



# LED TO PLACES WE DID NOT PLAN TO GO....

Sharon Daloz Parks

We human beings seek places of equilibrium—a balance of the familiar and the unfamiliar, stability and motion, the predictable and the infinite variant. We become contemplatives at the seashore and the fireside because both places can arrest us in their perfect balance of constancy and novelty. If we human beings have too much stability we become bored; too much of the unfamiliar and we become stressed. Great liturgists and great educators know the art of crafting that balance between the yearning for preservation and the yearning for transformation—whether in a cathedral or a classroom.

As this is the initial presentation in this conference, it is fitting that the phrase I selected as our topic, “Led to places we did not plan to go” is half of my favorite invocation which in its entirety reads:

“How do we know that God is with us? We know, because we will be led to places we did not plan to go.”

When we enter into the comfort and adventure of worship, or the work of contending with a new challenge, this invocation affirms that “God is with us”—evoking trustworthy presence; yet simultaneously it awakens us to the unknown, the Mystery that is beyond all that we can ask or think, continually inviting us toward more adequate seeing, being, knowing, becoming. That is, learning. This invoca-

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tion reminds us that as people of confessing Christian faith, our hearts rest on the cusp of the familiar and the novel, tradition and surprise. The pattern is always changing; faith confesses that while God may be the same yesterday, today, and forever, this is a living, dynamic God that we worship. What we have learned to trust is the motion of God’s activity—the activity of Spirit, Holy Spirit, Creator Spirit, who shapes and re-shapes the pattern of our lives, creating and redeeming all things.

The flip side, however, was well expressed by a minister who observed in his reflection on the stories in the Gospels of Jesus and his disciplines, “It appears that you can be reasonably sure you are following Jesus if you are disappointed about half the time.”

This kind of faith stands us in very good stead in the time in which we have been asked to live. We live in “cusp time”—one of those break points in history that others after us will look back on and have a name for. Those who lived in the Renaissance didn’t know as they lived through the break-down and break-up of the medieval world that centuries later we would tell the story as a time of rebirth. And like them, as we long for a manageable equilibrium, we are undergoing a great deal of disequilibrium. We are made keenly aware of this by the dramatic events of these days leading up to our gathering. A court verdict in Los Angeles is greeted with both triumph and stunned disbelief—the differentiation drawn on racial lines. Another great storm hits the Gulf and we are reminded that this is not simply “an act of God,” but that human agency plays an increasingly significant role in the global disequilibrium in weather patterns. These events coincide with economic upheaval reflected in the words of Derrick Bell, quoted in *Time*, (October 9, 1995) which sought the comment of several cultural leaders on the Simpson trial. Bell responded:

O.J.'s trial has served well the need for the society, and particularly the powerful corporate and government leaders, to have the public diverted during a period of great economic turmoil, when literally millions of people are being downsized out of their jobs, often by corporations that are showing respectable profits. Anxiety is great, and while much of it is shifted by politicians to affirmative action, welfare, crime and other race-related issues, the O.J. case has served to take up thousands of hours of media time with what amounts to entertainment. The Amos 'n' Andy show served a similar purpose during the Great Depression.

We have a bone deep awareness of the specter of ecumenical, ecological, and/or economic holocaust in the 21st century. The deep question of our time is: Can we all dwell together—even flourish—in the small planet home we share?

This is the large context in which we gather as faculty and administrators and ask what it means in this time and in our institutions to "Nurture Souls." How do we understand this work and vocation? Our conference planners have posed the question: "How do Christian accounts of human development—cognitive, moral, spiritual—differ from and/or parallel various secular models of development proposed by the sciences such as psychology or anthropology?" How might developmental models inform what we do in the classroom? Does it matter if learners are souls or psyches? My purpose here is not to answer these questions, but to help us begin to think into these kinds of questions together.

#### Once Upon a Time....

I did not grow up planning to do this kind of work or grapple with these kinds of questions. I have been led to places I did not plan to go, but I don't think that my story, in this respect, is distinctive. I suspect that if we devoted our time here—as we inevitably will in some measure—to telling our individual stories of how we came to do our present work, most would tell a story something like this. "Once upon a time I was...and then I learned...and then I planned...when unexpectedly,....But then it turned out that...."

If we listened attentively to each others' stories we would begin to notice patterns among them; we would wonder if they were unique to this group and if so, why or why not? We would draw on additional experience, reflect on our methodology and discipline, form hypotheses, and test them. We would be most strongly motivated to invest time in this kind of activity if we believed that it would be useful to us in the future. Depending on the focus of our attention, our emerging theories might be psychological, sociological, anthropological, or biological. If, among this

group of professionals, we incorporated into our stories the sense that we had been "led by God," our theories would also be theological.

