INTO THE FUTURE: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN A GLOBALLY CONNECTED AND DISCONNECTED WORLD -- PROMISES AND CONTRADICTIONS FOR THE FIELD

Comments for Panel Presentation, Religious Education Association, November 9, 2010

Patricia O'Connell Killen, Ph.D.

Exactly forty-eight hours ago I was sitting in Thomas Barry Hall at the Whidbey Institute, in a circle with twenty-five other university faculty representing an array of disciplines and higher education institutions in western Washington. We had been convened for a two-day exploration of "Contemplation and Sustainability," – how contemplative and reflective practices currently were, or could, or should be incorporated into sustainability education. All the participants expressed a desire to teach in ways that are true to their deep, abiding concern for their students and for all beings, though the language of "moral education" would have been opaque to them. All had their own "spiritual" practice. Nearly all presumed that contemplative practices (hear refined disciplines from east and south Asian religious traditions primarily), could and should be incorporated into courses of all kinds; in order to increase students' ability to deal with their own grief and despair, students' sense of connectedness to all that exists, and students' sense of urgency regarding environmental challenges. Yet only a small minority in the room thought the connection of contemplative practices to living communities of faith, or to the theological visions of those communities, relevant to the conversation at hand.

Three days previously I had been sitting around a table in the Foley Library, part of a conversation between the Department of Religious Studies at Gonzaga University

and new Roman Catholic bishop of the Diocese of Spokane, Blase Cupich. In that conversation the bishop spoke candidly about the challenges the diocese faces because of its bankruptcy, acknowledged that its infrastructure is seriously eroded, and shared without any defensiveness that moving into mediation to resolve outstanding issues related to claims regarding outstanding clergy sexual abuse cases was a step in faith, the outcome of which could not be predicted.

I share these two incidents because they illustrate well, I think, the two poles between which religious educators as a community of scholars and practitioners at this time must find their way into a vital future for the profession. In terms of connections to institutional religious communities, the circumstances or conditions in which the field of religious education has existed have been radically altered over the past four decades. In terms of the larger society and the academy, partly due to your own success, the profession is to many, invisible. The future of religious education depends to a significant degree on how the community of scholars and practitioners who make up the field negotiate the shifting landscapes of religious bodies, the academy, and the larger society.

Challenges

Historically, religious educators have existed on the boundaries of stable institutions, or at least demographically thick enough institutions, to be allowed to be creative thinkers and boundary crossers. Religious educators have thought at the edges of institutions about how new insights in educational theory and larger social movements influence the way faith traditions are handed on. Yet today, those historic

faith communities that supported the flourishing of religious education as a boundary-walking field are under stress, their institutional infrastructures far less robust than thirty years ago. And, as these institutions assess their new circumstances, concerns about survival have led to a hardening of boundaries. What results is widespread effort to strengthen the community by clarifying elements of essential identity, ratcheting up expectations that leaders hold firmly to them and reiterate them energetically, and more vocal insistence that members adhere to those central elements. Today the infrastructures of religious bodies in the United States are, by and large, far less open to the imaginative, boundary thinking of religious education that they once were. In fact, in some denominations the work of religious educators is blamed for current fortunes. (Blaming is always easier than thinking rigorously about complicated, multi-dimensional factors that lead to changed circumstances.)

I would go so far as to say that at this moment, to some degree, there has been a loss of trust in the liberating power of religious traditions, when openly engaged, to change lives. The emphasis is now increasingly on clarification and passing on cherished beliefs and practices intact. We are in a moment in which order and conservation, not the unleashing of faith-fueled energy, have become primary concerns. (For a thoughtful analysis of this move in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church, see Robert Brancatelli's critique in "Liberating Catechesis: A Call for Imagination and Renewal," *America*, September 13-20, 2010, pp. 17-20.) There is a certain irony in this emphasis, of course: some of the same leaders who see a need for order embrace new communication technologies that of their very nature contain the capacities to disrupt externally enforced orders.

Even as the institutional base that has been the soil of religious education is, at the present moment, less nurturing than perhaps it has been, the profession also is facing the consequences of its own success. Much has been written about the democratization of the sacred in the United States, a movement to which religious education as a field has contributed. As individuals become more confident in the authority of their own religious experience and that of their peers, a sense of a need to test experience against the wisdom of those who have practiced faith longer, or who have expertise in the fullness of a cultural wisdom heritage like a religious tradition recedes.

