life work

Stephanie Paulsell

The gift of the Lilly Fellows Program is to ask us to think about our work in the largest possible context, to resist thinking of our work as a series of tasks rolling out endlessly before us or as a wholly specialized enterprise compatible with only a narrow range of institutions, but as life work that might take root *anywhere* because it is life-*giving* work—life-giving for us and for the world. And the larger community of colleagues keeps our life work rooted in an ever-deepening conversation about the study of the liberal arts in the church-related academy. Being a part of these conversations has made an immeasurable difference in my life.

When my Lilly fellowship ended, I taught at a Roman Catholic theological school for two years. That was the last job I have had in a church-related institution, strictly speaking. In my years of the fellowship I focused on teaching the humanities and the arts to undergraduates in a church related-college or university. As it has turned out, I've spent most of my career trying to help graduate students in ministry studies find their way back and forth between the pleasures and challenges of liberal learning and their own vocation to ministry. Although I have not been working in the church-related academy as we define it here, I find that I am still immersed in the same set of questions about the relationship between vocation and liberal learning and religious faith that occupy all of us.

University-related divinity schools are usually categorized by their universities as "professional schools," a designation that raises all kinds of interesting questions about the place of liberal learning in our enterprise. At our opening convocation this past fall, the president of my university spoke about the work of a "professional school." In the business school, he said, we teach our students to "think like managers." In the law school, we teach them to "think like lawyers." In the medical school, we teach them to "think like doctors." Having spent a great deal of last year getting to know the Divinity School through the process of appointing a new dean, the president seemed to want to urge us to be more clear about what we teach our students to "think like."

I have to admit that I was not very comfortable with these comparisons. Getting a Master of Divinity degree ought to have a lot more in common with getting an education in the liberal arts than with going to medical school. But I must say, the president's question has stayed with me. What *does* it mean to think like a minister? What does it mean to think like a scholar and teacher of the humanities? What does it mean to think like a faculty member in a church-related liberal arts college? And what does how we *think* about our vocation have to do with how we practice that vocation?

Now, as you may know, the Internal Revenue Service understands ministers to be self-employed. My former minister in Chicago, the Rev. Susan Johnson, used to make much of this when she came to meet with my students. Ministers are *radically* self-employed, she used to tell them, because ministry is a job that doesn't exist until the minister gets out of bed in the morning and starts doing it. "The culture is not holding a place for ministry anymore," she would tell them. "You will have to make a place for ministry." I have found what she said to be true. When the minister wakes up in the morning, she is faced with endless possibilities for how she might spend her time—there are parishioners to be visited, sermons to be prepared, the Bible to be studied, public issues to be addressed, struggles for justice to join. There is a lot at stake in how the minister chooses to spend her time. The vantage point from which she surveys the many possibilities the day presents and the

agility with which she is able to move between these possibilities is what will give shape not only to her own ministry, but to ministry itself.

Reverend Johnson also used to tell my students that ministers are some of the last great *generalists* in our culture. Wherever she is, she tells them, she finds herself called upon to speak to people's fiercest hopes for their common life—whether those hopes have to do with community policing, public housing, or what kind of music the congregation will choose to breathe out their praise to God.

I WOULD ADD TO THE GROUP OF THE "LAST GREAT generalists" teachers in church-related liberal arts colleges who are constantly called upon to teach outside of their specialized fields of study; those, for example, who are teaching Kant, Genesis, the Mahabharata and Chuang Tzu to first year students. Like ministry, teaching in a church-related liberal arts college is itself an art. What does it mean to think like such an artist? I find at least one possible answer in Psalm 49: "I will incline my ear to a proverb," the psalmist sings. "I will breathe out my riddle to the music of my harp." To think like a Christian teacher of the liberal arts is to think *with*—to think with texts and communities, music and silence, friends and strangers, and, if we are to take Jesus seriously, it is to think with our enemies as well. It is to incline our ear to as many proverbs as we can find and then to breathe them out again, transformed, in the midst of the communities in which we practice our vocation—in classrooms and congregations, prisons and shelters, committee meetings and chapel services and office hours.

