THE GRACE OF TEACHING

Mary C. Boys

I. Introduction: Titles!

I've been carrying in the back of my brain for some time the tensive character of the theme of this year's conference. On the one hand, we're exploring what it might mean to "nurture souls." On the other, we're investigating the "sciences of human development." The two activities have a very different feel, and evoke contrasting images.

I've also been worrying about this tension as I mused on what to say, perhaps in part because when I reflect on my life as a teacher in the Christian community, neither phrase fits comfortably. "Nurturing souls" catches for me neither the embodied character of teaching nor the dissonance of challenging persons to take on strange, new ways of thinking and acting. The phrase "sciences of human development" suggests an instrumental, empirical realm far removed from the emotionality of learning. "Nurturing souls" suggested I should immerse myself in the literature of depth psychology, and the "sciences of human development," in the literature of developmental psychology. I know just enough about these fields to respect the wisdom they offer, but it is not the wisdom on which I rely. So how should I navigate my way?

Educational philosopher Margret Buchmann, in a wonderful essay to which I will return later, says that for teachers ultimately "uncertainty and imperfection are overtaken by the need to act." A phone call a few weeks ago from the Lilly Fellows office asking for a title for my presentation initiated the first action. It wasn't a day with time for extended reflection, so I let resolved to go with what rose to the surface. "The grace of teaching" immediately came to mind, only to be rejected just as quickly. Too simplistic and too pious for such an academic audience, I said.

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But "the grace of teaching" it was to be, not simply because I lacked time to formulate a cleverer title (or a more pretentious one). It just wouldn't go away. In my heart of hearts, I believe teaching is a deeply spiritual undertaking, a graced experience of a God revealed in often surprising ways. By working at becoming a teacher—let me be clear that teaching is a "costly" grace—I believe I'm also being drawn more deeply into the gracious vitality of God. At the same time, my understanding and practice of Christianity shape my activity as a teacher. To the extent that I wrestle with the demands of discipleship, I discover some disturbing questions about priorities and pedagogical practices. And a deeply consoling affirmation about where one's passion and energy are most wisely spent.

With my own title decided, I revisited the conference theme and saw it with new eyes, remembering the comment of Flannery O'Connor that "The action of grace changes a character. Grace can't be experienced in itself . . . Therefore, in a story all you can do with grace is to show that it is changing the character" (Fitzgerald 1979, 275). O'Connor knew that a novelist must *show* a character's qualities, not merely refer to them. Concrete detail and evocative images and lines of action enable readers to "see" grace at work. So, too, does knowledge about how human beings mature and learn—the "sciences of human development"—provide us with a means to nurture and challenge the depths of those whom we teach, that is, speak to their souls. If a college or graduate education is to be a "graced experience," then we will have to embody grace in word and deed, using every resource we can. As Jesus put it in that intriguing parable of the unjust steward, whom Frederick Borsch calls the "resilient rascal" (1988, 17-24), ". . . for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

In my presentation today I will attempt to construct a dialogue between the two worlds of Christian discipleship and educational work. Does being a practicing Christian make any difference to our pedagogical practices? Does the fact that we are teachers working in colleges and uni-

versities influence our understanding and practice of Christianity? My intent is to evoke gratitude for the graced character of our work and animate our holy perseverance in this strenuous profession. For it is also our own souls that need nurture.

First, however, a word about that elusive term "soul." Poet David Whyte tells us that "soul" immerses us in two worlds:

> We know intuitively that the word Soul represents energies and qualities in human beings that defy categorization. Soul stands for both a life bound and held by time and a life outside of time. Contemplating soul, we might imagine simultaneously both the worm burrowing through damp, close-packed soil and the hawk forgetting itself on a keen wind. We live between two worlds, both equally difficult to embrace: the first and most familiar, a life struggling through the everyday grit and grime of incarnation, and the second, perhaps more fleeting because of the stressful nature of our time, an experience of complete participation and joyful self-forgetfulness. We have, on the one hand, the devil in the details—the trash, the washing up, the necessties of bill paying and earning the money to do so—and, on the other, a numinous experience of existence where all our strategies melt away in movement and encounter (1995, 94).