Since we here are people of confessing Christian faith, it is interesting to wonder what language or models we might use to speak of the ways in which we have changed. Would we speak of conversion, salvation, formation, or sanctification? Would we tell a story of moving from Egypt, through a wilderness, to a Promised Land? Would we say, "Once I was blind, now I see"? Would we speak of having tasted of the fruit of good and evil? Would we tell a story of a Pilgrim's progress, a spiritual journey, an intellectual journey, a story of moral development? Would we speak of discipline, grace, hard work, gifts—death and resurrection? Would our stories reflect an ongoing dialectic between trust and fear, alienation and belonging, power and powerlessness, despair and hope? Would our language be religious or secular? Spiritual or academic? How would we define knowledge? Would our stories and theories stand in contrast to, parallel to, or one with "faith"?

#### Religious or Secular?

In his book *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* Mark Schwehn engages this kind of question. In doing so he refers, not without a certain charge, to "devotees of Perry." Indeed, it is appropriate that he and others reflect on the strength and limits of Perry's work which has considerable influence in American higher education, specifically in colleges such as those represented here, who are committed to teaching and attentive to the experience of students.

I suppose that I am vulnerable to the charge of being a Perry "devotee." When I published *The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith, and Commitment* in 1986, I hand delivered a copy to Bill Perry as a sign of appreciation for him and his work which has informed my thought in significant measure. As we exchanged a bit of chit chat, he was casually leafing through the index, doing a bit of counting. Shortly he reported with impish delight, "Good, you have cited Perry thirteen times; God—twelve!"

As I have reflected on the questions which Schwehn raises about Perry's work, particularly his positioning Perry's model as "secular" in contrast to "religious," specifically biblical models, I have become keenly aware that I learned the "Perry scheme" primarily from Perry directly, and secondarily from his book, *Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. Let me reflect with you upon two different stories from Perry's 25 years as a tutor-counselor-professor-administrator at Harvard.

Many years ago it was the policy of a president of

Radcliffe who will remain nameless, to immediately expel from the campus any student who was discovered to be pregnant. The Dean, however, perceived the policy to be harsh and inhumane, and at the risk of her job and in partnership with Bill Perry—a counselor at the Bureau of Study Counsel—she would protect a bit of time so that the young woman would have some opportunity to participate in the decision and shape the circumstances of her leave taking and be treated so as to affirm, to the degree possible, her own dignity, integrity, and sense of agency. In one particular instance, it was taking a little longer. The Dean was understandably uneasy. She called Bill, and he heard her anxiety speedily carrying her away from her best hopes for the student. Bill interrupted with a soft whistle like the one we use to call someone back. There was a pause. Then the Dean quietly said, "How much more time do you need?" Bill said, "Can you give me another twenty-four hours?" The Dean responded, "Okay, you've got it."

In more recent years, there was a young man who during his time of being a student at Harvard suffered a serious automobile accident. In the end he recovered, except in one respect. His right leg was fully and permanently disabled. Over a period of many months, he met with Bill Perry, doing the hard work of coming to terms with this new reality. One day he came to the office, they settled into the space in customary fashion, and Bill waited for the young man to begin the conversation. They sat in silence for an entire hour while the young man seemed to be undergoing the deep reordering of soul within that can only be faced if we are not utterly alone. At the end of the hour, he simply said, "Thank you." And the two parted.

Bill Perry has often said that to be a counselor is "to worship before great mysteries" and to be a part of a motion of life that is larger than the client and the counselor. My respect for Bill Perry's work is rooted in my respect for his capacity to be with us in the reordering of our souls and to share with us what he has learned.

As we live in a time when all of our souls are being reordered in deep and pervasive ways, we do well to keep company and be informed by those who are able to sit, and wait, and dwell with that process, and to learn from them. Social science at its best is one way of doing that; when it works well, the boundary between secular and religious models becomes more permeable.

### **Formation of Commitment to the Common Good**

We hope that it is in this spirit of reverence, care, and the search for truth in the service of compassionate and faithful living that my husband, Larry Daloz, and I, along with two other colleagues, Cheryl and Jim Keen, undertook a study several years ago which seeks to understand how

commitment to the common good is formed and sustained. In a world that is becoming increasingly fragmented and where many are feeling overwhelmed in the face of complexity, diversity, and ambiguity, we are asking: "How do we become the people—the citizens—that are needed in the 21st century?"