To think like a Christian teacher of the liberal arts is to think with—*to think with texts and communities, music and silence, friends and strangers, and, if we are to take Jesus, seriously, it is to think with our enemies as well.*

In the context in which I teach, the language we reach for when trying to describe the possible deep relationship between vocation and the liberal arts is that of the "learned minister," the "educated clergy." If ever a term cried out to be re-imagined and reinvigorated in our own day, it is this one. I fear that when we speak to students of our desire to form them into "learned clergy," a picture of someone like George Eliot's Mr. Casaubon rises unbidden to their minds. Casaubon, barricaded from human relationships by his manuscripts, sits alone in his study, wholly consumed by his research for his *Key to All Mythologies*—a scholarly project that will never bear fruit, that will never make a difference in anyone's life.

This is not what I have in mind for my students. Rather, I hope that they will enter into a life of ministry formed by the practices of reading, writing, learning and teaching: a life of rigorous and loving attention; a life that turns toward the world and its troubles with its heart wide open, bearing the best resources it knows how to gather; a life that eagerly embraces and embodies the creativity that faith demands.

Of course, the kind of liberal learning that we cherish is crucial to this way of "thinking like a minister": it depends upon the slow, deliberate reading of texts, vigorous conversation, and a porous vulnerability to the pain of the excluded and the brokenhearted. It requires that we approach our studies as Simone Weil once suggested, as a way of enlarging our capacity for attention, which not only enables us to make ourselves available to ideas and stories that are not our own but is the indispensable condition for making ourselves available to God in prayer, and making ourselves present to our suffering neighbors.

But my students are worried about the relationship between their vocation and liberal learning. Many of my students come to Divinity School fresh from powerful experiences in the Jesuit or Lutheran Volunteer Corps or the Inner City Teaching Corps. They fear that they are locking themselves away in an ivory tower, far from the frontlines of the work for social justice that first awakened their call to ministry. And if my colleagues and I don't practice our vocation with attention, if we fail to offer an invitation to liberal learning that is saturated with love of the world, these students end up understanding their years in divinity school only as a way of becoming credentialed, or as a way to ensure future admission to a Ph.D. program, or, worst of all, as a necessary interruption on the way to the Real Work of Ministry. These students are not unfamiliar with the pleas-

ures of intellectual work, but they often feel guilty about experiencing it. A few days after September 11, 2001, a student parted from me by saying, "Well, I'm going home now to read my Kierkegaard. As if reading my Kierkegaard's going to do any good when the world is on the verge of war."

I wish I could tell you that I sprang to the defense of liberal learning in that moment. I wish I could tell you that I said, "Oh, but it does. You are learning to be present to something other than yourself. You are learning to love the world in all its beautiful, terrible, complex detail." But the truth is, I muttered something rather indistinct, and went back to my own reading with the same uneasy questions: am I doing, in the words of Virginia Woolf, the work that is most necessary for me to do? We must never take our answer to that question for granted. We must constantly re-narrate our answer—not only for ourselves, but for our students.

WE ALL KNOW THAT IT IS POSSIBLE TO PRACTICE our vocation of reading and writing, teaching and learning, as a way of barricading ourselves from life, like Mr. Casaubon. It is possible to be like the gentleman Newman speaks of, a person who is cultured, but not changed, by his reading.

But fortunately those are not our only options when imagining the vocation that we share. A practice common to our shared vocation, something we do every day—the practice of reading—is essential, I believe, to our envisioning our vocation. It is perhaps *the* practice that shapes how we and our students think—like ministers, like teachers, like scholars, like Christians. And it is a practice that might, as John Henry Newman dreamed, shape how we and our students live.

