocation should be meaningful and life-giving for both you and those you're serving. This is where our tradition's language of internal and external call matter deeply. Just because something is meaningful for you doesn't mean it's life-giving for others. And just because people have needs doesn't mean you're capable of fulfilling all those needs all the time.

Last, and most importantly, this definition allows a place for gladness in our vocations but does not require it. This is important for our vocations and our identities. Even when I'm not happy, I'm still human. Even when you're not glad, you still have purpose. As someone who has lived all my life with mental illness, only diagnosed in college, its liberating to know that my purpose doesn't disappear with my

joy. That, in fact, not only does God remain present in the valleys, but so do my neighbors and their needs. My vocation remains valid even if I'm not feeling its value in the moment.

## Life-Giving Work

If vocation is any meaningful, life-giving work that we do for the world, then we can see how our lives are imbued with holy purpose not just in our individual gladness, but in our shared purpose. There is no more import to the vocations of clergy, medical doctors, or lawyers than there is to carpenters, Uber drivers, or photographers. There is no more value to work that is occupational than work that is volunteer or familial. Vocation is found at any intersection of our capacities with the needs of the world that is meaningful for us and life-giving for others.

It's time we redefine vocation in a way that is accessible to all within our institutional spheres of influence: not just students, faculty, and staff at NECU schools, but our community partners, our interreligious networks, and beyond. More than accessible, though, this definition intends to honor the holy work that permeates the lives of all people and acknowledge the needs for abundant life so prevalent within the cosmos. May you, your colleagues, and your institutions find work that is meaningful and life giving.

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# Vocation Outside of Career: Discovering Purpose through Comics

*I tell myself I can do this. I tell myself I'm exactly where I was meant to be. It's like that Persian guy Rumi said. "Wherever you are...was circled on a map for you."*

—Kamala Khan, *Ms. Marvel*

"I'm sorry. I feel like I'm not explaining this correctly, but I know this experience mattered."

The comment came from a student in my "Vocational Discernment" class.<sup>1</sup> We were discussing events that students identify as helping them form the morals they live by in their lives. The student was explaining a significant and life changing event that happened to them, and anyone listening could see how much this event was, and always would be, a part of their everyday life. The student knew, even if they could not fully articulate it, that this certain moment in their life contributed to the path they are on now. Even though they struggled finding the words they wanted, it was clear that the student knew the experience tied into their vocation.

The vocational discernment course was created as a result of Augustana College's Education-for-Vocation seminar that I participated in during the 2019-2020 academic year. I had just begun my role as the Faculty-in-Residence at Augustana College. In this role, I live with my family in one of the residence halls, where I

provide academic and personal support to sophomores. I was interested in ways I could have conversations about vocation with these students. I had been a first-year advisor for a couple of years at that point, and often had conversations with students about their career goals, interests, and passions. I correctly intuited that conversations about vocation would happen in my role as Faculty-in-Residence as well.

## Talking about Vocation

Vocation can be difficult to talk about with students because everyone has their own understanding of the word. I grew up in a Catholic family, and my hometown has strong roots in the Christian Reformed tradition. Because of that, vocation was a word I grew up hearing from an early age. It was a word that meant *calling*—as in: what was God calling you to do in your life? For others, it meant



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a trade, such as welding or plumbing. Others never heard the word vocation. When everyone has a different familiarity with the topic of vocation, it can be difficult to find common ground.

“I was interested in discussing vocation in terms of ‘living your best life.’”

In the course and through my mentorship, I was interested in discussing vocation in terms of “living your best life.” Many college students think about vocation in terms of career. They are trying to decide what the perfect job will be for them, and what steps they need to take to get it. However, I want students to consider that vocation can be fulfilled in ways outside of career. I want them to think about parts of their lives that are equally (or even more) important as/than their career. Many students I have conversations with about their goals are very practical. They are interested and passionate about their career goals, but it is not unusual for them to bring up the importance of money in order to live. They are correct; when all is said and done, food, clothing, and shelter are essential.

Partly due to these conversations, I want to show students that vocation can be fulfilled outside of career. I want them to think about how experiences impact them in their life. Who is important to them? What do they learn from others? How would they describe themselves and their role in others’ lives, and why does that matter?

But how was I to go about this?

