

Thirst by Mary Oliver

Another morning and I wake with thirst
for the goodness I do not have. I walk
out to the pond and all the way God has
given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,
I was never a quick scholar but sulked
and hunched over my books past the
hour and the bell; grant me, in your
mercy, a little more time. Love for the
earth and love for you are having such a
long conversation in my heart. Who
knows what will finally happen or
where I will be sent, yet already I have
given a great many things away, expecting
to be told to pack nothing, except the
prayers which, with this thirst, I am
slowly learning.

My places in the world

I had to change my intellectual and aesthetic beliefs about the world and about what I was doing in it, and I had to keep on changing them as the world changed—and I changed in it—forever.

–Nancy Mairs (21)

The stories we tell about ourselves are different in each telling and provide a new view in each moment. Sometimes I pick and choose which pieces to say when I tell about my life.

While some aspects of my identity (my white-ness, my woman-ness) cannot be hidden or masked, I still have agency in how I relate to and present those parts of me. My relative power in the world shifts, depending on what I choose to emphasize and who is receiving me.

Unitarian Universalist ethicist Sharon Welch quotes Margo Jefferson, saying “The real test of intelligence in America right now isn’t just the ability to hold two opposing ideas in one’s mind at the same time and still function, as F. Scott Fitzgerald said; it’s the ability to hold at least two opposing identities there as well” (55-56). A few of the sometimes opposing identities I try to hold:

I am an Appalachian girl who grew up at the end of a dirt road with a composting toilet, huge gardens, a wood stove, chickens and cows, a pond with fish, and a car that always broke down. My father never finished college and had a blue-collar job in a factory for 30 years. I went to rural public schools.

I am a college-educated adult. Every one of my aunts and uncles has a college degree. Every one of my grandparents had a college degree. My grandfather was President of a seminary. I usually speak without my southern accent.

I am a Southern white girl who grew up around stories and songs of protest and who knew that Rosa Parks was not just tired, she was part of an organized movement of people of faith.

I am part of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture more than I could possibly ever be aware of.

I am an affluent “American.” I have visited 13 countries so far in my life. I do not speak another language.

I am a lesbian woman who often is assumed to be straight. I am partnered with a woman who is often mistaken as a man.

I am an able-bodied person who usually takes this for granted.

I am a member of a small, mostly white, highly educated religious denomination.

All of these identities (and more) criss-cross and create not just “me,” but also often circumscribe my view and experience of the world and other people. I strive to widen my views and experiences beyond my own set of identities and look for points of interconnection. One of the most memorable moments of my years as an organizer for the social justice group Jobs with Justice was in Kentucky, watching an older straight male union leader and a younger female leader of an LGBT organization on a stage together, talking about why they supported each other’s struggles for rights and equality. Perhaps this exchange especially spoke to me because of my own mix of identities. In my very being I understand the links between the oppression of women, the oppression of LGBT people, and the oppression of working class people, and this understanding informs my awareness of racism and the white privilege I carry. It also means that I cannot advocate for the liberation of some groups of people and not others. Though they didn’t use religious language, the union leader and the lesbian woman reaffirmed my faith in the potential to build a truly transformed society, the Beloved Community where all people are seen and recognized as whole people with dignity given by the Creator.

Before coming to PSR, my work life was devoted to an organization which empowered and organized communities to support the rights of people in the workplace and to change social policy in favor of economic justice. I became well-versed in social and political analysis and strategizing for social change. We focused on the big-picture *systems* of oppression, discrimination and inequality. Yet even within our organization we struggled with sexism, racism, classism, able-ism, and more. And what often felt lacking in our work was attention to spirit and soul. My learning and exploration at PSR have helped me to put the “isms” and our on-going struggles to confront them into spiritual and theological frameworks. For instance, I

now see my attempts to uncover, understand, and take responsibility for the white privilege I carry as a never-ending spiritual process towards reconciliation and wholeness.