Equally challenging to religious educators, I think, is the degree to which the work of the profession is, with enthusiasm, "plagiarized." Areas in which religious educators have long worked have become separate, specialized communities of discourse. Leadership studies may be the best example. There has been an explosion of programs in leadership, in churches, in K-12, and in higher education. The umbrella of "leadership studies" allows for the discussion of issues of individual maturation, group and organizational dynamics, and the common good that, in the past, were primary work of religious educators. I am increasingly struck by how what religious educators would call moral education is widely desired, but cannot be named for what it is. Why? Because the term "moral education" is associated with religious institutions and so associated with ideologically strong, and for that reason, for many, destructive, connotations. Other examples that could be developed include: the shift from religious education to "spiritual formation" programs; peace and justice programs; and, equally

close to home in the academy, the growth of "practical theology" as a more specialized field.

Finally religious educators face the challenge of being invisible to most in the larger society. As I sat in the circle at the Whidbey Institute, it occurred to me that the working group there could have benefited from the presence of a religious educator, an expert to help them thread their way through the questions they were asking, to focus their attention on actual practices of teaching that incorporate formation/moral education dimensions, and to invite them to consider the threads of connection between their desires and purposes, and long traditions of religious/moral educators who have cared about students as these people do. And I knew that very few in the group would have known what a religious educator is.

Resources and Opportunities

So, what are the resources and opportunities open to religious educators? On what to draw, as a community of scholars and practitioners negotiates a cooling of institutional support, the blurring of disciplinary boundaries and a seeming cloak of invisibility? There are, I think, four touchstones in the theory and practice of religious education that I would hold up as essential to any future for the profession.

First, imagination and hope. Religious education always has been about the shaping and nurturing of imaginations in a direction that increases the capacity for hope. Fundamental to the field is the assumption that small imaginations shackle and distort. Fundamental to the field is a commitment to nurturing imaginations that

support moving toward the horizon of the holy, God, the transcendent—the capacity to embrace, love, and care for reality in its fullness.

Second, religious education cultivates the contemplative mind. Religious educators invite those with whom they work to notice their experience with a non-grasping attention, to ponder what is, to live in the fallowness of ambiguity and unknowing until meaning emerges. Religious educators teach people how to pause and ponder in a world in which such contemplative pause is rare.

Third, the practice of refined attention to practice. Religious education works at the intersection between the actual and the theoretical. It is rooted in careful attention to practice, in the gentle, discriminating description of the moves one makes when working with children and adults around issues of faith and justice. It is about making meaning from our practice and learning from that meaning to refine practice. This is a distinctive skill and one badly needed, I think, across many fields.

Fourth, and to my mind perhaps the most significant, religious education has always been about the art of the "apt question." The apt question focuses attention in ways that disclose new possibilities of meaning, fertilizes new imaginative insights, and grounds persons solidly in their core. The apt question reframes toward fuller understanding and freer living. The apt question opens up newness, always a sign of God.

Wherever religious education is moving as a profession, I suspect that these four qualities, which have provided an organizing nexus to a community that always has had the courage to engage in conversations on the boundaries, to think against and with the

horizon of other disciplines, and to love the real more than a theorized ideal, will remain important.

Personal Postscript

I have never thought of myself as a religious educator, though I have long counted many of you as my conversation partners. I am an historian of Christianity in North America whose central research question is how people think, or don't think, with their cultural wisdom traditions, and why. That question has become very contemporary over the past four decades.

In the United States, Canada and Western Europe, most of what we know about how to be religious communities and how to pass on wisdom traditions came to us from the square of Reformation and Enlightenment on the monopoly board of history. That square, once a high rent property, is now less valuable; to some, it has become something of a sinkhole. I am convinced that at this moment it is vital, both for the future of the human and other species, and for the possibility of humane existence in the twenty-second century, that we embrace the work of finding ways to pass powerful wisdom traditions and heritages to the next generation, knowing that we do so in circumstances we have never before encountered. How to go about that handing over of heritage in a way that retains the deep integrity of the tradition —its capacity to unleash imagination and courage, is our shared work for the future.

The significance and worthiness of that work propelled me earlier this year to leave an institution where I had been for twenty-one years to return to Jesuit higher education. I accepted the position of academic vice president at my

undergraduate alma mater because I know, through the life it has made possible for me, that Jesuit higher education is a 450-year-old tradition worth passing on in a vital form. As I pursue this work, I look forward to continued collaboration with religious educators. Own your art. Articulate your skill. Weave the thread of your future through continued fearless boundary walking.