## Exploring Vocation through Ms. Marvel

Enter the superhero, Ms. Marvel. Written by G. Willow Wilson, Ms. Marvel is a superhero character and the first Muslim superhero to headline her own comic book series. Kamala Khan, a 16 year old, Pakistani-American, nerdy girl, becomes a superhero one night and names herself Ms. Marvel. I had recently reread the series before the vocation seminar was announced, and I immediately thought of how well the series ties into the concept of vocation. Because Kamala became Ms. Marvel overnight, she has to learn to balance this new role in her life with

her other roles. Throughout the series, we see Kamala reflect on her different responsibilities, her relationships, her religion, and her life experiences, all while striving to be the best superhero she can be.

With the help of the Education-for-Vocation seminar, as well as discussions with colleagues at Augustana College, the LSC 250-Vocational Discernment course was determined to be the best fit for the class I envisioned. The first nineteen issues of the Ms. Marvel series served as the core reading, and all activities and assignments centered around the series and student examinations of their lives. Sixteen students enrolled in the class; only a few were familiar with Ms. Marvel, but the majority of them enjoyed superheroes. Some took the class simply because they needed the credits, but overall many of the students were genuinely interested in the topic. Although the class was geared towards sophomores, there was a mix of all years in the class.

“They thought about their own identities, their families, friendships, life events, religion (or lack thereof), and how it all led them to where they were in their lives.”

The class was broken into five different units: family and identity, friendships and relationships, teamwork, religion and morals, and layers of vocation. Students read the Ms. Marvel issues, and we discussed Kamala/Ms. Marvel’s vocational journey. In class, we talked about her different family members, friends, romantic interests, and her work with the superhero team, the Avengers. We discussed how Kamala is raised, the influence that Islam plays in her role as a superhero and as a friend and daughter, and how she becomes more comfortable with her identity as a person and as a superhero. For the last unit, “layers of vocation,” we discussed how all the different responsibilities and parts of Kamala’s life play a role in her vocation as Ms. Marvel.

Students took what they learned from the Ms. Marvel issues and our class discussions, and then reflected on their own lives. They thought about their own identities, their families, friendships, life events, religion

(or lack thereof), and how it all led them to where they were in their lives. Throughout, they gained a better understanding of their own vocation. Now, they better understand why their values and goals are important.

## Takeaways

For their final assignment, students gave presentations about their vocations. They shared statements such as: “I want to be a positive force in the world,” “I want to be the best version of myself,” or “I want to love myself for who I am, and show others that they should just be themselves.” Not everyone could define their vocation in one sentence, but the students had a much better sense about what is important to them. They could talk about vocation in a way that goes beyond their major or career choice. They could discuss what makes them feel like they are living a life of purpose. They understood how they feel fulfilled in ways outside of classes and future goals.

In the first class, I had students fill out a very short survey with the following questions:

- 1) Why did you take this class?
- 2) What does the word *vocation* mean to you?
- 3) How do you want to live your life?

During the final session, I had students fill out the same survey in order to gauge if their thoughts on vocation changed over the course. In the first survey, many students responded to “What does the word *vocation* mean to you?” with words and phrases like purpose, passion, or “to be honest, I’m not too sure.”

At the end of the semester, students had a clearer understanding of vocation. When asked, “What does the word *vocation* mean to you?”, one student responded with this: “The thing that makes you get up in the morning, and the thing that you seek out that shapes your life how you want it to be. It can be more than just your job, like people, activities, hobbies, the world around you, and more.” When asked, “How do you want to live your life?” I saw responses such as: “I want to leave a positive impact on people’s lives, especially my family”; and: “Living in confidence, and having no shame of myself.”

In class, we often discussed specific scenes that stood out to students. One scene that resonated with many students appears in issue 5. In this scene, readers see Kamala/Ms. Marvel putting together her superhero costume. She says “Good is not a thing you are. It’s a thing you do.” In class, students often spoke of wanting to do good in the world, normally in ways of supporting family, friends, and themselves. The students saw themselves in Kamala/Ms. Marvel. They had the same desire to contribute positively to those around them. It was clear that students were able to conceptualize that desire better at the end of the course than they could in the beginning.

“Taking a step back from traditional academics helps students examine their lives and values, which in turn helps them learn about how they want to live.”

A comic book series may not be the first thing you think of when helping students explore their vocation, but approaching the topic in this manner helps students think of their vocation in a different light. It shows them that vocation does not have to be *what* you want to do with your life, but *how* you want to live it.