Paul Rasor, a Unitarian Universalist minister and scholar, emphasizes the spiritual side of racism, but he could be talking about almost any other system of oppression when he writes:

We must begin to see racism not only as a matter of institutional structures and social power disparities, but as a profound evil.... I am making a theological claim. Racism is an evil, a profound, structural evil embedded deeply within our culture and within ourselves. It is a “power” in the biblical sense. ... Treating racism as an evil, a power that has us in its grasp, may help us realize more clearly what we are up against... To approach it as a human construct and nothing more misses its profound power over us. We are tempted to think it can be dismantled with the right motivation, proper analysis, and good programs. It will take all of these and more, but these, by themselves, are not enough. ()

Approaching my own oppression, as well as my complicity in the oppression of others, from this spirit-centered place roots my action to change structures in a deeper place than abstract ideas of justice and equality, or even a personal desire for liberation. I struggle to be aware of and be accountable to the lived experiences of those who have less societal privilege than me because I want to be free. I struggle to share my own experiences of discrimination and oppression because I want others to be free.

Journeys of Faith

In my experience, realization of grace does not come all at once in a single, sudden conversion experience; it cannot ever be fully captured. A character in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *Animal Dreams* says that revolution is not a “great all-or-nothing.” Neither is salvation. Her character, living in war-torn Central America says,

I think of it as one more morning in a muggy cotton field, checking the undersides of leaves to see what’s been there, figuring out what to do that won’t clear a path for worse problems next week. Right now that’s what I do. You ask why I’m not afraid of loving and losing, and that’s my answer. Wars and elections are both too big and too small to matter in the long run. The daily work—that goes on, it adds up. It goes into the ground, into crops, into children’s bellies and their bright eyes. Good things don’t get lost. (299)

In the midst of war and poverty, she stays rooted to the ground and connected to the bright eyes of children. This is the grace that takes away her fear. In the midst of war and poverty, there are still the leaves to turn over; the moments of grace which allow us to “clear a path” for growth and love. This grace is a combination of seeing and holding on to the good and beautiful, even when surrounded by problems, and choosing to do the daily labor that enlarges that good and beauty in community. This is her salvation and the work of community salvation. “Good things don’t get lost.” At this moment in my life, this simple phrase sums up the basis of my belief. How I journeyed to this point and how I relate this belief to God is a more complex story.

After a church service in which my grandfather, a Disciples of Christ minister, preached, I asked him: “Why do we have to bow our heads when we pray to God?” I don’t remember my age; certainly I was no more than 8 years old. His answer to me then does not remain in my memory, but I do remember the feeling of being confused and indignant. My question on the surface was a somewhat practical one-- If God is in the sky, then why do we look down? However, it contained a host of theological implications, including an assumption that God is an all-powerful being looking down on us from above. Are we shielding our eyes from something we dare not look upon? When we bow our heads are we giving a signal of our obedience?

Flash forward a few years: I am in a Presbyterian Church at age 12. I refuse to say the Lord’s prayer or the Apostle’s Creed. Though I attend all the confirmation classes (and loved them) I decide not to be confirmed. Who was this God the Father and Jesus the Son and what did they have to do with my life as a young girl? Through my family I had generally been affirmed and supported in thinking and saying what I wanted. There was a woman minister in the pulpit of this congregation, so I had a sense that women could be close to God and even be spiritual leaders. Yet the patriarchal language we used offended my sense of self even then. Raised by a feminist mother, I rejected a God who would make me feel inferior or dependent or

simply obedient. As Unitarian Universalist Patricia Lynn Reilly writes about, I was grappling with the “God of our childhood understanding”(446). As a twelve-year-old I rejected that (totally transcendent, totally controlling, totally judging) God, but never fully gave up on the idea that there was another way to approach the Divine.