My favorite image of the Christian as reader comes from Augustine's *Confessions*, when, in his own passionate reading of the first chapters of the book of Genesis, he imagines the firmament stretched out like a skin between earth and heaven to refer to scripture. The firmament helps us draw near to God, to be sure, but it also hangs between earth and heaven, separating us from God. We—its human readers—are like the stars in the firmament, clinging to the strange, old words of scripture with both our hands, trying to catch a glimpse of God through its veil. We are made for this, Augustine believed. To be a human being, for Augustine, is to be a reader.

THE ANGELS ARE ALSO READERS, HE SAYS, BUT they read the very face of God. Their reading, unlike ours, "is perpetual, and what they read never passes away." For Augustine, words, both spoken and written, because they are temporal and will not last, are reminders of our distance from God. But they also hold open a place in time in which the eternal can break in; they are reminders of our life in time, a life sustained by God, a life in which we can change, be converted, and turn towards God. As temporal and imperfect as words are, there is something holy about attending to them as readers.

If you are like me, you may often experience reading not as an attempt to see the face of God, but as a burden, or even as a source of guilty feelings. Do you feel that you are always behind in your reading? Do you feel that there are always more books on any given topic than you can possibly read? That in order to keep up even a little bit with the reading that confronts you on our research agenda or even on your own course syllabi—somehow I always forget that if I assign a book a week it's not just the students who have to read them—that you have speeded up your reading to such an extent that you are no longer able to linger over a book, or a sentence, or a phrase? Sometimes I feel like I have forgotten *how* to read: "how to leave aside our search for subtlety and originality," as the historian of ancient philosophy Pierre Hadot puts it, "in order to meditate calmly, ruminate, and let the texts speak for us."

Four themes in relation to reading are especially relevant to this discussion: first, what the historian of reading, Alberto Manguel calls "the fear that opposes reading to active life;" second, reading as a way of deepening our relationship with God; third, reading as a way of deepening our relationship with others; and finally, reading *with* others—not only with our students and colleagues in church-related institutions, but perhaps even in churches as well. A culture of reading in our churches would make a big difference, I think, in how we practice our vocation in church-related colleges.

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Allow me to begin with a story.

It is 1989, and I am reading in a yellow armchair under several blankets, trying to stay warm in my basement apartment in Chicago. A pile of books stands next to me on the floor. I am reading for my qualifying exams, one book after another, pen in hand. I am reading literary theory, medieval church history, and mystical theology.

While I read, my younger sister is in El Salvador, working with a non-governmental human rights group. They all live together in a house with a barricaded door. I cannot call her on the phone while she is there. She entered the country from Guatemala on a student visa, but she is a student in no university. She is accompanying the human rights workers as they go about their work, taking depositions from survivors of massacres, photographing bodies that turn up on the streets and in the countryside nearly every morning.

I sit in my chair and read. One of the things I read is a sermon by Meister Eckhart on the story of Mary and Martha, two sisters who love Jesus but who respond to him in different ways. Eckhart has an interesting take on the story, different from anything I've ever read. He explains that when Jesus says Martha's name twice—"Martha, Martha, you are worried about many things"—he is showing his *approval* of her choice to work actively to receive him. Martha is not carping at Mary, Eckhart insists, when she asks Jesus to tell Mary to get up and help her in the kitchen. Rather, she is *worried* about Mary, worried that her sister will be content to sit at Jesus' feet, bathed in pleasant feeling, and never enter into the soul-making work of active service. Mary needs to get up and learn *life*, says Eckhart. It is only by getting up and joining Martha, he says, that the saints become saints.

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"The fear that opposes reading to active life" has a long, persistent history in western philosophical and religious thought. One of the earliest, and still perhaps the strongest, articulations of this fear can be found in Plato's *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates tells the story of the Egyptian King Thamus's rejection of the gift of the art of writing offered by the god Theuth. Thamus declines the gift for several reasons: he believes that writing will destroy memory, for if people know that they can find information in a book, they will not bother to inscribe it in their hearts. He worries that written texts offer a mere semblance of wisdom, convincing readers that they are wise when they are not. Written texts allow readers to read without a teacher's instruction; they can fall into anyone's hands; they are dangerously democratic. And worst of all, written texts offer only a ghost of "living, animate discourse." Books can't respond to the reader; books can't defend themselves against incorrect interpretations. Writing, Thamus fears, will undermine the art of living conversation, grounded in relationship, in the unscripted exchange of ideas between particular persons in a particular context. Reading a book, he worries, is something quite different from active life.