Students not only enjoyed reading the Ms. Marvel series, they were able to find ways to relate to Kamala/Ms. Marvel in some way. This shows how taking a step back from traditional academics helps students examine their lives and values, which in turn helps them learn about how they want to live.

## Endnote

1. I want to acknowledge and thank the Augustana College LSC-250 class of Fall, 2020. I appreciate and value how the students in this class explored and shared their vocational journeys with me and their classmates.

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# Leadership in a Pandemic: Grace-Filled Lessons in Unprecedented Times



It has now been just over a year since the severity and impact of the COVID-19 virus sent us scurrying home from our campuses, trying to pivot to remote operations, a concept that was unheard of for most university campuses across North America. Yes, online course delivery is a

growing trend with some institutions (such as Athabasca University, Alberta). But, for most of us, complete remote operations—including financial services, HR, student services and supports, and so forth—seemed unthinkable.

At the time, I was teaching within academic disciplines (economics and leadership) for which traditional teaching methods depend on in-person class interactions (leadership) and on visual graphical explanations (economics). I am of a vintage for whom manually drawing the graphs in class and walking students through them was a fulfilling and effective teaching method, particularly with macroeconomic analysis. Manually drawing graphs—whether by smart board, wireless tablet, whiteboard, or even chalk—created an interactive experience that students craved because of its clarity and in-person nuances. Certainly, I used online learning management systems such as Moodle and Blackboard, which have excellent collaboration tools. Still, I believed that nothing could replace the “magic” of the in-classroom experience.

The inconvenience that I experienced after having to deliver content remotely pales in comparison to what I will describe as the real effects of the pandemic, which I know first-hand as a teacher, pastor, and new college president. I want to summarize some highlights and learnings by briefly answering three questions:

- 1) What have we learned about our community during the pandemic?
- 2) What have we learned about leadership in a long-term crisis?
- 3) What does a “new” normal or “next” normal look like for our institutions post-pandemic?

## Community in a Pandemic

As a pastor who is writing this during a pandemic and during Lent, I cannot help but think of time spent in exile, wandering about the wilderness. When we all went home last March, many of us were expecting a couple weeks of a “makeshift” remote operation before returning to campus for business as usual. Now, a full year later, the Canada-United States border remains closed to all nonessential travel, and many post-secondary schools (including mine) are still operating completely remotely.

If the pandemic has emphasized anything for us, it has reiterated how important our call is to care for those around us and to work for justice and peace in God’s world.

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It has reminded us of the value of kindness, both given and received, and the need for sharing grace in all that we do. For Christians, this is a simple measure of the grace we receive in the Spirit-infused waters of baptism.

“The pandemic has reminded us of the value of kindness, both given and received, and the need for sharing grace in all that we do.”

Most importantly, the pandemic has reminded us of how much our university campuses crave community and connection. At Luther College in Regina, all the community-building activities so essential to the niche of our college have been either moved online, offered in a limited way according to the health authority guidelines, or offered not at all. Daily chapel at the high school campus has moved to Zoom. While we cannot gather as we normally would, a silver lining is that now alumni chapel speakers join us electronically from around the world. On the university campus, where no one except essential workers are on campus, weekly chapel and all events of the faith-based programming have been moved online. What we have learned is how important gathering in community will be when it will finally be safe to do so.

## Leadership through a Long-Term Crisis

There is also some learning about leadership. Despite being an economist and past professor of strategy and leadership, likely the best preparation for my new role as president in a pandemic has come from my seminary and pastoral training. We are seeing an unusual level of anxiety and PTSD-like effects of the pandemic, even in those of us in relatively privileged and protected positions. People have run out of capacity to manage issues via email—a medium that loses nuances of language and can cause even small problems to explode.

More than anything, what is demanded of leaders at this time is to display a calm, pastoral, listening approach to servant leadership. Our teams need to be reassured, even when there is often no information to be shared or answers to give. Leadership is about looking after those in our care so that, in turn, they can care for our students.

It is also noteworthy that the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on women and those in relatively lower income service industries. It has heightened the divide in society around racial issues and income inequality. In March of 2020, our college’s large proportion of students who are single parents suddenly had no childcare options, and their children were learning from home. A pastoral approach to teaching was needed to help those students just trying to cope.

Today, as the pandemic drags on, our employees’ and students’ life-transitions continue. Deaths in families still happen, except one cannot gather for a funeral to grieve. Relationships that were held together by a thread saw the pressures magnified, including a risk of increased domestic violence. Access to internet bandwidth and computers are limited in many homes. Many students who are also parents cannot get university work done until late at night after family members have gone to bed. Student expectations about the quality of online learning have (rightfully) risen as time goes on.