In my early adult years I was drawn to the Quaker idea of the divine spark within. This is an idea of a radically immanent God; God who is present to us in our inmost meditations and deliberations. God who we discover by listening to the “still, small voice.” There is no outside force telling me what to think or do, but rather an inner impulse to uncover and cultivate. Conceptualizing this kind of God allowed me to affirm myself as a young queer woman with my own power, freedom and self-determination. However, because I had not fully developed an understanding of this inner voice in relationship to others and to creation, the power of this voice was still “my” power, even if it was a power from within. In a way, it was just another version of secular humanism. As I grew older, the independent and immanent “still, small voice” could not contain all my experiences of a power beyond my self that I would call the Divine. I increasingly recognized the Divine in experiences that were less about my individual self and more about being part of a transcendent Whole. I would include many experiences in this category: confronting my small-ness within the vastness and beauty of the universe; being part of an expression of love and justice with other people at a political protest or worship service; recognizing the mystery of loving relationships that transcend individual egos; experiencing a classroom or collaborative process where “the group can generate ideas that go beyond the additive knowledge of the individuals in the room” (Kowalski 137); witnessing the death of my father, when I experienced deeply both the finiteness and the infinity of human existence.

I have found a route through the predicaments of theodicy, divine power, and human freedom in the formulations of process theology. Contemporary process theology BOTH affirms individual human freedom and responsibility AND recognizes a powerful “something” beyond humanity. Key to the process theology understanding of the Divine, however, is a different idea of power. God does not have a “higher power” which helps to “[maintain] the hierarchical organization of the society in which we live” (Gebara 114). Instead, God’s power calls forth, invites, lures, and empowers (Keller 89). Unitarian Universalist minister and process theology adherent Gary Kowalski describes it this way:

God is love, the ever-present possibility of intimacy and compassion. The kind of influence this divinity exercises is not *power-over* but *power-with*: nurturing and deepening the bonds of kinship that hold us in community and keep us in right relation with other living beings. For the downtrodden or downhearted, God’s power lies in the seductive suggestion that a freer, more fulfilling existence is possible. (142)

God is neither omnipotent decider on high, nor is God simply one’s own inner conscience. God’s power manifests in relationship between self, creation, and that which is within all creation yet beyond it. Theologian Catherine Keller calls this “the risky interactivity of relationship” (89). For ecofeminist theologian Ivone Gebara, this relatedness *is* God. She says, “To speak of relatedness as the mysterious reality of God is, in the final analysis, to affirm that God is not a pure essence existing in itself; rather, God is *relationship*” (104). By seeing God in all things, and all things in God, a process and ecofeminist theology affirms God’s continual presence with us, a presence full of possibility for good and liberation even in the midst of evil and suffering. God’s presence *is* in the still, small voice of an individual—but only a “social individual” who is continually and constantly in relationship and interdependence. In this framework, I return to bowing my head for prayer—not in obedience to a controlling and powerful

transcendent God, but to listen to how my life and relationships are calling me to manifest more Love, more Good, more God in the world.

Sacred Words

“We cannot tell in the forest how much of the tone we hear is of the wind and how much of the tree. Neither can we tell in the great passages of the Bible what proportion of the music is of God and what proportion is of man?...We must go to the Bible as to a grove of evergreens, not asking for cold, clear truth, but for sacred influence.” –Thomas Starr King (316)

I draw on many sources, including the Wisdom scriptures of the Hebrew Bible and the Jesus stories of the New Testament for models of what living a life rooted in radical interdependence might look like. I began my adventures in biblical studies at PSR with a somewhat ambivalent view of the Bible. It is no longer seen as authoritative, or even central, in my chosen faith tradition, though many including myself continue to be nourished and transformed by its ancient texts. However, I believe it is ethically imperative for me to be able to understand and engage the powers of the Bible in our contemporary culture and to do so in a critical and life-affirming way. My experiences at PSR in biblical studies have given me new questions to ask and new tools to utilize in this project. My faith calls me to the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” within and beyond the Bible. I have gained a more complex understanding of the many ways to enter the hermeneutical circle; from now on I will see it as a project of ambiguity, an interplay involving ethical choices and imagination, no matter what methods or lenses I apply.