Henry David Thoreau picks up this theme many centuries later, cautioning us in *Walden* that the partial view of the world provided by reading can blind us to life. "But while we are confined to books," he writes, "though the most select and classic,. . .we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard. . . Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer? Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk on into futurity."

Alberto Manguel illustrates "the fear that opposes reading to active life" with a story from twentieth-century Argentina, told to him by the novelist Jorge Luis Borges:

> . . .[D]uring one of the populist demonstrations organized by Peron's government in 1950 against the opposing intellectuals, the demonstrators chanted, "Shoes yes, books no." The retort, "Shoes yes, books yes," convinced no one. Reality—harsh, necessary reality—was seen to conflict irredeemably with the evasive dreamworld of books.

Neither Socrates nor Thoreau would have agreed with the anti-intellectual dimension of the slogan of the Peronistas. But they would have had some sympathy with the idea that reading can distract our attention from what is really real. Perhaps, during these last weeks, you have wondered about this yourself. Perhaps you have wondered, as a student put it me last week, what good reading your Kierkegaard assignment is going to do when we are on the verge of war?

ANYONE IN MINISTRY HAS FELT THIS STRUGGLE. Certainly every seminarian has experienced it. It is not always easy to convince ourselves that our reading and writing in seminary is not an escape to an ivory tower. It was not easy to convince myself, as I sat in my yellow chair reading my books, that I was not somehow sitting out on the real work of the universe that my sister was so wholly engaged in. And it is surely not easy, when a minister wakes up in the morning, and tries to make choices among the many urgent tasks that the day presents, to decide to set aside a portion of that day for reading.

There are many answers to this dilemma, including Alberto Manguel's contention that reading is an act of subversion rather than passivity, for it is precisely the tyrants who urge us to put down our books by censoring them or by portraying reading as the opposite of living. When my sister returned home from El Salvador, this is what she said to me. And she reminded me that she was led to El Salvador, in part, through her reading.

It is entirely possible to read as a way of sheltering ourselves from what is going on around us. It is possible to use reading as a kind of anesthesia. But the kind of reading that goes on in church-related colleges and universities should be a kind of reading that draws us ever more deeply into the life of the world and into the life of the God who sustains it. In places like this, reading should *be* real life. And for that kind of reading, we have rich resources from the living tradition of our faith.

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Another story.

I am eleven years old, sitting in the backyard with my father after supper, swinging in a porch swing he has set up in the shade beneath the pine trees. The flower-beds and rock gardens he has created curve around us. He is holding in his lap a small notebook with the picture of a fierce-looking bulldog on the cover, the mascot of the sports team of Atlantic Christian College where my dad teaches. Beneath the bulldog, in block letters, my dad has written LECTIO DIVINA.

I am holding a tattered copy of the psalms, the Gelineau translation used by the monks at the abbey of Gethsemani, a community my father loves. I am reading him his psalms for the day, and we are talking about which verses he might record in his notebook. For as long as I can remember, my dad has been reading straight through the Psalter, over and over, six psalms a day, and writing down one verse from each on which to meditate as he goes about his work. Most of the time, he reads his psalms in the early mornings before my sister and I wake up or in moments snatched between classes and meetings. But his day has been busy, and it is only now, in the early evening, that a quiet space has opened up. This is lucky for me, for he has invited me to read his psalms aloud to him. I read slowly, and try to pay attention to which words, which phrases, which verses speak most clearly to me. I think about which notebook *I'd* like to use for *lectio divina*.

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This is one answer to the fear that opposes reading to active life. For this way of reading is an integral part of an active life. It is not an escape from it, nor even really a pause in the midst of it. Here, reading itself is an activity that might transform—although slowly, slowly—the many ways we act in the world.