“Leadership is about looking after those in our care so that, in turn, they can care for our students.”

Leadership in a crisis is all about a patient pastoral presence without illusory hope.

## The New or Next Normal

True hope, however, does appear to be on the horizon. While vaccinations, particularly here in Canada, have been slow to roll out, they are now rolling out, and with them a new sense of hope. Just as the hope of the gospel propels us out of the darkness into the light, the end of the pandemic will come. There are still more silver linings. In Saskatchewan, Indigenous post-secondary student participation rates are as high as ever, thanks to the flexible delivery options now available. I am hopeful that these kinds of innovations will remain post-pandemic.

There are still lots of issues to resolve even beyond vaccinations. What if an employee refuses to be

vaccinated? How long will physical distancing, mask wearing, and sanitation practices continue—and what *should* continue? The influenza season was virtually nonexistent this past winter because of these procedures. Should some version of them continue in the years ahead?

“There are still more silver linings. In Saskatchewan, Indigenous post-secondary student participation rates are as high as ever, thanks to the flexible delivery options now available.”

As leaders we will also need to be aware and concerned about the long-term sustainability of our institutions and the long-term impacts of the shutdowns on our balance sheets. We will wonder about the recovery of international travel, including the arrival of international students who stay in our dorms and on whom our institutional finances

depend a great deal. To what extent will we continue to offer online delivery? To what extent will our “in-person” model return post-pandemic? At Luther College, the in-person, personal touch has been an important part of our brand and niche as a small college. How much of that will we be able to retain?

At the end of the day, many of these questions are still unanswerable. What I will say is that good leadership is needed to help us to continue focusing on the things we have learned over the past year. They include: kindness, grace, and community. Perhaps our NECU institutions will continue to have a special role to play in the healing of our world. We may continue to produce graduates who have learned how to care for one another and the world around us, and the importance of the true value of kindness, grace, and community.

May the grace of God that sustains us each day refresh and renew us to, in turn, be grace-filled and kind to those around us as we recover. May that action of grace also be a lasting change for the better in the days ahead.

ALL FACULTY, STAFF, AND ADMINISTRATORS ARE INVITED TO ATTEND

## This summer's Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference!

(formerly, the Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference)

**The NECU-wide gathering will convene virtually,  
July 12-15, 2021, 2:00 pm-3:30 pm Eastern Time,  
*except the session on July 13th, which will meet 2:00 pm-4:00 pm Eastern Time.***

The theme of the 2021 conference is **Called to Place: Community Responsive Education**. Participants will consider how local landscapes, neighborhoods, events, and people influence the missions, identities, and institutional vocations of our colleges and universities, along with our individual callings related to antiracism within our particular communities.

**For information about registration, contact your VLHE Conference campus contact or email Melinda Valverde at [melinda.valverde@dca.org](mailto:melinda.valverde@dca.org).**

ANN ELIZABETH ROSENDALE

# Unconventional Wisdom and Talking about God: A Review of Beckstrom's *Leading Lutheran Higher Education in a Secular Age*

I was a brand new campus pastor when my colleague and I took a four hour road trip from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to Waverly, Iowa, to visit Brian Beckstrom and his colleague—another duo of chaplains at another ELCA college. The purpose of the visit was to compare notes and share best practices in our work.

Close to a decade later my most vivid memory of our time together was lunch as a foursome of clergy at a quaint cafe in downtown Waverly. It was more than the meal that gave me something to chew on. Brian talked, even in those early years of his call at Wartburg, about the challenges of secularization facing Lutheran Higher Education. He was adamant that the antidote had to do with talking about God more. It sounded so simple, and it should be obvious, but it wasn't.

In *Leading Lutheran Higher Education in a Secular Age: Religious Identity, Mission, and Vocation at ELCA Colleges and Universities*, Brian Beckstrom lays out in detail all that we lamented years ago over lunch in the cafe, this time backed by rich research and the work of other keen theologians whose voices make Beckstrom's arguments all the more compelling.

Beckstrom uncovers a troubling disconnect that exists between the espoused religious identity of our institutions and the religious identity as perceived by many who live and work there (54-56). Who we are is not congruent who we say we are, and people are taking notice. Beckstrom's research at five ELCA schools bears this out.