I see the utility of historical-critical approaches particularly in religious education programs (in an adult religious education class for instance), but not for dry discussion about what “really happened” during Biblical times. When historical-critical approaches are utilized in a broader process of ideological criticism then we as religious leaders can help congregants

“learn to claim their spiritual authority to assess both the oppressive as well as the liberating imagination of particular biblical texts....” (Fiorenza 47), to be curious about what kind of ideology is being produced out of that time period, and to recognize the continuities and discontinuities with our own historical and cultural context.

I acknowledge how deeply my own specific identities and life experiences impact how I understand and interpret a text, but as Professor Kuan said in class lecture, “When we read we are never just reading for ourselves.” Here is another place of creative tension—at once being up front about how my own complex set of identities informs my readings, while at the same time being clear about to whom I must remain accountable. I have made an ethical commitment to use the privileges I have as an educated white person from the United States and the power I have as a religious leader on behalf of justice, liberation, and reconciliation. For my future adventures in biblical interpretation, this requires a persistent re-evaluation of my own rhetoric of interpretation,¹ and searching for ways I may be reinforcing some structures of domination, even in my resistant and liberationist readings.

I believe that the written texts we use -- whether Biblical texts, sacred scriptures from other religious traditions, or contemporary poems-- are most illuminating when used to reflect on our current lived experiences. Instead of only asking, “what did this text/author mean?” I think it is much more interesting to ask how a story or poem or hymn might provoke new questions or new perspectives here and now, recognizing that the questions and perspectives will be different depending on who is reading the text. As Mary Ann Tolbert says, “Taking [our] lived differences seriously demands the displacement of dualistic thinking by other, multiple categories of analysis, and perhaps most importantly of all, the willingness to tolerate endless ambiguity...” (308). My reading strategy should depend on my context, the goals of my reading,

¹ As Mary Ann Tolbert suggests, biblical interpretation is really a process of producing rhetoric (Tolbert 316).

and which text I am investigating. Furthermore, I can take the risk to be explicit about my reading strategies within a religious community, remembering that in the end “The reading process does not provide us with any final conclusion... but an endless stimulation to further inquiry and conversation” (Jasper 21).

Theology as Response-ability

“Theology arises out of life and thus reflects a people’s struggle to create meaning in life.” – James Cone (39)

“Theology must be man’s [sic] critical reflection on himself, on his own basic principles. ...Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology follows; it is the second step. ...Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it.” --Gustavo Gutierrez (11).

For James Cone, Gustavo Gutierrez and other liberation theologians, theology is not static doctrine, but a dynamic way of responding to life experiences. It takes a process of reading, seeing, hearing, acting, and reflecting to come to a deeper understanding of self and community in relation to what is transcendent. Believing that my actions take place in a web of inter-relations, my theology-in-process calls me to respond to what I see and experience in the human condition.

On February 27th, 2009, my niece was born. A small little package of newly expressed life. We call her: Beauty. Innocence. Goodness. Miraculous. She has arrived in a world that also contains the beautiful, the innocent, the good, and even the miraculous. It is hard to see a newborn child and not simultaneously be filled with awe at creation, and dread for what the world might bring her way. For we also know she has arrived in a world that contains ugliness, corruption, evil, and tragedy that is most often created through human actions we might call sinful. What are we to do with these two contradictory perspectives about human beings—that we are born beautiful, innocent, and good and that we all contain the capacity for ugliness, corruption, and evil?

My previous congregation, at our child dedication ceremonies, declared that each child has the potential to be “one more redeemer” and Unitarian Universalism emphasizes the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Our Universalist branch grew in part out of a rejection of the Calvinist emphasis on original sin and the total depravity of individual humans, and an affirmation of God’s universal love and salvation. 19th Century Universalist Hosea Ballou, in his *A Treatise on Atonement*, questioned the Calvinist notion of an omnipotent God who would create beings destined for sin and damnation from the moment of their birth. Instead, he said, sin is finite; it is a part of our earthly human condition to make mistakes, but these sins do not live on for eternity. From this affirmation of the ever-present possibility for human goodness, rooted in *imago dei* theology and common to most liberal religious communities, how do we grapple authentically and constructively with the reality of sin? Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams, writing in the 20th century, called religious liberals to “take the risk that we would incur by giving more serious consideration...to the sinful side of human nature” (52).