My plan is simple. I will develop five convictions about the nature of teaching that come from my "lived knowledge and probed experience." As I proceed, I will explore how each of the five relates with the Christian life. Since I intend both my convictions and the connections to Christianity as a catalyst for extended conversation, I hope they will stimulate you to articulate your own deepest beliefs about teaching as a Christian vocation.

II. Five Convictions about Teaching and the Christian Life

1. Teaching is fundamentally about relationships, about not imposing oneself upon the subject or upon the learners, but in fashioning an appropriate response to both. As in all relationships, it is dependent upon the ability to listen and to make connections. It is grounded not simply in interpersonal relationships, but also in a relationship with the subject matter. There is no substitute for knowing one's subject and for working that through in light of the pedagogical process. Teaching requires us to think our way from the subject matter as we understand it into the minds and motivations of those we teach. Teaching involves the asceticism of de-centering, of imagining how others might come to grasp a concept or feel about a controversy.

Accordingly, we have no formulas to follow. If anything, much of contemporary literature regards teaching, in the words of Joseph McDonald, as an "uncertain craft":

> Real teaching, I learned in time, happens inside a wild triangle of relations—among teacher, students, subject—and the points of this triangle shift continuously. What shall I teach amid all that I might teach? How can I grasp it myself so that my grasping may enable theirs? What are they thinking and feeling — toward me, toward each other, toward the thing I am trying to teach? How near should I come, how far off should I stay? How much clutch, how much gas? (1992, 1).

McDonald's language contrasts sharply with the literature of twenty or so years ago, which manifested greater interest in explicating "scientific" models. These earlier studies (e.g., the Flanders Interaction Analysis Category System, the Florida Taxonomy of Cognitive Behavior), tended to isolate classroom encounters in the quest for empirical data. Two leading theorists expressed the prevailing ideology in 1974: "The classroom activities of teachers and pupils are observable events. They have discoverable causes and consequences"(Dunkin and Biddle 1974, 29). Researchers of this era "investigated" by "observable means" derived from "performance criteria." Today, however, qualitative research has largely superseded quantitative studies. Researchers work at less distance in their efforts to get inside the ways teachers think. They use "participatory action research" and work with case studies. The current literature approaches the teaching-learning process with a certain reticence.

> Teaching and learning are such complex processes, and teachers and learners are such complex beings that no model or practice or pedagogical approach will apply in all settings. A lot of fruitless time and energy can be spent trying to find the holy grail of pedagogy, the one way to instructional enlightenment. No philosophy, theory or theorist can possibly capture the idiosyncratic reality of your own experience as a teacher. . . . As teachers we cross the borders of chaos to inhabit zones of ambiguity. For every event in which we feel things are working out as we anticipated they would, there is an event that totally confounds our experience (Brookfield 1992, 197-198).

"As teachers we cross the borders of chaos to inhabit zones of ambiguity." I muse often on this line. In a strange sort of way, it is consoling. More than that, it reminds me that the classroom is holy ground, that the relational character of teaching places us not in the realm of the observable and measurable, but in that of the *mysterium fascians et tremendum.* We are not to be totally in control. Even as we strive to be clear and compelling in our presentation of material in order to help others comprehend the world, we are immersed in the incomprehensibility of the Holy One at work in creation.

Note the tension inherent here. We are obliged to

use our God-given minds to their fullest extent. "A shallow mind is a sin against God," as one of the characters in novelist Chaim Potok's *In the Beginning* phrases it. Or, as Roberta Bondi recounts in her evocative memoir, "It is God who gave you your mind; never be afraid to use any of God's gifts to its fullest" (1995, 75). So we must cultivate reason, logic, analysis, planning—demand them of ourselves and of our students as a *religious responsibility*. At the same time however, our religious tradition provides language by which we might place rationality in its proper place. It provides us with a respect for finitude and with an awareness of mystery.