This way of reading has a long history in Christianity and often goes under the name *lectio divina*. It is a way of reading intended to sharpen the attention of the reader to God's presence and even to leave the reader vulnerable to an experience of God's presence. It was born in a culture that cherished books, a culture in which a book was a rare thing, the result of the labor of many hands. We get a sense of that culture in the *Customs* of the Carthusian order, an order of monks and nuns whose "active ministry" in the world was the making of books. Their *Customs* speaks of books as nourishing food, much to be desired. Throughout the *Customs*, books and food are linked together; indeed, the monks gather in the cloister to receive books and the implements of book production from the sacristan at the same time they receive legumes and salt from the cook. On Sundays, the monks enter the refectory in order to feed their bodies by eating and their souls by listening to someone read. The monks are exhorted to take good care of the books entrusted to them and to produce new copies with great eagerness because books are, the *Customs* say, "the food of our souls."

So it is no surprise that one of the richest, loveliest descriptions of *lectio divina* came from a

twelfth-century Carthusian monk named Guigo II. In a letter to his spiritual director, he describes the reading of scripture as the first rung of a "ladder of monks" that stretches from earth to heaven. Reading, he says, is like putting a delicious grape in one's mouth, and meditation, the second rung of the ladder, is the chewing of that grape through bringing all the resources of our reason to bear upon it. Prayer (the third rung) extracts its flavor. And contemplation (the fourth rung) is the sweetness that gladdens and refreshes. Meeting God in contemplation is a gift, Guigo says; none of us can make it happen through our own efforts. But through our reading, Guigo suggests, we are made vulnerable to it, available.

I DIDN'T KNOW ALL THIS HISTORY WHEN I WAS A child, reading psalms with my father in the backyard. I just knew this was something he did, something he felt it was important to do. Over time, I came to understand why this was so, why my father has made *lectio divina* such a central practice in his life. I know he wants to be available to, and guided by, the sweet presence of God of which Guigo speaks. I know he wants his life and his imagination to be permeated with the language and images of the psalms. I know he wants to pray with all who have ever prayed the psalms—with the monks of Gethsemani, with his students and the members of the churches he has served, with the many others around the world whose names he will never know but who also open their Bibles to the middle each day and breathe out those ancient words, with Israel in exile, with Jesus on the cross. I think my dad would say that his practice of reading six psalms a day undergirds every aspect of his vocation—as a minister, a teacher, a scholar, a father, a husband, a friend. It is a method of reading that is deliberately slow and meditative, an attempt to write ancient precious words deeply into the heart and the mind. Far from being opposed to active life, such reading transforms active life—slowly, to be sure, but also daily. Over time, such daily, repetitive reading has the potential to effect what David Tracy has called "a slow shift of our attachments, a painstaking education of desire."

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A third story.

I am sitting in my office when Santiago Pinon, a first-year M.Div. student, comes to tell me of his excitement over a class he is taking on negative theology with Jean-Luc Marion and David Tracy. He is holding in his hands a copy of Professor Marion's book, *God Without Being*. As he pages through it, looking for his favorite passages, I can see that Santiago has marked up the book in at least three colors of ink.

"The first time I read this book," Santiago says, "I read every sentence three times, just trying to figure out what Professor Marion was saying. "Now," he says, "I am reading it again, trying to figure out what the idea of a God without being might have to say to the homeless ex-convicts I work with. I think there is something here for them."

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He was reading it again, not just through his own eyes, but through the eyes of formerly incarcerated, badly wounded men. And he expected to find something for them there.

If, like the student I mentioned earlier, you are wondering why you should read your Kierkegaard when the world is on the verge of war, this is one important answer. This is a way of reading on behalf of the world. Faced with a reading assignment of the most esoteric sort, Santiago didn't waste time complaining that the theology he was being called upon to read and study was too abstract, too theoretical to have anything to do with real life. Instead, he saw it as an alternative account of real life, albeit an unfamiliar one, and set about reading it with an eye towards the homeless ex-convicts with whom he ministered. Like practitioners of *lectio divina* who make themselves available to God through their reading, Santiago made himself available to *others* as he did the hard work of reading and rereading, outlining and underlining that the text required.