As explained by theologian Andrew Sung Park, the traditional Christian doctrine of original sin says that it is “universal so that no personal involvement in its act is necessary. This sin is unavoidable. It involves collective, but no personal guilt” (78). All people are sinful, and therefore all people are guilty. The problem, Park says, with this formulation is that it equalizes sinners and those who have been sinned against. In a strange twist, it can become a way for people with privilege within oppressive systems to avoid responsibility for their individual actions. At the same time, it makes people guilty for actions that they did not commit. In my experience, white liberal Protestants (myself included) can easily get caught in this bind of thinking no one individual is really responsible for the powers and principalities that oppress and marginalize, and simultaneously paralyzed by guilt about our positions of privilege. In neither of these cases are we truly looking at our own actions and choices in our lives here and now, which

would lead us to confront our own sinful side. Furthermore, we are not truly addressing how to transform the real pain, suffering, and shame that sin has caused.

As Jesuit Jon Sobrino has written, “We cannot firmly grasp reality without bearing it at its worst.” When I visited the museum at the University of Central America in San Salvador I wondered why they kept the shredded and stained garments of the murdered Jesuits behind the glass, along with the jars of blood-soaked grass from the lawn where their bodies were found, and the mundane objects of life found in their rooms. I admit I thought “Maybe it’s a Catholic thing with relics.” But when I looked at the graphic pictures of their dead bodies I understood a different reason. Over and over we heard from people in El Salvador that in order for the possibility of real reconciliation, the truth must first be told and acknowledged. Holding on to the material evidence of the lives of real people who had real bodies who ate and dressed and played soccer is a way of keeping the truth alive. Rather than an obsession with death, it is an affirmation of life, of the very real, bodily existence of these brave people. In a way, seeing the disturbing pictures of their murdered bodies was a holy moment that helped me to understand this. Holy moments are not necessarily easy, but they confront us with something deep that calls for a response and has the potential to change us for ever.² We can never see in quite the same way again. For me, theology is taking seriously the formulation of a response to those holy moments.

Hope, After All

I realize now that when I entered PSR I was struggling with eschatological questions in response to two life events. The previous year I had decided to leave the social justice organization I had dedicated several years to, in part because of a nagging sense of futility and hopelessness in my work. After deciding to apply to the MTS program at PSR, my father

² I must give credit to Prof. Dante Quick for helping me to this realization in his class, “Theology and Ethics in Black and White.”

unexpectedly died, and I had a lot of questions about what his life and death meant (and, by extension, the meaning of my own).

I was raised in a liberal family with Protestant roots that had an eschatological worldview that was implicit—rarely talked about in a direct manner, but deeply ingrained nonetheless. It manifested as a complete avoidance of conversation about heaven or the afterlife and a complete focus on what we are to do during our lifetime to make the world a better place. Underlying this focus was an idea that the world is supposed to be different than it is. If God has any ultimate purpose for the world, then it will happen through human actions to realize God’s purpose on earth. The “realized eschatology” present in my family upbringing had roots in the social gospel movements of the early 20th century, with an overlay of Humanist belief in the progress of humankind and liberation theology critiques of oppressive social structures. By the fall of 2007 none of these traditions were quite enough to answer my questions. I now have a better understanding of my sense of discomfort with some liberation theologies that say God is on “our” side (the side of the poor, the side of the dispossessed, etc.) and will triumph over our oppressors in the end. However, I have become just as uncomfortable with Humanist answers that place the human person at the center of all. What happens to our hope when we confront the reality that our human efforts alone are not bringing about the Beloved Community we long for? As Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock point out, one of the draw backs of realized eschatology is that it often fails to recognize the good that is already present here and now. They call this a “self-defeating Protestant habit” that “constructs a vision for the future as a hope and enjoins the faithful to labor tirelessly to bring the vision into being” (415).