It also offers us stories and images by which we might invite others into the realm that transcends rationality. Our Scriptures are filled with paradox and poetry, lest we think that God could be revealed in merely propositional speech. Elijah discovered God not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in the "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:12; NRSV). The Holy One of Israel, we are told, "used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11). But when Moses requests that he be shown God's glory, he sees only the divine "back," because "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live" (Ex. 33:20).

It is our religious tradition that gives us a vital perspective on the "zone of ambiguity" we inhabit. It is the cloud of unknowing. If revelatory experiences typically happen on the mountain top, it is because the peaks are often obscured by clouds.

Remember Sinai, for example. When Moses goes up the mountain on the third day, it is shrouded in a thick cloud. The revelation is veiled with the mystery of God's elusive presence. And when the venue shifts to Jerusalem, we find not only that mountains surround Jerusalem, but that the Temple rests on Jerusalem's highest place. Clouds swirl about the Temple Mount. At its dedication, a cloud of incense fills the Temple (1 Kings 8:10-11). We are told (Leviticus 16: 2,13) that incense hides the Divine Presence in the Temple. Ironically, it thereby also serves to accentuate it. Similarly, the cloud of Divine Presence overshadows Jesus while he prays on the mountain: Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!" (Luke 9:35).

Is not the educational process like these revelatory moments? The lure of the mountain. The desire to know more, to see more. And the experience of never having a clear vision. Only a view obscured by mystery. Intense study reveals the breadth and depth of our human longings, but it never satisfies them. Gregory of Nyssa reminds us in the *Life of Moses*: "And this is the real meaning of seeing God: never to have this desire satisfied. But fixing our eyes on those things which help us to see, we must ever keep alive in us the desire to see more and more. And so no limit can be set to our progress towards God."

2. Teaching is not to be confused with telling or with technique (though both are utilized). Teaching revolves around *thinking*; it is an intellectually rigorous activity. One, of course, learns to teach by doing. But doing alone is insufficient: it must be a deliberate doing, i.e., a practice that is imagined, rehearsed, enacted, reflected upon and redone. Lee Shulman offers a useful heuristic, worth quoting at length (1987, 15):

A Model of Pedagogical Reasoning and Action

- **Comprehension**
  Of purposes, subject matter structures, ideas within and outside the discipline

- **Transformation**
  Preparation: critical interpretation and analysis of texts, structuring and segmenting, development of curricular repertoire, clarification of purposes.
  Representation: use of a representational repertoire, which includes analogies, metaphors, examples, demonstrations, explanations, etc.
  Selection: choice from among an instructional repertoire which includes modes of teaching, organizing, managing and arranging.
  Adaptation and Tailoring to Student Characteristics: consideration of conceptions, preconceptions, misconceptions, and difficulties, language, culture, and motivations, social class, gender, age, ability, aptitude, interests, self concepts, and attention.

- **Instruction**
  Management, presentations, interactions, group work, discipline, humor, questioning, and other aspects of active teaching, discovery or inquiry instruction.

- **Evaluation**
  Checking for student understanding during interactive teaching; "testing" student understanding at the end of the lesson or units; evaluating one's own performance, and adjusting for experiences; consolidation of new understandings and learnings from experience.

- **Reflection**
  Reviewing, reconstructing, reenacting and critically analyzing one's own and the class's performance, and grounding explanations in evidence.

- **New Comprehensions**
  Of purposes, subject matter, students, teaching and self.

Yet not all thinking is directed toward decisions about the content or the students or the "multiple small uncertainties" of the pedagogical process. A teacher's thinking must also include contemplation. Contemplation teaches us how to pay attention. "Contemplation sets aside ties to self-involved willing and feeling, to given conceptual frameworks and schemes of utility, substituting a careful attention that does not exploit the object of thought, nor change it in any way." If we fail to pay attention, we will fail at teaching. A Japanese friend told me that when she began her teaching career, a sage veteran told her to image each of her students at the end of the day. If she couldn't recall a particular face, she hadn't been paying sufficient attention to that student.

