

James T. Butler, Fuller Theological Seminary



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Imagine yourself as a first-year student in a prestigious school of design. You have always loved to draw, and as an undergraduate art major you found your interests broadening into a fascination with art in various media. You enjoy the very materials of art, the studio environment, the craftwork. You find that your interest in art puts you into touch with people that you like, who share your enthusiasms and who stimulate your creativity. And you realize that art increasingly informs your ideals — you have come to believe that aesthetic creativity is not only a wholesome but a crucial aspect of life. So here you are, hoping to train for a vocation in doing what you love and believe in.

Now imagine that you are the seasoned professor who will teach the first class that this student takes. You have pursued an academic route to your present post, as have most of your colleagues, and your vita is appropriately filled with analytical works that assess the kind of art that your students aspire to do. You remember, too, your early fascination with the practice of art, the charcoal and the pigments; but in your studies you were quickly distinguished by your interests and abilities in thinking about what constitutes good art, the role of art in society, and other theoretical questions. From the vantage point of your years of experience, you are increasingly convinced of the shallowness of most artistic praxis in our society. Commercialization has corrupted the sensibilities of the public, galleries are obsessed with dumbing down their exhibits to popular tastes, and the best-paying jobs are going to graduate students who will practice what you deplore. You find that even your best students are compromised or coopted by this cultural environment, as they are dulled by the pap they see or as they aspire to train in commercial techniques. So here you are, determined to play your small part in subverting the commercial takeover of what you love and believe in.

Perhaps this kind of *Kulturkampf* is characteristic of all professional education, but certainly it is familiar to those engaged in theological studies. Some portion of our students have come to us with an introduction to theology already begun in undergraduate school. But virtually everyone we teach comes to us from a church, synagogue, or college organization in which they originally became enthused with or convicted about our subject. Not a few of our students are beginning a second career, pursuing at considerable cost and dislocation something that they feel is more fulfilling or more important than what they had done before. And yet, we find, we must disturb their enthusiasm with unsuspected problems and uncomfortable truths. As one of my departmental colleagues once put it, in defense of the substantial hours devoted to biblical studies in our curriculum, “But they have so much to unlearn!”

On Testing Our Imagery: Reconstruction or Transformation?

Surely all worthwhile education requires iconoclasm. However much we may want to promote a relatively incremental growth in knowledge and maturity, we also recognize the acute need to deconstruct false or inadequate understanding. Indeed, it might seem that the more intuitive order for these tasks is to begin by “clearing the ground,” modeling our work as construction that must be preceded by demolition. After all, if the challenge is not sufficiently radical, if it does not rout the defense mechanisms that always protect cherished ideas, the result will either be stiffened resistance or a superficial accommodation. So, whether we proceed with pious pain or unholy glee, we fill our lectures and our reading lists with all of the problems, we eschew easy apologetics, and (to use an expression I heard from an appreciative student) we “blow the kiddies out of the tub.”

But as I look back over thirty years of teaching, I recognize how often such therapeutic “demolition” has unintended consequences. Some students, usually those of a more academic bent, are quickly won over to their professors’ perspective, and begin to acquire the critical tools that will distance them from the cultural womb that produced them. Others will buy into the educational process enough to gain a patina of sophistication, but, faced with the demands and predilections of the theological consumer culture, they will put together the nuts and bolts of their eventual practice in ways that are largely unaffected by their professors’ insights. Finally, a few others simply will become cynical about theological education, get the required degree, and then quite intentionally fulfill their professors’ worst fears by embracing and cultivating values that are now “battle hardened” against wool-gathering academics. I have had experience of such results in mainline Protestant and progressive evangelical environments, but I believe they are found to greater or lesser degree across the spectrum of theological education.

In my experience, an ability to recognize and to imaginatively attend to the nexus of cultures

confronting our students — the culture of their earlier formation and the culture of their anticipated vocational service — is one of the most crucial pedagogical skills that a theological educator can nurture. Our job is not simply to provoke dissonance and crisis, but also to help students to negotiate these crises appropriately — to work with them to find larger contexts of explanation, and, when appropriate, to model honesty and humility in the face of intractable texts or interpretive issues.

Some Examples

One aspect of respecting the culture of the students' theological formation is asking questions about and accumulating examples from their prior interpretive frameworks. In teaching the book of Esther, for instance, I was surprised to learn of a view apparently widespread in evangelical churches that portrays the heroine negatively as one who compromised rather than risk, as did Daniel, a martyr's death. By allowing this understanding to surface, we engaged in a fruitful discussion of various ways of dealing with disempowerment. I was able to mention the story of a Jewish feminist author whose friend was appalled when her daughter was chosen to play Esther in a Purim Spiel: "I don't want her to be Esther — I want her to be Vashti!" Still, were there not values to be affirmed and dangers to be faced in both challenges? Students from societies in which they were part of religious or cultural minorities were able to weigh in with vivid experiences.

I also have found that students are more likely to share aspects of their earlier formation when I am vulnerable enough to share my own path with them at times. In beginning a segment on Daniel, I once took to class a worn book of dispensational charts that I had purchased as a boy with my paper route earnings. They would quickly see that I had other things to offer them, but meanwhile we had a productive time talking about the fascination in some circles with apocalyptic literature, from Hal Lindsey to the *Left Behind* series, with some reminders of ancient antecedents in the history of the church. Once the problems were framed from their experience, and once we had an opportunity to explore not only what we regretted but what might carry theological value in such popular expositions, it was natural to talk about form-critical definitions, comparisons with other literature, analyses of historical and social setting, and new theological assessments.

Communicating respect for the background of students is also a critical element of learning from the diversity of our student populations. It is one thing to recruit and to celebrate diversity, developing pedagogical structures to pose questions that we feel confident will give voice to neglected perspectives; but it is another thing to allow students to articulate their diversity on their own terms. Creating an atmosphere that encourages students to bring their background into the classroom creates not a few surprises. A discussion of call narratives, for instance, might bring from an international student an energetic defense of the need for an audible word

from God, or an account of a dramatic healing or of struggles with spiritual warfare. If we do not begin by privileging western questions, but by inviting a respectful sharing of experience, we end up with a much messier but more invigorating, more truly dialogical discussion.

“Appreciative Inquiry”

In recent years, insights from a theory of organizational change called “appreciative inquiry” have been addressed with interesting results to assessments of both congregational life and theological education.¹ Of the basic assumptions of this theory, two seem particularly relevant to our discussion. First, “[P]eople have more confidence in the journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.” When an organization approaches change by talking about what is wrong “participants express their fears in resistance.” By contrast, “confidence and trust can be built when questions create direct links with the organization’s best and most appreciated narratives.” Second, “organizations are heliotropic”: that is, they “lean toward the source of energy — whether that energy is healthy or not.”²

If our approach to the communities that produce and employ our students is primarily one of diagnosis and prescription, we risk creating resistance or alienation. Perhaps, like our colleagues in medical education, we need to recognize more fully the value of promoting health as well as diagnosing illness. And we need not fear, I believe, a loss of critical acuity, as though we are accommodating popular pressures and forsaking the lessons we have learned in our guilds. Instead, if we let students know we are in common cause with them, and that we are respectful of their journeys and of the commitments that have brought them to us, they will often be more severe in their critique of poor theology than we could be, and more creative in finding constructive and hopeful alternatives.

Endnotes

¹ For an introduction and further bibliography, see the work of my colleague Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004). The recent Carnegie Foundation study of professional theological education adopted appreciative inquiry as their research framework (C. R. Foster, L. E. Dahill, L. A. Golemon, and B. W. Tolentino. *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006], p. 384.)

² Branson, 24–27.