I too have increasingly come to feel that a realized eschatology that always looks to a future perfection is inadequate for a deeply felt spiritual wholeness because there is always something missing, we are never quite enough, we have never arrived. What Brock and Parker propose is a radical realized eschatology, one that stays awake to the beauty and goodness here

in the world, and holds it up next to brokenness and evil. This requires me to think of time and history in a less linear way, and to let go of an attachment to one particular future end point for our human efforts. This goes against the grain of dominant U.S. culture, and is perhaps especially difficult for those engaged in social justice work. As Paul Rasor says in “The Postmodern Challenge to Liberal Theology,” “we are left potentially without a reference point for our prophetic voice” (26). But I would I lift up four examples that help me envision what radical realized eschatology looks like--they touch on the importance of rejoicing, gratitude, blessing, and imagination.

The first example is an ancient one, from the Hebrew Bible. In Proverbs 8: 22-36 Wisdom, personified as a woman, is alongside God during the creation. Wisdom says she was “daily God’s delight, rejoicing before God always, rejoicing in God’s inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” Wisdom’s role in creation is portrayed as one of emotional joy and of exultation in creation. I understand this role as celebrant as crucial to God’s creative actions, not confined to cheerleading on the sidelines. If Wisdom herself is metaphorical for a human way of being in the world, then she points to our partnership with God in the ongoing process of bringing the good creation into being. One of the ways we do this is through delight and rejoicing!

An example from my chaplaincy experience demonstrated the power of gratitude. He was an older African American man, HIV positive, toothless and homeless. His brother had recently died, and he was unable to go to the funeral because he could not afford the travel. As I listened to this one man’s story, my mind wandered to the structural injustices that shape his life and body and that constrain his choices. I began to think about what needs to change in the world. I wondered how he managed to make it through. My answer came when we prayed together. He began the prayer with a fullness of gratitude that I yearn to carry with me. He began the prayer with thanksgiving for the creation, for that very day, for the gift of life, and for

the blessings he saw in his life. I felt humbled and even shamed; my muscles of gratitude are so weak in comparison. Now, I am not suggesting that we all should just cultivate a gratitude for what we have (no matter how unequitably distributed) and just leave it at that. I *am* suggesting that moving from a place of gratitude for the gifts of life and creation can feed our souls and our living a just world into being.

Noticing, rejoicing, and gratitude can lead us to enact a particular kind of blessing that sees the sacredness of life before us. My favorite description of this kind of blessing is in a novel by Marilyn Robinson, *Gilead*. An elderly minister is recalling a “baptism” of kittens he performed in his childhood. He says,

I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. ...There is a reality in blessing.... It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time. (23)

This blessing does not try to change the recipient into something new and different, or explain away the mysteriousness of life, but simply sees the sacred where it is.

Finally, I lift up the idea of eschatological imagination as outlined by Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff in their book *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, and Resurrection*. They say that “Eschatological imagination is a practice of hope that encompasses a deep listening to the vulnerable voices that confront poverty and the destruction of life-sustaining resources. Eschatological images retrieved in songs, stories, and prayers foster a sense of being awake and acting responsibly in a world full of possibilities” (41). The eschatological imagination is able to hold both the “reality of brokenness and hope of wholeness” (7) at the same time. It does not ignore the bad and the ugly, but sees ritual and creativity as a site for getting in touch with the good and beautiful. Brock and Parker echo a similar theme when they write: “Assuredly, we are

in a world in which the struggle continues. However, it is also true that we already live on holy ground, in the presence of God, with bodies and souls sanctified by the Spirit’s anointing, surrounded by the communion of saints” (417). Our role as humans then becomes to strengthen the creative force, the force of life, the Spirit of Life here around us—to channel and expand that force, to chip away at walls that constrain it, and to widen the narrow pathways it always finds. Good things don’t get lost.