To those who have spent more than a year or two in higher education, the first few chapters of Beckstrom's book will be a review. Times at our institutions are tough. Resources are scarce. Enrollment numbers are harder to come by than ever. The cost and value of a four-year college are often in question, and families' finances are stretched. Discount rates aren't helping like we thought they might, but we're stuck in what Beckstrom describes as "a sort of circular arms race" (43) in which no one dares to be the first to reduce unfunded aid and risk losing coveted prospective students.



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To those new to the distinctives of *Lutheran* higher education, read chapters 1, 2, and 3 closely. Beckstrom outlines the history of how and why these institutions exist in the first place and raises an important ecclesiological question: What is the relationship between our colleges and universities and the larger church? For those less steeped in the life and rhythms of the church, it may come as a surprise (or not) when Beckstrom highlights that “Lutheran colleges belong to not one, but two sectors undergoing massive changes” (39). Shifting economics and culture threaten both higher education and the church. Is it any wonder, then, that our ELCA institutions are feeling especially strained?

Chapter 5 is where my pen started working overtime, underlining and starring the adaptive challenges unique to Lutheran higher education and Beckstrom’s ideas about how we might face them.

“Shifting economics and culture threaten both higher education and the church. Is it any wonder, then, that our ELCA institutions are feeling especially strained?”

Using qualitative coding, Beckstrom examines mission and identity statements of the five schools he studied. His findings are striking. All five institutions, while claiming their Lutheran identity, tended to downplay it in favor of more secular descriptors such as “service, inclusion, and discovering one’s purpose in life.” Several even followed the naming of their Lutheran identity with a disclaimer, “that being Lutheran is really about freedom and openness” (93). While this characteristic is not untrue, there is little eagerness among our institutions to talk about the gift or importance of religious conviction, even as our rootedness is the very thing that inspires our openness.

Beckstrom argues that our institutions are described, either in print or by members of the communities, using “a rather vague and ambiguous sort of humanism that seems intentionally designed to avoid any mention of God or the transcendent” (112). Institutions and their leaders are, Beckstrom suggests, very comfortable espousing the virtues of “service, justice, and vocation,” which are valued in both the sacred and secular spheres. It is much harder

to name or describe God’s action in any of this. Beckstrom writes, “We are good at talking about what we do but not why we do it” (109). Even the “common calling” touted by the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU) in the document “Rooted and Open,” which reads, “called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish,” is nebulous about who is doing the calling and empowering (135). Why is it so difficult to make God’s agency explicit in Lutheran higher education?

A particularly convicting and powerful insight in Beckstrom’s book comes around to the topic of what is said about the Lutheran identity of our schools on campus tours: “Campus tour guides often get a bad rap for not accurately describing the religious identity of the institution, but perhaps they are actually describing the religious identity of the school accurately” (104). I starred this sentence twice and cringed, recalling overhearing a tour guide at my own university state emphatically that worship in the chapel was optional and that many use the “dedicated” time each morning to take a nap.

Beckstrom astutely notes that another factor contributing to the disconnect between espoused and perceived Lutheran identity is the way that religious faith and even the work of interpreting the Christian mission of the university has become reserved for a select few, typically the campus pastor and sometimes the religion faculty. They are seen as the primary custodians of faith and namers of God’s activity on our campuses. Few leaders in other parts of the institution have any theological training, and many even lack their own significant religious life experiences. Though the hiring of theologians and church professionals was initially done as a strategic response to a perceived loss of faith at our institutions, putting the onus of paying attention to God’s work on just one person (the campus pastor) or campus building (the chapel) has had the unintended effect of diffusing others’ responsibility to steward this vital piece of our identity (28).

Additionally, an increasingly pluralistic society makes it difficult for Lutheran colleges and universities to know how to talk about their Christian convictions without alienating those who do not share their beliefs. Keeping Jesus at the center feels incongruent with the openness that is needed in an era of increasing diversity and a clearer call to accommodate, include, and celebrate neighbors who

are not Christian. Hence, we shy away from talking about beliefs that might offend and settle for a watered-down relativism. For those interested in a third way that holds tension between conviction and openness, Beckstrom offers helpful suggestions of language that can be used to articulate Christ as the one by whose example and for whose sake we are radically inclusive (128).