All our students need to know how to do this, how to read on behalf of others. Tom Long says this is precisely the work of the preacher. In *The Witness of Preaching*, he says that the preacher goes to the text on behalf of the people. The reading and study that preaching requires is not preparation for ministry, he insists; it *is* ministry. Like those practicing *lectio divina* and thereby reading with a com-

munity of readers that stretches across time and place, those ministers, like Santiago, who read with others in mind never read alone. They read with and on behalf of those with whom they minister.

But it's not just students preparing for ministry who need to know how to read like this. Living a life of faith is an art. Like the artist who feels that nothing human is alien to her, it is our work, and the work of our students, to make ourselves vulnerable to unfamiliar ideas, to enter into conversation with unfamiliar perspectives in order to live that life as truthfully and courageously as we can. In schools like ours, we do not read for ourselves alone. We read for others, we read for the world.

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But this does not mean that the practice of reading belongs only to students and teachers. No indeed. And for that point, I have one more story.

In 1988, I was asked by Bernard Brown, the dean of the chapel at the University of Chicago, to offer a study group for anyone interested in reading classic texts of Christian spirituality. I was a doctoral student in the Divinity School, preparing for an academic career, and the dean's invitation seemed like a good way to get that precious commodity, "teaching experience." So I agreed and prepared for a study group that would meet six times per quarter, reading Augustine's *Confessions* in the fall, Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* in the winter, and Simone Weil's essays in the spring.

Perhaps you have wondered, as a student put it to me, what good reading your Kierkegaard assignment is going to do when we are on the verge of war? Anyone in ministry has felt this struggle. Certainly every seminarian has experienced it. It is not always easy to convince ourselves that our reading and writing in seminary is not an escape to an ivory tower.

THE FIRST EVENING ABOUT FIFTEEN PEOPLE showed up: a few undergraduates, a few graduate students. A local painter. A young couple. A therapist. A seminary student. A lawyer. A bank secretary. A mildly autistic medical technician. A secretary from the dissertation office and the permissions editor from the University of Chicago Press. They ranged in age from twenty to sixty, in income from low to high, and in denominational affiliation from high-church Episcopalian to Baptist to Unitarian to no affiliation at all.

I don't remember much about my contribution to our first meeting, except that they all smiled kindly at me as I stumbled my way through my introduction to the class and to the *Confessions*. What I *do* remember is that, when *I* finally stopped talking, *they* began to speak about why they had come. And what they wanted, it seemed, was to learn how to pray. They wanted to learn how to draw near to God, and they wanted to talk about how the people who wrote the books we would be reading managed to live their lives in the knowledge of the presence of God. They wanted to talk about what difference such knowledge might make in their own lives. I hadn't seen a group so hungry since I was a child, sitting on the floor of our family's living room, listening as my father and his students talked passionately into the night about God and prayer and the war in Vietnam and about the kind of life work that might make for peace.

Compared with my father, who answered his students' hunger with a seriousness and a quality of attention that they and I found irresistible, my attempts to meet the hunger of this group were pretty modest. Looking back, it seems to me that my main contributions to what happened were these: I arrived at the church on Tuesday evenings, unlocked the door, set up the chairs, greeted people as they arrived, opened whatever book we were reading at the time, and invited them in.

To say that the group began to "gel" doesn't quite describe the bonds that developed over the next weeks and months. Those without a church home began to worship on Sundays at the Chapel. Those who had been at the periphery of the Chapel community began to move to the center, taking on more responsibilities. Most of the group continued our conversation at the university's pub on Tuesday evenings. They began asking me for recommendations for other books to read so that they could continue meeting in

each other's homes in addition to the assigned six weeks of meetings. They shared meals together on those evenings and began taking turns leading the discussions.

