

Introduction

Here I am, over halfway through seminary, and I still am enjoying it. The friendships I have cultivated here at Pacific School of Religion are ones I hope will last a lifetime. At the very least, I anticipate these relationships to be professional and spiritual ones I can call upon throughout my vocational ministry. The professors, instructors, and staff have encouraged me and lifted me in ways I did not know to expect, as well as the affirmations and confirmations all along the way.

Here, I present to you a small portion of what I have been processing throughout my journey as a theologian in seminary.

Part I Sacred Tests, Traditions, and Interpretations

Traditions, ancient and sacred stories, and holy rituals are a way of grounding people. Each of these can be a way of transcendence to commune with what is happening—for example, the Eucharist. Participating in the Eucharist in a sanctuary as a church body, with a leader walking the people through the steps of this ritual, can help a person partake in the Last Supper.

Moreover, this moment can be duplicated individually and personally. With permission to take the elements, whatever they may be, outside of the confines of a church and into homes, on the streets, or at a picnic table, we can create holy spaces and worship on the holy ground we walk on, created by God, wherever we may be on the Earth.

The Bible is my sacred text. Through the Introduction to Old Testament and Social Change with Dr. Aaron Brody, my appreciation of ancient stories, places, and traditions is more profound, and I appreciate them more. Through the Social change aspect, I have learned to incorporate it into my sermon preparation and dialogue with others. The History of Christianity and Social Change with Dr. Bernie Schlager also broadened my thinking. Knowing the history of the religion I claim and how other faith traditions have been incorporated into Christianity roots my understanding. With the social change facet, I was able to consider areas of spreading Christianity beyond what I was taught as a young conservative evangelical. It would have been beneficial when I was an overseas missionary. Considering clothing, I wrote in my week six reflection essay paper, "First appearances have been a method of categorizing people for centuries. In this essay, I argue that the early explorers from Europe into Africa, Asia, and Latin America utilized visual appearance as a way to measure and determine a people group as heathen or Christian and, further, to estimate their land's worth for determining the value of it for the imperial who was funding their missions." How many times did I use my American lens to view those I went to serve in their country, on their land? Did I play into James 2:3-4 which reads: "If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here is a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" Had I been educated before setting off to lands unfamiliar to me, armed with little more than my good intentions and prayers, perhaps, I would not have been a systemic colonizer in that way.

Additionally, pastoral care should be where those who need it are. As a homebirth midwife, I have practiced the art of caring for people in their own homes, the sterile and unfamiliar environment of a hospital, and even in hammocks. As a budding pastor providing pastoral care, some people feel most comfortable in the closed doors of the church office. Location is essential, and so is trust. While titles can provide some clout, a person needs to feel safe and have an element of trust in the person they are receiving care from, especially in vulnerable and spiritual situations.

When I preach from a pulpit, my goal is to be personable and to show humanity. I aim to be 100% honest and about 70% transparent. Listeners want to connect with the speaker; moreover, parishioners want to feel as though they know their pastor and that the pastor is one of their own. It is why we often hear people say “my pastor” over “the pastor at my church.” My rationale for not being 100% transparent is to have a boundary between my personal and professional lives. My family is personal to me, and their stories are not fodder for sermons. They deserve the respect of their privacy as much as any other profession I have.

I understand that sermons, leading worship, and rituals are not about the pastor but about the pastor leading people into worship and welcoming individuals to be held in a moment they can carry with them beyond the ceremony or sermon and know they are loved. I am a storyteller in my preaching and draw upon the ancestors for whom storytelling was their method of bringing the history of our lives to life. Storytelling helps people place themselves in the continual history of our origins and the history we are actively co-creating.

For several years now, many people have been deconstructing what they believe and have been taught in church, which has led to a decline in church attendance and membership. I am one of the masses who found myself deconstructing, but as I have matured, I have begun to reconstruct. Deconstructing can become one's identity and usually does not lead to growth when someone does not do something with it. I aim to help those who want to have a relationship with the church or the Divine to reconstruct. To help them reconcile the suffering they have gone through and the suffering of the people written about in the Bible and our ancient stories, including modern history.

I believe sin is something that separates us from God. Separation means different things to people. Their relationship with this helps to build and shape their relationship with God (or their Higher Power). A one-size-fits-all method of belief is not a belief system but conformity. If we were always to conform, then Jesus would not have needed to come to Earth and tear the veil because the Law would have continued to reign. However, this is different from what happened. Jesus did come. Jesus did tear the veil. Jesus did care for the orphans and widows and confronted the lawmakers and political tyrants who were keeping oppressed people oppressed. Through discussion and fellowship, we can reconstruct and love each other together.