Moving toward a path forward, Beckstrom helps us understand how secularization has influenced society from the time of the Reformation until now. He uses Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* and his theory of three secular worldviews (Secular 1, 2, and 3) as a foundation for opening new possibilities for our institutions. I will not go into detail about each worldview here, but I am taken by Beckstrom's notion that Secular 3, a paradigm in which transcendence is hardly on anyone's radar, is, in fact, a more promising space to hold than Secular 2, where believers are fighting tooth and nail to avoid irrelevance and non-believers are simply resigned to a world in which religion is obsolete. Beckstrom posits that we are entering an era (Secular 3) where more and more people are unchurched or uninfluenced by religion. While that may seem a threat to advancing the gospel, it may well be the opportunity that our institutions need. Lack of religious experience and literacy is fertile ground for nurturing curiosity as opposed to the Secular 2 worldview, where non-believers' posture toward religion is often unwaveringly hostile (122).

"We are entering an era where more and more people are unchurched or uninfluenced by religion. While that may seem a threat to advancing the gospel, it may well be the opportunity that our institutions need."

Beckstrom proposes a more faithful and authentic way forward for our ELCA schools—what he calls Trinitarian Missiological Ecclesiology, or TME (5). It sounds like a mouthful, and it is. TME calls our institutions to examine who they are through the lens of God's mission. And although Lutheran colleges and universities have mission statements of their own, as institutions of the church, these

statements ought to be grounded, first and foremost, in the mission of God. Lutheran colleges and universities are a part of God's mission, just as congregations are. This is a mission to share the Gospel and to bring the kingdom of God ever nearer to earth. Though our schools do this in a particular way, distinct from congregations, they are no less integral to God's mission.

Trinitarian theology, as it is understood in eastern and western Christian traditions, is especially helpful for imagining how our schools can live out God's mission in an age of pluralism and secularization. Emphasizing both the oneness (western) and threeness (eastern) of God is an example of the tension that Lutheran higher education must dance with as it discerns how to exist both broadly and deeply. For the visual learners among us, Beckstrom shares the metaphor of a rubber band stretching—"the very thing that pulls the rubber band outward (my thumb and index finger) finds itself included within it. A centripetal force then acts to pull what is included back to the center" (78). The theological term for this is "perichoresis" (76).

So what does Trinitarian Missiological Ecclesiology look like in practice? How do our Lutheran colleges and universities make their way amid significant threats to both higher education and religiously affiliated institutions? And, how can our schools find greater congruence between espoused and perceived Lutheran Christian identity?

Beckstrom offers several concrete suggestions beginning with, not surprisingly, talking more about God. His instincts at our cafe lunch a decade ago were spot on. Institutional leaders, faculty, staff, and students, should feel encouraged to name God as an active participant in all that is happening to and at our schools. We ought to talk about God, aloud and explicitly, at faculty meetings, cabinet meetings, board meetings, and in student government. This is not just the responsibility of the college chaplain, or even the president. All can work to become more fluent in the language of faith.

Beckstrom is convinced, and readers will be too, that the religious identities of our schools are not sustained simply by offering chapel services and spiritual care for those who want to engage that sort of thing. On the contrary, embracing the call and mission of God at colleges and universities of the church is "critical to [our] future" (133). Adaptive leadership, an innovative

and entrepreneurial spirit, courage, and tenacity are not enough. “Engaging the community in theological reflection is a necessity”; Beckstrom urges institutional leaders (outside of ordained clergy) to be theologically trained and minded (126). This may seem like a tall order. Perhaps it is the least we can do to give Lutheran higher education every advantage in this difficult climate.

I appreciate Beckstrom’s lifting up the NECU document “Rooted and Open: The Common Calling of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities.” This document has been significant in my own institution’s deepening understanding of what it means to be Lutheran. I don’t disagree with many of Beckstrom’s critiques of the document. We surely could stand to talk about God more, even in this piece of writing that serves to make us clearer about our Lutheran Christian identity.

“How do leaders make decisions about institutional rites and rituals that call for both Christian prayer and authentic inclusion of non-Christian and non-religious persons?”

I do wish Beckstrom would have given more concrete examples of his thesis, as it is lived out at his institution or others. I suspect his work will receive push back from some who are non-Lutheran, and especially non-Christian, still wrestling with feelings of marginalization at a school affiliated with a tradition different from their own. How, for instance, do leaders make decisions about institutional rites and rituals that call for both Christian prayer and authentic inclusion of non-Christian and non-religious persons? A case study or two would have been helpful in imagining

how to talk about God with boldness and integrity while at the same staying open and mindful of the neighbor who holds a different worldview.