Grounded in the disciplines of constructive-developmental psychology, community development, political science, education, and theology, we have studied over one hundred people who are able to sustain commitment to the common good when they are not naive about the global reality in which we now live. The people we studied recognize that we are living in a time when the technologies of travel and communications have spawned a global economy which relativizes nation states and serves as a catalyst by which cultures collide and old tribal wounds are re-awakened. They recognize that we are now living within an expansion and intensification of interdependence as we find ourselves dwelling on a new global commons.

The people we studied roughly represent the demographic make-up of our society, though ten percent grew up in other countries. They represent a broad range of professions and geographical-social locations. Because each of the authors is located in higher education and because we are ourselves religiously committed, we have, of course, been attentive to the influence of both higher education and religion in the formation of commitments to the common good. We believe that what we have found is important in a society in which it has been suggested that particularly the institutions of business, religion, and education are preparing our young people for a world that isn't going to be there.

What we have found in the lives we studied will be published this Spring in a book entitled: *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*. Of particular significance for our discussion here as we consider how we might "nurture souls," are three broad patterns: The importance of environments which foster both trust and agency; the critical role of certain habits of mind; and the power of constructive encounters with otherness.

### **Trust and Agency**

While much of human development has focused upon the journey of the individual, an increasing awareness of the power of context and the interdependent nature of all of life compels attention to the environments in which people are formed. As we listen to the accounts of the influential characteristics of the environments in which people now committed to the common good were nurtured, we have gained appreciation for the importance of people learning that the world is not "out to get them."

This means that as people move from childhood, through adolescence, and into the college and university years, it is important that in the expansion of their world that occurs at each juncture, they can discover again and again that their world is "trustworthy enough," and thus they can be open to new truth, to discovery, to possibility, to doubt, to curiosity, and to the adventure of learning. In the absence of people and institutions that "hold well," the young person must necessarily become defended—even armored—in ways that preclude new learning.

This is particularly important during the college years. In these years, the assumptions of childhood—whether conservative or liberal, religious or secular—are brought to the test of a wider inquiry and a wider sociality. Yet term tests can be passed, papers written, grades received, and awards given—while a defended "faith" stays in place. Convictions about what is ultimately true and dependable—religiously, politically, economically—may remain untouched and unexamined if lines are rigidly drawn and defended between "what matters" and "school work," or between "the academic disciplines" and "spiritual-religious life." On the other hand, when there is a climate of trust and respect and a commitment to truth, there can be a powerful examination and reordering of meaning which engages not only the intellect narrowly understood but the intellect of the soul—the whole of being. In this kind of intellectual engagement, meaning is informed and reordered in ways that re-center identity and purpose in a reality that has become more spacious and tested—at once both more complex and more trustworthy.

But the formation of a more adequate ground of trust is insufficient if it does not lead to more confident action. People who are able to work on behalf of the common good have learned that they can make a difference. In a time when there is, in Walter Brueggemann's phrase, "a surplus of powerlessness," we need people who not only see clearly, but who can exercise moral courage. This implies a re-examination of our curriculum, assessing where, if at all, students learn that they can make a positive difference. Many of those whom we interviewed had during their young adult years participated in some kind of movement—e.g. the student Christian movement, or the civil-rights, anti-war, or feminist movements. But how is it that in "ordinary time" students learn that they can make a difference? There is a growing interest in student "volunteerism." This reflects an important awakening of social awareness and potential commitment. However, if there is little or no conversation between the experience of serving in a soup kitchen or refurbishing a community center for low income people and the academic disciplines, and if there are few occasions when one can explore and begin to understand the web of institutional assumptions, economic

and religious ideologies, and political policies that give rise to economic disparity, the new global commons remains a cold and hungry place for millions. Further, volunteerism becomes a sop to the conscience of a young person who believes that in the end it is simply a cut-throat world in which the first task is to care of me and mine and volunteer in the time left over. In contrast, when volunteer activity and classroom reflection take place in tandem, and truthful connections are revealed in disciplined forms, young adults and their professors will be led to places they did not plan to go.

### **Habits of Mind**

The quality of experience, conversation and learning that fosters commitment to the common good is dependent upon certain habits of mind, and the cultivation of these habits is presumed to stand at the heart of purposes of colleges and universities. Learning is dependent upon a challenging dialogue between self and world. The practice of dialogue that is transforming is grounded in perspective taking, the ability to see, as it were, through the eyes of another. Howard Thurman has spoken of this act as a miracle. He wrote:

It is a miracle...when one man, standing in his place, is able, while remaining there, to put himself in another man's place. To send his imagination forth to establish a beach-head in another man's spirit, and from that vantage point to so blend with the other's landscape that what he sees and feels is authentic—this is the great adventure in human relations....To experience this is to be rocked to one's foundations...We are not the other persons, we are ourselves. All that they are experiencing we can never know—but we can make accurate soundings.

