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Renewing Our Journey: Some Thoughts on Pursuing the Truth

John Rehl

Heresy, I've been told, is an occupational hazard of being a theologian, and I think the point is well taken. Invoking the truth is a risky project, one requiring a light but unhesitant hand, and a bold enough presentation to make one's vision real. In what follows then, I hope to speak forcefully, though without presumption, in the belief that such an approach can serve our conversations most well.

In his reflections on Lutheran higher education, Mark Schwehn invites us to think again on the nature of truth -- perhaps even Truth with a capital T -- and suggests that our continued ability to seek and speak the truth might be central to the task at hand. I will follow Schwehn's invitation and insight, and take a few first steps down the path he offers. My contention here is that a renewed understanding of the role and relevance of Truth can shape our future and our self understandings in remarkable ways, and can re-enliven our vocation as church-related colleges and universities.

To begin, I'd suggest that we discard a few popular conceptions of truth which have not, I think, proved helpful. Most significantly, truth is not fruitfully understood as a matter of information. We live in the self-touted information age, and have seen the limited promise of information. New information, however precise and timely, might make us more comfortable, more secure, and perhaps even more wealthy, but information alone is insufficient fare to sustain us. Our information may be accurate or not, but is never true.

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Second, truth is best not seen as an object. We may collect facts and figures and descriptions of the world, but these remain information. Truth is not a prize to be won, nor an heirloom to be passed down, nor a formula to be memorized. Instead, truth is an event, met and explored in the living of it.

And finally, the truth is not merely words about the truth. Our language may successfully invoke the truth, and will shape and direct our understandings, but can never encompass or exhaust the whole. Indeed, the best discussions of truth are self-effacing, and plan in advance to fall short. Honest discussions of the truth make no

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presumption to permanence, but point beyond themselves.

With these conceptions set aside, the truth remains as the ultimate source and the ultimate goal of all our choosing. For our vision of the truth, of life's meaning and value, of our circumstance and possibility, both shapes and is shaped by all our actions. Our relationship to the truth is borne out in our priorities, in the risks we take and the sufferings we bear, in the hopes which sustain us and the dreams we pursue. In short, the truth represents the primordial question we are always already answering with our lives.

This remains at best a partial treatment, inviting more careful qualification and development if space and time would allow. Yet even these meager beginnings are enough to spur our conversation, and suggest their own path for exploring our institutional calling. For against this backdrop, our church-related colleges and universities are easily seen as among the few places today where we can still seek the truth in all of its richness and urgency. To suggest that our task is unique would be false, and to argue that we are the best qualified to perform this task can only serve as a self-congratulatory diversion. It is enough that this is *our* task, and one for which we are remarkably well suited. Our church-related colleges and universities, educational communities which are grounded in faith and reason together, remain as one of the few public forums fully open to the life of the spirit, fully prepared to ask and answer our lives' most urgent questions. Moreover, in pursuing this task well, we can easily respond to those who might misunderstand or misconstrue our relation to the church as some sort of retail outlet for religious doctrine. In this vision, church and church-related college are twin communities, linked together by their common loyalties to the truth. Like the church at its best, the church-related college can genuinely equip all its members -- its faculty and staff, students, and alumni -- to live reflectively, to act responsibly, and to choose well.

With these thoughts come immense practical implications for our teaching and learning. Most obviously, this approach brings a renewed emphasis on classroom teaching. Many have linked the decline of church-related higher education to the emerging prominence of the large research universities. For all of their accomplishments, these research institutions have reinforced a small-minded vision of truth: truth as something to be measured, collected, quantified and published. Within this vision, universities serve as factories of information, first produced in the laboratories, and then "delivered" in the lecture hall. Within this framework, the classroom too easily degenerates into merely a loading dock, for unloading booty collected elsewhere. Ironically enough, our understandings of truth have faced much the same assault from another source: the growing number of technical colleges with their focus on training and their celebration, as one advertising campaign has put it, of "hire education." None of this is meant to insult, but to stress instead that we, as church-related colleges and universities, have taken up a different and deeper commission. The quality of our

teaching can and should be a first priority, not only because excellence is nice and good teaching sells, but because we believe that truth is an event that happens in the classroom, and that good teaching and good learning involve giving birth, individually and in conversation, to our own relations to the truth. Kierkegaard's rich image of the teacher as midwife deserves our careful attention once again.