A couple years ago, as Brian was in the throes of working on his book, he attended our annual gathering of NECU chaplains and gave us a sneak peek of his outstanding research and findings. At a quaint Episcopal retreat center in Racine, Wisconsin, heads nodded in agreement as our colleague presented what our group of campus pastors already knew to be true, that our institutions would not be able to live out their mission with integrity without seeking and naming a God actively at work among us. My fellow chaplains and I strive daily to do this work with all we’ve got—mind, body, and spirit. But it’s clearer than ever that we can’t do it alone. We need the partnership of presidents, provosts, deans, department chairs, faculty members, choir directors, coaches, and student body presidents to do this work with the care and faithfulness that it deserves. As Beckstrom repeatedly says, the future of Lutheran higher education depends on it.

And when we fall short, which we all will and do, we return to the promise that it is God who buoys us. It is the Holy Spirit who sustains us. It is Christ who calls us. We do none of it alone. Even the most savvy college presidents and people with PhDs will not save our institutions. God does and God surely will, even as that saving work often looks different from what we might expect.

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JASON A. MAHN

# Shelter in Place: Reflections from March 22, 2020

This is getting real.

I'm up well before dawn after a handful of hours of restless sleep. Last night, Facebook Messenger lit up with rumors of a first case of COVID-19 in our small city. One cryptic message from our neighbor D., who often knows things before they are public, specified that the boys and I should not, under any circumstances, play pickup basketball this afternoon, which we had done a week ago, the last day that my college's rec center was open. No sooner had my spouse, Laura, read me the message than I began to connect and create dots: I think the wife of the player who likes to drive the lane works in the emergency room. Did he contract it through her? Did either of my sons, Asa and Gabe, guard him? Did they use enough hand sanitizer between games? Could they die?

A subsequent text from our neighbor clarified that she just didn't want us having any contact with anyone; basketball was only an example. No need to dwell on the questions above—minus the last one, which kindled my anxiety long after we said goodnight to the boys.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent. The gospel lesson is the story of the man born blind, whom an un-beckoned Jesus hastens to heal as the disciples debate over who is to blame for his condition. My family will have "family church" at 10:30 this morning over chorizo egg bake, which I promised to the boys last night. Sitting under a warm blanket on the couch,

watching the sky spit sleety snow, my contemplations and writing this morning feel especially like prayer, or at least like the difficult (non-)action of paying attention, which Simone Weil identifies as the essence of prayer.

We will abide by the Illinois Governor's executive order to "stay at home," one of five statewide decrees at present. "Shelter in place" is no longer being used for these orders, given that the



"Deriving from the word *shield*, to shelter is to take guard—and more so, to protect those who need guarding."

phrase conjures frightening images of active shooters and classroom lockdowns in many people's minds—especially those of Gen X, who have trained for school shootings since they were in kindergarten. For me, though, to shelter seems much more accurate to the purposeful action asked of us. Deriving from the word *shield*, to shelter is to take guard—and more so, to protect

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those who need guarding, as in providing lodging for the homeless poor or taking in stray animals. My putting egg bake in the oven, and Laura's designing word games for the kids, and our planning of hikes with our dog Gracie at Sylvan Island, each make shelter for our family. The difficulty is how to shield those who are not already under our roof. Whom else will I be called on to shelter? What can hospitality look like across property lines?

Two days ago, I received an email from E., a recent graduate from my college and former student in my upper-level seminar, "Suffering, Death, and Endurance," who moved to Boston to look for jobs and attend to his mental health. Students like E. make me proud to teach at a Lutheran liberal arts school. He identifies as nonreligious, but would visit during my office hours to discuss faith and hope and spiritual wellness. He wrote his final paper in the "Suffering" class on the theodicy of hip-hop music, which first turned me on to the prophetic and profane musical artist, Brother Ali. I dare not tally the teaching versus the learning that I give/receive from students like E.

He reported last week that the streets and squares of Boston have been disconcertingly quiet, like the calm before a storm. "Still, it's not all bad," he writes. "People are settling into their new norm. I'm starting to get involved with the mutual aid networks popping up across the country. It's wonderful to see how much people are willing to share, both in knowledge and resources. I'm grateful for social media allowing us to stay connected while remaining distant." He says he's been organizing people in his Sommerville neighborhood, ensuring that channels of communication remain open. And then, with characteristic humility, E. asks me for advice about how to talk with people about the pandemic itself. He confesses, "I'm not sure how to talk about this moment in time we're living through. I want to be a source of stability, but I don't want to be more than what I am."