So many people utilize social media as a platform to contact people. While we can reach for books written by outstanding authors, the masses also speak up independently. Personally, I prefer to pick up a book and read it rather than holding my phone to get a theological message, which may show maturity or the generational age gap. Regardless, people have ideas to share, and others read them in both forms. This collective is a community of conversation. There is

discourse, tension, praise, questioning, and even harmony. Each of these provides a confluence of ways of thinking that crescendo into a global dialogue about how we can love one another. Sure, some are incredibly different from others, but at the end of the day, people want to be heard and above all, loved. I envision constructing and advancing theological work in my spiritual tradition by listening, discerning, and praying through what I hear and read. I will invite others to the table, draw the circle wider, to join me and help create a space to do so. Far too many times in my formative years, I have listened to sermons where the pastor was telling me how to live, what to think, and what not to do or wear, and these were not necessarily from the Spirit but from a confirmative theology. Where was the serendipity of the Holy Spirit to move in each individual's heart and mind? Where is the freedom to have a personal connection with the Divine with this method?

Salvation is more accessible than we have been led to believe. Theologically, I believe that if a person believes in Jesus, they are a Christian. Done. I believe that we will be in a Heavenly community with so many more people than we think would be there, and that is the Mercy and Grace of God. Beyond this simple definition, the other *modus operandi* is for religious purposes for outward viewers. With this statement, I hold onto my above stance on rituals and ceremonies. They are meant to help us connect with Divinity and with each other. But not for salvation.

Ephesians 2:10 reads, "We are God's masterpiece," therefore, the fluff is fluff.

Part II
My Social Location and Identity

Being a White, lower-middle-class lesbian has given me opportunities not only for growth but to be in places available to me that others are not and, with this, the opportunity to speak into ears that otherwise may not hear. My church is 99% White. We hold forums and classes to become anti-racist. Rich discussions happen organically, and we are able to grow in this area as we seek to be inclusive within the majority White neighborhood where our church sits. Additionally, we have a committee that leads panels to create and educate us on the land geology of our property. In each moment, this is a time for leadership to help people feel what is happening inside their bodies. My education at Pacific School of Religion has prepared me for these times, and the entire first year of classes had a strong bent on anti-racism, how to hold it, and how to reconcile it when appropriate. Admittedly and embarrassingly, I only understood this methodology until I began to apply it personally. I understand now the difference between stating, "I am not racist" and "I am an anti-racist." I am learning the humility of apologizing through my learning when I offend other races. The rich diversity of the PSR facility has broadened my instructional learning; to memory, all of my previous educators were White. Needless to say, I love it here!

As a middle-aged lesbian, I am of a demographic that has a voice to help dispel the stereotype of being a man-hating heretic. Through my advocacy in the Interfaith Equality group in my community, I can be a bridge builder between those who know love is love and those who have contingencies on love. Our society has been moving away from the misnomer that being in the LGBTQ+ community is a choice toward being who we are, including those who are included by choosing to be part of us. The Venn diagram needs more crossover to create safe and brace spaces where all know they are beloved sentient beings on God's earth. My position is to

demonstrate that same-sex couples and families are normal, common, everyday units. While I was a practicing midwife, I was in the closet with nearly all of my clients. I needed to be closeted to be safe within the wide demographic I served. Over the past decade, this wore on me. Making the vocational shift from that ministry toward congregational ministry, I publicly decided not to hide anymore and to be my authentic self. By doing so, I am more honest with those I serve and worship with, which builds a stronger community overall. I talk about my family in everyday language, and my circle appreciates it.

Striving to be "unafraid" in public settings is a challenge for me. There is so much hatred, and so many within my community who identify with me are being killed for who they are as LGBTQ+. Beloved people are killing beloved people. As a mother of five children, I want to set an unafraid example for them, but I also want to live to see them grow. This is a difficult feeling for me. This is part of why I am seeking ordination in an affirming denomination and attending a seminary that *is* unafraid to help me be and serve as I am in a world that we are praying to make better. However, safety is still an issue. I reside in a blue pocket in a very red state. It is commonplace to see a handgun while shopping at the produce market. It is expected to see an overhead airplane fly over Pride Fest with a hateful message trailing from it. My presence is political. My participation is a religious controversy to some. My children see me being bold, brave, and scared. My fellow church siblings see the same. We hold each other. We speak to each other. We proclaim love. I press into the divine love that sustains me.