I mentioned in the introduction Margret Buchmann's phrase "uncertainty and imperfection are overtaken by the need to act." It is appropriate here to reflect on the full paragraph for which that sentence is the conclusion:

> Teaching demands recognizing that students and teaching subjects can neither be known altogether, nor once and for all. The more teachers think about their subjects, the less they are sure of their ground, becoming clearer about the limits of their understanding and coming to share in the "learned uncertainty" of scholars. The more they contemplate their students, the more they will become aware of the fact that their knowledge of them is imperfect and constructed, a fallible vision also because people change, and are supposed to change, in school. Still, students and subject matter have to be brought together, on given understandings. Uncertainty and imperfection are overtaken by the need to act (1989, 18).

Contemplation, which William Shannon defines as "a way of making oneself aware of the presence of God who is always there," has deep roots in Christianity as well as, of course, in Eastern religious practice (1993, 209). The art of contemplation depends on fostering awareness, cultivating wonder and drinking deeply from the wells of silence.

3. Perhaps we might term this, following Sharon Parks, "led where we did not plan to go." Rigorous preparation and attentive enactment neither assure us of achieving whatever end we had intended nor account for what happens in the souls of those whom we teach. At least three corollaries suggest themselves. The first: the more painstaking our preparation, the more prepared we will be to lay it aside in order to follow the flow of the process. It is sometimes necessary, as football fans here know, to call an "audible." For those who find analogies drawn from the athletic field mystifying, we might look to an aphorism coined in 1891 by philosopher Josiah Royce: ". . . [W]hen you teach, you must know when to forget formulas; but you must have learned them in order to be able to forget them" (1965, 113).

The second corollary: we will learn as much, perhaps more, from those strategies that failed or fizzled as we do from those which seemingly succeeded—if we engage in that move Shulman calls "reflection": reviewing, reconstructing, reenacting and critically analyzing one's own work and the performance of the students. (On Mondays even the audibles get reviewed!) The third corollary I believe to be of the greatest importance: we will never know precisely what has been transformative in the soul of another. We can, of course (and should), assess whether someone has comprehended the vocabulary or understood key concepts or successfully synthesized material. We don't know what's happening deep inside the soul of another—and, thankfully so, or we would never find the courage to go into the classroom day after day, year after year. To the extent, however, that we try to raise questions that transcend formulaic solutions or to inspire communion with an author's passion, we will likely glimpse only a shadow of what is happening—if at all. Teaching requires faith the size and expansiveness of the mustard seed.

All this requires us to negotiate a delicate balance between intense involvement in the pedagogical process and proper distancing. "How near should I come, how far off should I stay?" Just this week, for instance, a student from whom I would not have anticipated a significant degree of self-revelation told our section a soul-rending story about her educational journey. Stunned, I found myself praying that my response might honor the profundity of her revelation. How does one appropriately manifest awe at the courage many students show in persevering in study despite enormous pain?

Perhaps Paul's formula ("I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase" [1 Cor 3:6]) is the most apt account of a teacher's function in the "science of human development."

4. Teaching involves playing many roles, most of which are not on center stage or at the podium but behind the scenes. Precisely because teachers encounter so many multifarious situations, plan for so many diverse circumstances, and make so many decisions while teaching, Lee Shulman argues in a memorably entitled article, "It's Harder To Teach in Class than To Be a Physician" (1983:3). Some of our most important roles are played off stage—designing creative assignments, crafting engaging questions, offering extensive response to papers, reworking a syllabus in light of student needs. Others are risky, such as committing oneself to rely less on the lecture and more on interactive strategies. Some of these roles come more

naturally to us, and others impose new demands on us, demands for which we may feel prepared neither by personal predilection nor by professional training.

Talk about risk may seem like cheap grace when we're gathered in the safety of a conference. Back at the "Bar-S," however, it's not so easy. It's the lifted eyebrow of a senior colleague, or the acerbic comment of the department chair. Worst of all, it's the rolled eyes from students—or their closed ones. The folded arms. The look that says this is a waste of time. On such occasions, we are mightily tempted to revert to the tried and true—but we do so at risk to our own souls. Contented students who pen glowing evaluations may be good for our longevity (and may their tribe increase and multiply!), but they may distract us from the pursuit of deeper wisdom. Satisfied customers may suffice for the marketplace, but not for the classroom.