This is no call for even less research support for our faculties, but simply a suggestion that we reflect our research energies back toward the classroom, or even more personally as sustenance for our own truth journeys. Indeed, a key feature of such an approach is to convene a faculty engaged in their own journeys alongside of their students. In short, we need brave and articulate professors who can and will profess, who can and will publicly own and defend their thoughts, opinions and conclusions. Playing "the devil's advocate" may well be amusing sport, but scarcely serves as effective teaching today. Perhaps in an earlier age, hiding one's own position served well to dethrone the pretensions of an absolute perspective, but this is not our highest problem. I would suggest that most of our students are quite at home with the thought that they have a "right" to their own opinions, but are ill-equipped to articulate, defend and explore their own thoughts. They need examples of clear thinking and careful conversation; they need reference points and foils against which to respond. To give them anything less than our own best ideas, carefully and reflectively held, is to bear false witness -- to pretend that ideas are mere playthings and that the stakes are trivially low.

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To be sure, we must always guard against shallow agreements, against our students' desires to agree with us and to be our intellectual allies, but this charge is already part and parcel of our vocation as teachers. And the wide field of ideas is best explained and explored by one who has moved deeply, carefully, and passionately into a position of one's own, not by one who pretends only to be a spectator.

As students as well, this approach to truth can bring a renewed focus and challenge to our endeavors. Our studies bring skills and credentials, but more importantly they bring us into relation to the truth, into our own sense of purpose and direction, however crass or noble. Ultimately, our education involves taking up the tools which promise to sustain us through a richly unfolding, lifelong relationship to the truth. Past generations, in their seemingly quaint idiom, have spoken of "moral education," of teaching virtues and building character, and we can do well to rediscover the full import of such a project. We should teach the virtues, not so much to promote decent and civilized behavior, but to equip ourselves and our students for fruitful and enduring relationships to the truth. We should teach courage, both to live our convictions and to bravely confront the shortcomings of our lives. We should teach discipline, to hone and polish our efforts and guard against sloppy thinking. We should teach

patience, to persevere on a journey into truth which is new each day. And we should teach love, so that we might care for and enjoy a world over which we so desperately seek mastery.

These suggestions may seem well and good for the humanities, and perhaps especially for core courses in philosophy and religion, but more difficult to apply in other fields. But I have in mind here a conversation over truth which engages all the disciplines. To borrow Tillich's phrase, the dimension of depth is explored in all our studies. No field is immune to the human condition. Every fact is value laden, shaped by a context of interests and priorities. Beauty and precision can be explored and appreciated in mathematics and music courses alike. And who can deny the need for a genuine, reflective value-laden foundation for our training in journalism, law, health care and education?

For an example, I would comment on certain difficulties in one of my own fields of experience: economics. Introductory courses (and indeed every textbook I've seen) typically begin with a simplistic discussion of the difference between facts and values, and a quick division of economic debates into positive and normative statements. Economists are not without values, but normative discussions are subsequently ignored, or simply deferred beyond the end of the course. The professional difficulty, I think, is that economists, as a rule, have no formal training in addressing questions of value. This may not be troubling so long as economists content themselves with ostensibly positive questions, but normative matters invariably arise. Economic study revolves around a handful of striking assumptions -- about human motivation, the importance of animals, the nature of hedonism, and the value of wealth -- assumptions which bring many urgent questions about the values which inform and affirm our studies. And the sad problem remains that these questions urgently call for answers, answers which might fruitfully be developed by trained economists and economic students who were also trained in the task of moral inquiry. And this remains an even bigger problem for all who believe responsible living involves responsible voting, saving, spending, and investing.

My second example also comes from economics, but applies as well, I think, to other fields which pursue empirical inquiry through statistical techniques. In teaching and doing empirical work, we most frequently begin with a handful of elegantly simple statistical tools to organize, summarize, and explore the evidence. Most typically, we set up our statistical tests to carefully limit (to 10%, or 5% or 1%) the chances of mistakenly finding relationships where none really exist. And there are good reasons for beginning here. The math is straightforward enough; the test is easily explained, and our conclusions are readily comparable with those of our colleagues.