There's so much here to comment on, including all the ways that E. is enacting neighbor love much more creatively than I am. I am particularly struck by the wisdom of not wanting to be more than he is. He could have said that he didn't want to overextend himself or that he didn't want to do more than he could effectively do. But his language is about personhood and character, not activities and tasks.

He's writing about his sense of calling, that understanding of oneself and one's necessary limits that must be carefully discerned and then courageously lived out in service to others. While many idealistic young adults bravely want to change the world in whatever ways they dream up, E. has intuited the more discerning insight of American author and activist Parker Palmer—namely, that pretending you are something you're not is a recipe for resentment, then fatigue, and then cynicism. We must rather, in Palmer's words, "accept that our lives are dependent on an inexorable cycle of seasons, on a play of powers that we can conspire with but never control." Accepting those God-given limits alongside our God-given gifts can be painful. We inevitably "run headlong into a culture that insists, against all evidence, that we can make whatever kind of life we want, whenever we want it. Deeper still, we run headlong into our own egos, which want desperately to believe that we are always in charge" (97).

"E. is discerning his deepest self, and its responsive and purposeful work in the world, even as he keeps one eye open for an ambush of his ego."

E. is discerning his deepest self, and its responsive and purposeful work in the world, even as he keeps one eye open for an ambush of his ego. I am proud of him, and wrote back saying as much.

The networks of church-related higher education in which I am a part have, over the last few decades, doubled-down on their central missions to educate for vocation. From *vocare* (calling) and *vox* (voice), *vocation* is something one hears (usually metaphorically) and then responds to—or not. Many identify the ultimate Caller as God, who uses the voices of human and nonhuman creatures to beckon a person toward work for the flourishing of all creation. Others hear the call as originating from particular people and places who call out for help and compassion. Either way, undergoing education for a life of vocation provides a very different understanding of higher education than the leading consumerist model. Students don't only pay for college to get a degree that

gets them opportunities to advance their chosen careers. They also—and more importantly—accept the invitation to carefully listen for and critically understand what the world most needs, and then develop skills by which they can capably and confidently respond. While many if not most students come to college primarily to get a good paying job (and there’s nothing wrong with that), among them are students such as E., many of them first generation college students and others with a strong sense of appreciation for this opportunity, who have a handle on their gifts and passions and are ready to leverage each for the flourishing of the common good.

Language about neighbor love is easily translated into the idiom of purposeful callings. Lutheran higher education follows its namesake, Martin Luther, in equating vocation with love and service to the neighbor. Whereas before the sixteenth century “godly work” had been the work of the professionally religious or explicitly religious work (such as taking a pilgrimage), Luther redirected such work away from the desperate attempt to please God and towards the free, creative, and even joyful effort to work on behalf of the neighbor. As Luther put it 500 years ago in “The Freedom of a Christian”:

No one needs even one of these works to attain righteousness and salvation. *For this reason*, in all of one’s works a person should in this context be shaped by and contemplate this thought alone: to serve and benefit others in everything that may be done, having nothing else in view except the need and advantage of the neighbor. (520, my emphasis)

When the old self, the ego, is upended by the unearned gift of divine love, it then—and *for this reason*—can finally see what the neighbor actually needs and will do what it can to respond. Luther assumed that the transformative turn-around happens in baptism, whose waters drown a person’s pious perfectionism, together with her doubt

and despair. For most today, death of ego and the rebirth of a summoned life probably only come from brushes with actual death. Being made to face our mortality—for example, by sheltering in place, glimpsing the vulnerability of your family, or getting sick yourself—can sometimes kill the self-reliance to which many of us otherwise so fanatically cling. Self-reliance is replaced by the gift of grace, which then redoubles as gracious attention to others.

“When the old self, the ego, is upended by the unearned gift of divine love, it then—and *for this reason*—can finally see what the neighbor actually needs and will do what it can to respond.”

My colleague from our music department, M., also reached out by email last week. She is a wise leader within this year’s “Education-for-Vocation” faculty seminar. She wrote to me of that key vocational discernment question that David Brooks asks, and which we had discussed a few weeks before: “To what am I being summoned?” Then referencing the worldwide pandemic: “If this is not a moment of summoning, I don’t know what is.”

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