Growing Edges

I believe that one of the most fundamental practices I am learning to appreciate and to let flourish here in seminary is that of ambiguity-- being able to hold contradictory and non-authoritative information, and yet still have prophetic words and work of meaning and value to offer the world. I have been reflecting especially on what it takes to get beyond dualistic thinking in social change work, how to be principled without slipping into self-righteous absolutes or “us vs. them” territory. I am coming to understand that part of the answer is about living a spiritually grounded life that nevertheless remains constantly in a place of doubt and questioning. This is theology-in-process, engaging eschatological imagination and ethical imagination.³

One of the reasons I became a Unitarian Universalist is because I felt there was room for my seeking and doubting. Paul Tillich’s description of the dynamics of faith and doubt has further helped me to more boldly affirm my faith: “If faith is understood as belief that something is true, doubt is incompatible with the act of faith. If faith is understood as being ultimately concerned, doubt is a necessary element in it. It is a consequence of the risk of faith” (Tillich 21). At the same time, I am humbly aware of the fine line between doubt and a lack of commitment. Paul Rasor writes of this pitfall, especially for Unitarian Universalists, saying that “liberals tend to

³ Professor Gabriella Lettini’s course “Liberating Ethical Imagination” helped me to explore these issues further.

hold religious ideas with a kind of tentativeness.... [This] contributes to a certain liberal tendency to avoid committing ourselves to anything, as though deep commitment somehow signifies narrow-mindedness” (16). This is a growing edge for me, particularly as I consider ordination for UU ministry, and making a deep public commitment not just to a faith stance but to a human institution as well. I’d like to be better able to articulate my denominational identity in the context of a commitment to religious pluralism.

My path has been unfolding while at PSR, and I see many possibilities for my next steps after seminary. After beginning the MTS program, I quickly made the decision to switch to the M.Div. program, realizing that I wanted the vocational preparation it offered (regardless of my decision on ordination) and that I wanted more time for theological exploration. My previous work had built solid organizational and administrative skills, and had given me leadership development and group facilitation experience. I chose to do my field education at Sojourn chaplaincy in part because I wanted the challenge of doing something very different from my past work experiences. Whereas my previous work was often about doing, doing, doing (and organizing others to do things), at Sojourn I was able practice just BEING with people. I was also able to make strides in articulating my own theology of prayer, and simply became much more comfortable leading prayer in that context. My field education experience really opened up a chaplaincy path for me that I had not seriously considered before.

The broad range of work that is the life of a congregational minister appeals to my generalist sensibilities. However, when I consider a future in congregational ministry, I confront some resistance within on a couple of different fronts. While I feel that I have good people skills, I am by nature an introverted person. As a leader, I have been much more comfortable being the person behind the scenes helping to move things forward, than I have been as the person “in the front of the room.” This is probably in part a hesitancy to fully take on the role of authority that being a congregational minister requires. (I paid attention to this during my field education

placement, but need to continue to grapple with it.) Not unrelated, I definitely have had anxiety about preaching, something which I had not done before, and a lack of confidence in my speaking voice. I had the opportunity to preach twice this past summer, learned from those experiences, and am looking forward to preaching class this fall.

I can imagine myself returning to non-profit work in a faith-based setting. For instance, my experiences over the past year working as a student assistant in the Contextual Education office have gotten me excited about creating critical theological reflection opportunities through experiential learning. As a part-time organizer for UU Legislative Ministry of California I have been able to bring some of my newly acquired theological tools to bear on the issue of health care reform, and to practice some of my organizing skills in a denominational setting. This fall I will be on a team of facilitators for my church leadership retreat, and I am thinking about how to bring my leadership development and strategic planning skills into congregational settings. All of these experiences give me a glimpse of possibilities in my future.

Finally, I am aware that regardless of “what will finally happen or where I will be sent” I am “expecting to be told to pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning.”⁴ Developing a more grounded spiritual practice was a goal for me here at PSR, and I have found some growth and some disappointments. For me, a meaningful spiritual practice must help me move within and between the expanding concentric circles of inner soul, outer body, primary relationships, immediate community, and wider world. Sometimes this is journaling, sometimes gathering with a spiritual advisor or covenant group, sometimes going for a run in the park, sometimes attending a committee meeting, and sometimes simply cooking dinner with my partner. I struggle with consistency and depth; I am slowly learning; I have a long way to go.

⁴ From the poem “Thirst” by Mary Oliver.

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