I read authors who look and think differently than I do. I study words and the use of words by others whose backgrounds are dissimilar from mine. My work and journey are not in a silo; I am

surrounded by scholars and lives that have many stories and wisdom to share. Notably, the poetry of Pádraig Ó Tuama jumpstarted my reconstruction and entrance into this seminary. His phrases and use of two languages, English and Gaelic, and how he collides them together open my own use of phrasing. His social location is from a gay ex-catholic background; he knows scripture well. He utilizes his hours spent at mass and in meetings to create a valuable tempest for his writings. Cole Arthur Riley has impacted me in my spiritual journey, too. Reading the essays in her book *Black Liturgies* jettisons me from my White mainframe to consider systemic racism and worshipping our God.

Strategically, I listen to local radio sermons to consider the perspectives of those who oppose me and my community. Using the verbiage and dialogue that they do helps to include others in the conversation. Keeping a tender ear helps keep the conversation going. As a former very conservative believer, I can understand the perspective and beliefs that conservatives hold. I understand their convictions and respect their rights to express them non-violently. I recognize the arguments that will shut open dialogue down and know that only love will break the barriers. A counselor said to me once, “it just takes knowing one [LGBTQ+] person to change someone’s mind”. If I can be that person who is joyful, loves Jesus, loves people, and is clergy to help change someone’s mind, I am here for it. There is a cavalcade of LGBTQ+ people who have come before me from whom I draw inspiration, guidance, and hope. I am not a pioneer in this life journey of being an out lesbian, and to be a maverick alone is to negate and dismiss the lives who have paid the painful price and diminish the joys they had, and that creates no throughline of faith in Christ, who creates us all.

Part III Spiritual Practices

Prayer, meditation, contemplation, wise counsel, fellowship, continued listening, and learning are paramount to the crucial leadership on social justice, personal integrity, cultural humility, and shared accountability for a flourishing world.

Contemplation as a practice was introduced to me intellectually in several of Dr. Leonard McMahon's courses. As a young child, I always wondered what theologians did all day besides reading and writing. Contemplation is something I had not realized I do because I was told by my parents, grandparents, and teachers as daydreaming. Now I know I was secretly a young theologian!

I would be remiss if I did not include something vital to us all and crucial to me in my work and life, and that is rest. I spent most of my 19 years as a midwife in sleep deprivation, and it played a part in my burnout as a practitioner. My ability to make quick, life-saving decisions is matched to other emergency and first responders. My instruction to the families I served to sleep and heal was true and genuine, and while I had amazing support to "sleep off a birth" at home, my overall sleep debt was not going down, and I paid for it with interest. By the end of the semester at PSR, I have noticed the demon of sleep deprivation attacking me, and it has turned into me attacking those whom I cherish most in my circles. I have had to ensure that I am getting enough sleep to be effective and to care for my own body with earthly minerals to restore my adrenal system from the constant caring for others.

Poetry has been a practice that I have developed since being in seminary. Poetry is a way of pausing and putting a few words together that are a snapshot of what is happening, what I am feeling, or what I am witnessing. Most of my poetry is not shared, but I have begun to be brave enough to read some in class. In Dr. McMahon's *Spiritual Formation for Leadership* (I believe), he permitted me to use poetry in place of the journaling assignment, and it helped me to connect with it in a way that made sense to me, as well as fulfill the goal of daily writing my experiences. Poetry is always there for me, even if I do not get it from my mind to paper.

Also, I have a counselor with whom to process life and not lay it at the feet of family and friends. These help me to care for nature, which is my body, and to minister wholly. Recognizing burnout and preventing it is its own spiritual practice in leadership. Also, rest is ethical. As discussed in my *Introduction to Christian Ethics* with Dr. Lisa Asedillo, taking moments to check in with each other and ground ourselves at the top of each class develops stronger cohorts and familial health. While I have not been able to attend many Online Cafe's founded by Manny Padua, I appreciate the connection when I do. Also, listening to the podcasts that my fellow seminarians have produced and started by Maurice King deepens the Pacific School of Religion culture and carries me beyond the classroom.

Part IV Best Partnerships

Throughout this essay, I have demonstrated that, like the 2024 Olympic slogan, "No journey is taken alone." I believe I have a personal and public relationship with God. As an emerging Congregational pastor, my relationship is also public, and I rely on human relationships to

support me on this journey. Hallelujah that I am not alone! I turn to music, nature, and written and spoken words to partner with me in my formation and to enhance my world.

I steer clear of artificial intelligence as I disagree with the inhumanity of AI. AI limits the creativity that people bring into situations.

As I mentioned above, social media can connect us. Through this method, I have stayed connected with graduates from the classes before me as well as with my cohort. I am sharing the camaraderie in the culture here at PSR. The theologians I study with understand the process we have gone through to reach our milestones.

Professors and instructors generously sharing their wisdom have been a mainstay in my academic journey thus far.