This approach may be a good example of skeptical scientific inquiry, and may serve well as an opening strategy for exploring the world. But it can also foster remarkably poor habits for careful, responsible choosing and thinking. When taught alone, or as the common model of "thinking scientifically," it too easily encourages our students to endorse a policy of waiting, of deferring action until the evidence and our algorithm tell us what we can confidently believe. Some times this posture of waiting may be appropriate. But at other times, when

possible threats to our health, our environment, our families and our cultures are contemplated, such a stance may be imprudent, irresponsible, unnecessarily costly -- and even disastrous. So we need to equip our students to discern these different times, to understand the stakes, and to realize that the absence of scientific proof does not absolve us from choosing.

In closing these thoughts, I would add three last observations. First, I have pursued this argument in a wholly secular idiom, and have done so by choice, not necessity. We need to begin, I think, with a commitment to keeping our conversations and our schools accessible to outsiders, for whom the vocabulary of faith does not yet resonate. Nonetheless, this is no call to jettison our familiar symbols, terms, and stories. To touch on but a few possibilities, the imagery of sin and grace, idolatry, revelation, confession and conversion continues to guide and shape our thinking in wonderful ways, and can bring a greater richness to our conversations. I envision here a project of faithful translation, and a promising journey of rediscovery. Moreover, such an effort should not be seen as a plea for watering down our Christian symbols, but as a call for making them real and relevant once again. We must urgently address the painful possibility that most of our students, and even many of our colleagues, have but a shallow understanding of the Christian faith. And we must resist the trend of becoming nominally Christian, with the language of faith a self-contained jargon that merely decorates our lives.

Second, the journey into truth provides a natural and promising way for re-embracing the Lutheran tradition which has shaped us. Our tradition's vigor stems from its fruitfulness -- from its continued

potential for shaping, guiding, and sustaining our efforts. As such, we honor our Lutheran heritage, not by defending it or preserving it as a museum piece, but by testing it, exploring it, and putting it to work. And it promises to serve us well. The theology of glory, for instance, meshes nicely with a vision of truth as information, to be triumphantly captured and shared around. Luther's theology of the cross, however, rejects this notion of redemption as a trophy to be won, or borrowed, or inherited, and suggests a truth that must be re-encountered daily, by our sinful, saintly selves. To follow up on one of Professor Benne's suggestions, a renewed confidence in our tradition, and a renewed commitment to seeking and speaking the truth, will bring a refined logic to our recruitment agendas. We need excellent, competent professors, and part of their competence must be their ability to converse on matters of truth both within their fields of expertise and across the university at large. Moreover, a significant fraction of these conversation partners -- in Benne's terms a "critical mass" -- can and should be steeped in the Lutheran tradition.

Finally, I would suggest that we need to carefully prepare our students for living in a world of Untruth. Their relationships to truth will unfold against a world of false goods and false gods, and we must equip them to resist the lure of the crowd, to humbly guard against self delusion, and to face the loneliness of being different. Indeed, with Julian of Norwich, we may strengthen them, and ourselves, with her famous thought that "all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well." But we might well pass along her other insight: that God does not promise that we won't be tested, nor that we won't be tried, but only that we will not be overwhelmed.

Diversity and Dialogue

Florence Amamoto

I usually do not start my articles with autobiography - in fact, this is unique, but I feel it is important to say something about myself to put my remarks in context. I am a third generation Japanese-American who teaches American literature at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, MN. I am a Buddhist--who regularly attends daily chapel. Although I went to large research institutions for all of my own schooling, I have always wanted to teach at a small liberal arts college and feel the church-relatedness of Gustavus is a bonus. In other words, this is the perspective of a sort of "inside outsider."

Mark Schwehn began the closing section of his address "The Future of Lutheran Higher Education" by noting:

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And so I leave you with tasks rather than predictions, opportunities rather than prescriptions, and large ideas rather than a set of discrete practical and programmatic suggestions. I really do think that the future of our schools will depend less upon material factors and more upon the power of our collective imaginations to refurbish our ideal of the Lutheran college and the Lutheran university for the 21st century.

The pressures of "material factors" are immense as any college president will tell you, as are the pressures toward secularization. However, I would argue that first, church-related colleges are vitally important to our society and second, part of this "refurbishing" needs to consider the issue of diversity. Last, I will examine some of the ways in which Lutheranism or church-relatedness is manifest at Gustavus and some of the pressures surrounding them. Although every school is unique, I suspect the issues at Gustavus are not so