On days when I'm tempted to follow the path of the tried and true rather than risk some creative venture, I find it freeing to think of the ways in which Jesus taught. He not only challenged people to "take care what you hear" (Mark 4:24a), but listened to the deepest longings of those he met—what Nelle Morton terms "hearing into speech" (1985, 202-209). He had a special ear for marginal people, whom he taught particularly by his hospitality.

Jesus challenged people to enter imaginatively into new ways of understanding. His puzzling stories and provocative questions compelled his hearers to take a fresh angle on the taken-for-granted or to consider a radically different reading of reality. And, though the parables were intended not so much to convey information or to list ethical principles as they were to persuade hearers to a new way of living, they demanded that people think.

In particular, I find the parables an invitation to creativity. They depicted God's reign in vivid speech. Nearly always they took a surprising turn: rogues commended for their cleverness (Luke 16:1-9); last-minute workers on par with early birds (Matt 22:1-15); erring children—prodigal sons and grumbling elder brothers—both accepted (Luke 15:11-32) and despised Samaritans revealed as heroes (Luke 10:30-37). As one commentator has quipped, people probably reacted to the parables by scratching their heads. "I don't think I get what you mean by that story. But if I do, I don't like it" (Crossan 1975, 55-56).

I'm not suggesting that we all need to go forth to emulate Jesus as a brilliant story-teller. I am, however, hinting that discipleship to Jesus, God's parable, invites us to risk playing some roles with which we might have some initial discomfort. If, after all, the children of this age are so shrewd in dealing with their own generation, how much shrewder must we be in teaching for the reign of God! Are we not to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves"? (Matthew 10:16).

5. In teaching we experience ourselves as both vulnerable and privileged. Teaching brings us face to face with our finitude, with our ignorance, clumsiness and narrowness. Too little in my own background, for instance, has prepared me for the diversity of Union Theological Seminary. On my best days, it's exhilarating. On other days, it's *ascesis,* the experience of my own parochialisms unveiled. As Roger Simon says "As a 'place' of meeting and an act of provocation, teaching is an occasion where one may come face to face with difference. It is a place where one is constantly confronted with the incommensurability of that which cannot be reduced to a version of oneself" (1995, 90).

Accordingly, Margret Buchmann writes, "[Teaching] demands . . . a sturdy self on the part of the teacher, combined 'with a yielding and receptive character of soul' incompatible with undue concern for self-protection of advancement" (18). A sturdy self? Perhaps on our best days. But what about those times when we feel fragile, dull and distracted?

So teaching brings us face to face with our limitations. Knowledge beyond our mastery. Students whom we know in fragmentary and incomplete ways. Systems that close us in and seem to bleed us of our very life. Demands on our time and energy that overwhelm and sap our energy.

And teaching brings us face to face with our sinfulness. We do not always use our power wisely or in the service of others. Our pursuit of knowledge may lead not to wisdom but to self-aggrandizement. We may use the authority our knowledge bestows on us in domineering and authoritarian ways. We may develop an inflated sense of our self-importance. Like the disciples, we may vie with one another for places of honor, counting citations of our own works and envying others the spotlight. We sin, thereby failing one another, our students, ourselves. And so we are thrown back upon the compassionate God in whose mercy our transgressions are removed from us "as far as the east is from the west" (103:12).

Conclusion

The ultimate grace of teaching is that God desires the flourishing of creation. God desires that we teachers help others to flourish, and so participate in the work of creation. Perhaps the "sturdy self" Buchmann advocates is best imaged in Psalm 1. We are to be "like trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in due season and whose leaves do not wither." Gerard Manley Hopkins ends one of his unnamed sonnets: "Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain." This is for me the prayer for teaching. "Nourish my roots that I may be sturdy enough to enable others to flourish. Let me be receptive, welcom-

ing, like fertile earth. Let growth be abundant."

Teaching not only embodies grace. It graces all who submit to its discipline. To paraphrase Hopkins, teaching keeps all our goings graces. ❑

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