One of my classmates once said, “A sermon cannot sing but a song can sermon.” Although I have sung in several sermons, I understand her statement. Music and song penetrate us. They reach inside our souls and grab us right at the core of who we are. Therefore, I utilize music as a partner in my ministry work.

I feel called into local parish ministry as a congregational pastor. Spring-boarding from my connectivity in the community as a midwife, I am developing relationships locally. I serve in the Interfaith Equality Coalition and the Local Church Ministries through the Central Pacific Conference of the United Church of Christ, serve on our local camp board, and attend the monthly clergy luncheons. Building community and connecting people is part of my ministry. It is theological to show love and encircle marginalized people to care for all, just as Jesus taught.

My passion is to live and preach a radically inclusive gospel. This means I seek out and incorporate opportunities beyond myself and my perceptions beyond my social location. PSR is helping me to achieve just that with its stackable curriculum and ability to double major with a Master of Arts in Social Transformation alongside a Master of Divinity. When I tell persons in the broader community where I choose to study and the formative leadership style, they are impressed and proud of me that I have been attending a West Coast school as a West Coast thinker.

Part V Growing Edges

Reflecting on the growing edges of my current place academically, I have a challenge melding my seminary lessons with my outside circle. Learning from Dr. Dorsey Blake in Spiritual Formation for Leadership, his theology is lived and seeps into his students. Although Dr. Blake has been teaching for a long while and has much practice, my growing edge is to incorporate my knowledge into daily practice so that it evolves into wisdom.

The Concurrent Field Study semesters with Grace Gilliam and Pastor Kamal Hassan gave me the experience of living on this growing edge of incorporating my education into my ministry.

However, I know just enough to speak about some issues without having a good resolve—for example, Black History Month. My church is all White with one Brown person. As Black History Month approached, I brought up to the leadership that I wanted to be cautious not to capitalize on the moment of the month without some foundation as a nearly White congregation. This is where the conversation stopped, and we did not acknowledge Black History Month

except for one sermon. The silence added to our racism. I know that if I could ask better questions, guide people into the conversation, and lead better in an anti-racist way, we could have honored the whole month. This is a frustrating growing edge for me, especially within a denomination that is seeking to be an anti-racist denomination. I plan not to let this mistake happen to our church or other churches I serve in the future.

Technology is not something I fear. However, I have noticed that there is a vast difference between congregants who are very tech-savvy and those who are not. Presently, I am still discerning how, when, or if technologies and modalities are the way of worship in the future because it is more inclusive or exclusive. Is it the direction the world is going in because now it is more convenient or because this is how we want to praise God? A juxtaposition like this is a growing edge for me, especially as a 100% online Lerner here at PSR. But is it best practice to build a spiritual community in a worship setting?

Furthermore, what about those who cannot participate in person? Have the pastoral home visits been replaced by a computer? The human connection still needs to be made. Human touch is achieved by way of a hug or a pat on the hand, and even a high five is what we long for. We are designed to interact with others physically. We bond by hearing a person's voice, looking into their eyes, and watching mannerisms. My one week at PSR, where I preached at the chapel service and attended prom, is a testament to this. Embracing other students and professors is superior to a box on a screen. And again, I go back to the thought that without my screen, I would not know any of these faces that I do from two states away, more with the international students.

Considering the writing of the poem¹ by the author Reinhold Niebuhr (as best we know it to be through years of modification and additions made by others),

God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things
I cannot change,
Courage to change the
things I can, and the
wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardship as the
pathway to peace.
Taking, as He did, this
sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it.
Trusting that He will make
all things right if I
surrender to His Will;

That I may be reasonably happy
in this life, and supremely
happy with Him forever in
the next.
Amen

My growing edge in this is to deeply incorporate my education from PSR beyond academics, one day at a time. I will consider how each lesson shapes me towards congregational ministry and anticipate that I can learn some skills before I am called to a church and avoid harming people while understanding that when I harm, I recognize and correct it.

Conclusion

¹ Niebuhr, R

My personal motto for this next season is JOY. I plan to approach graduation with a sense of jubilee, power, and strength rather than the alternative. I will strive to make meaningful connections with my seminary and other students and staff. I understand I will carry PSR with me for the rest of my life. It is part of me now, after leaving for a couple of weeks, to discern if another seminary was a better fit and directly returning to PSR. I am a social change maker. I will stop resisting some of the areas I have been in and connect more fruitfully. The good people here are the ones who will understand the perspective I have and the meaning of being “unafraid” in a way that others do not. When I need to lean on someone to help me in this area, I will seek out a fellow PSR colleague. Writing and contemplating my academic experience, emotional tension, deep gratitude, and fun throughout my time thus far here at Pacific School of Religion helps me to think of all this as adding all up to the chatoyancy that makes Jenny Jahn who she is.

Bibliography

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