As a group, they were amazingly permeable. There was a core of people who provided continuity, but even the core shifted and changed and people came and went. And the group seemed endlessly able to welcome others. A woman showed up one Tuesday night, eager to read St. Teresa. As we got to know her, we learned that she had just been divorced and was about to lose her home. The dissertation office secretary invited her to live with her for a while, and she did. She stayed with her until she was able to get back on her feet and then left for another town. But they remain in touch and still occasionally spend a holiday together.

Soon the group felt strong enough within itself to reach out to the community around them. They organized themselves into groups of volunteers at a soup kitchen, caregivers for people living with serious illness. Those without many family commitments began to spend holidays together, often inviting those from the community who would otherwise be alone to join them. Three women from the group sold their apartments and bought a house together in East Hyde Park. When one of their friends, a young father, fell ill with cancer and felt that his body had become his enemy, they trained themselves in therapeutic massage and, in his last days, returned his body to him as a source of comfort.

How did it happen that a once-a-week study group, sitting together in uncomfortable metal folding chairs in a too-small room evolved into a Christian community that took responsibility for one another and for the world around them? It was surely the work of the Holy Spirit. And what made room for the Holy Spirit to move? Oh how I wish I could tell you that it was the brilliance of the group leader! But I believe that what made room for the Spirit to move in this group was something very simple: our weekly practice of reading books together.

How did it happen that a once-a-week study group, sitting together in uncomfortable metal folding chairs in a too-small room, evolved into a Christian community that took responsibility for one another and for the world around them? It was surely the work of the Holy Spirit. And I believe that what made room for the Spirit to move in this group was something very simple: our weekly practice of reading books together.

In the midst of everything else that happened, the Tuesday night study group remained our anchor and the door through which new people entered. With such powerful relationships forming among the members, you might think the conversation would turn in on itself, away from the books we were reading and onto our lives alone. But, in fact, every single person in the group, without exception, loved to puzzle his or her way through the books we read. They all took such satisfaction in unraveling the threads of difficult passages looking for something true. They loved to read out loud to each other and rushed in each week eager to quote their favorite passages. They had arguments about these books that were so fierce that occasionally their relationships became strained and were in need of mending. The intellectual work that lay at the heart of our community was shared by everyone.

WE NEED TO NOURISH A READING CULTURE IN our churches. It is our heritage as Christians, to understand the intellectual work integral to the life of faith as belonging to all of us, not just to an elite with M.Divs and Ph.Ds. The work of reading belongs to the student learning a new philosophical vocabulary in order to understand the difficult ideas of a difficult book, to be sure. But it also belongs to the homeless ex-offenders with whom he ministers as they sift through lives marked by incarceration and punishment for signs of God's presence. It belongs to medical technicians and secretaries and novice teachers listening for a new word for their lives in the old words of Augustine and Teresa of Avila, polishing those words in the pebbly river of their conversation until they glow. It belongs to the young mother—and I am thinking

here of my own mother—who rises before dawn to read and study and write before her children get up and clamor for her attention. It belongs to the little girls who nuzzle in close to the warmth of their mother's body as she reads them a book.

A Jewish colleague of mine once told me of her initiation into the intellectual practices of her tradition. She was in preschool, and her teacher smeared honey on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and invited her students to lick it off. Imagine being invited into the intellectual work of your faith as a very young child and finding it delicious. Imagine what it might mean for the church if we acted as though the intellectual inheritance of Christian faith belonged as much to a child hearing a Bible story for the first time as it does to a biblical scholar struggling with a difficult passage.

How deeply fortunate we are to be called to the work of reading and writing, teaching and learning. What a privilege to be able to invite students into the books we love. And what a gift to share a faith that asks so much of us, the exploration of which is the work of a lifetime. We can swim and swim in the deep pool of faith and never sound the bottom. That mystery, that struggle belongs to all of us. It is the heart of our life work. Thanks be to God.

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