The greater the care with which this form of perspective taking is exercised, and the more perspectives brought to bear, the more accurate our perceptions of life and truth may become—whether we are working in the science lab, a philosophy class, or wrestling through an issue in the dormitory. Such perspective taking is critical to citizenship in the new commons, and it is learned only in environments which call it forth and provide initiation into its disciplines and supporting structures.

But also vital to the flourishing of the new commons is a capacity for holistic-integrative thought. As schooled as we are in the cult of narrow, disciplinary expertise, there is an increasing need for people who can work on a part while cognizant of its relationship to the whole. It has been said that "spiritual people are people who can see the connections among things." And while religion is thought by many in a secular age to constitute but one strand of a busy life, religion at its best serves as a lens through which the

whole of life may be perceived in fitting relation. Thus as Whitehead saw so clearly, all education is ultimately religious—fostering the capacity to see life whole. One person we interviewed said, “When I’m working on the details I try to ask, what is the larger thing I’m doing here? To be able to work on the details and keep the big picture in view is what life is all about.”

Embedded in disciplined practice of holistic thought is critical, systemic thought—the ability both to see the connections among things and to step outside a “system” and reflect on its strengths and limits. The academy does take pride in the formation of critical thought. But it is the linking of critical thought with a capacity for holistic thought that challenges the organizational and ideological norms of most colleges and universities. Yet human beings seek to make sense of the whole of self, world, and cosmos. And when the questions of integration, wholeness and ultimacy are neglected, we become vulnerable to narrow, arrogant, cynical, and finally dysfunctional interpretations. On the other hand, when we learn to practice thoughtful dialogue about living questions across disciplines, institutions, and sectors, our souls are stretched and we are led to places we did not plan to go.

#### **Constructive Encounters with Otherness**

Human beings are highly social creatures and we are appropriately dependent upon “networks of belonging.” We are best able to thrive when we have a secure sense of place and people. The history of human life cannot be told apart from the imagination of “tribe.” We all need tribe. No matter who we are or how sophisticated we perceive ourselves to be, we are oriented to tribal norms whether they be obvious and explicit or subtle and diffused. But the shadow side of tribe emerges whenever “we” would tolerate treatment of “them” that we would not tolerate among “our own.”

The single most defining pattern we found in the formation of those committed to the common good was that sometime during their formative years (which in some cases extended into their thirties) they had a constructive encounter with another or others significantly different from themselves. That is to say, they had a significant, transforming encounter with another outside their own tribe.

An encounter with the other re-orders our assumptions about “we” and “they” when it allows us to discover that the other suffers as we do, knows yearning, joy, love, hope, and disappointment in the ways that make us most deeply human and constitute the dimensions of life that foster empathy and compassion. When we recognize the other to be as fundamentally human as ourselves, our sense

of “we” is enlarged and forms the ground of commitment to the common good.

College can be the place of such meeting. But this kind of meeting is dependent upon the establishment of an environment that fosters trust, agency, dialogue, perspective taking, critical-systemic and holistic-integrative thought. This kind of meeting is dependent upon more than simply bringing people of differing experience and perspectives into mere proximity to each other. This kind of transformative meeting takes time. It requires support and intentionality. It belongs in any curriculum that is going to prepare us for participation in the commons of the 21st century. One of the women we interviewed told us:

I had my most important interracial, international experience of my life when I was a senior in college. The Hollingsworth Fellowship sponsored young people from all over the world, and our theme was: “World peace can be brought about only by world understanding.” You can’t understand people unless you live with them. The experience came at the time in life when it’s needed most, when you’re developing your philosophy of life.

Learning to see through the eyes of the one who is other to us inevitably takes us to places we did not plan to go.

#### **Formation of Souls**

In short, what we discovered in our study of people who can sustain commitment to the common good is a kind of consciousness, an apprehension of life as it is in its profound interdependence. But along with this apprehension of life in its complexity and diversity, is the ability to tolerate the consequent ambiguity because truth has become large enough to acknowledge Mystery which they do not comprehend but steadfastly seek to apprehend more faithfully. They typically reveal an elegant mix of hubris and humility, what might be described as a strength of soul.

There are some who suggest that to “care for souls” is to depart from the rigorous work of disciplined cognition. Our times call for great souls, that is, ordinary souls committed to the common good. The imagination of the world has been captured by the likes of Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel, and Maya Angelou. These embody an integration of intellect and spirit that our study suggests is dependent, in part, upon experiences of trust and agency, the ability to take the perspective of another, to practice critical, systemic thought, and holistic-integrative thought. It is dependent upon constructive encounters with otherness. To “nurture souls” is a great and demanding work, and it will lead us to places we did not plan to go. □