

Recent media studies scholarship suggests that our familiar way of talking about the media — as instruments of transmission, vehicles for transporting messages — is less descriptive than understanding mass media as elements of a culture from and within which we draw materials for forming and informing our identities, relationships, and communities. Rather than being reliably produced and predictably consumed, media “rituals” provide space for the creation of, negotiation with, and even resistance to meaning-making — including religious meaning-making.¹ This new way of understanding a media culture landscape poses interesting questions to religious educators. If mass media provide raw materials and an environment for meaning-making, how are we (as representatives of historically grounded communities of faith) present in that environment? How does that environment shape our students before they ever enter a single religious education context? To what extent do we need to engage those raw materials and to what extent can and should we simply ignore them? Since communities of faith are clearly marginalized from the centers of power in the United States, and under and misrepresented within mass media contexts, what ought to be our pedagogical stance?² At the same time, many members of communities of faith stand at the central nexus of various institutional systems of privilege and power: what ought our role as religious educators be to these members and within these systems?

These questions are large, and vitally important. It is far beyond the scope of this paper to adequately address even one of these questions, let alone the entire range. But it is necessary, to begin to think through what is possible and effective for religious educators in this landscape. In this paper I will try to do so from a very situated place. I am myself a white, middle class, highly educated (I hold a PhD from a Boston College, a Jesuit university in the U.S.), parent of two small children. I grew up in the ‘70’s and ‘80’s in the middle west of the U.S., and I currently teach in a graduate program in

¹ For more on these assertions, along with background citations, please see my paper, “From trucks carrying messages to ritualized identities: Implications of the postmodern paradigm shift in media studies for religious educators,” forthcoming in *Religious Education*.

² Please note: since I’m trying to be as situated as possible in this argument, I will speak from and to a United States context. I do not assume that what I have to say applies across the U.S., and I do not want to imply that anything I say has to be evident or applicable beyond that setting. It may be evocative, and I certainly hope it is useful, but it is no way intended to be definitive.

religious education and pastoral ministry in a Catholic context. I live in an urban, multi-racial, multi-ethnic neighborhood in the city of Boston. I am naming these markers of my identity from the outset, because I believe — and my argument in this paper assumes — that context matters.

My focus in this paper will be the contribution that media education tools bring to the task of religious education as we look towards the next millennium. To summarize that argument: religious educators need to recognize that the most powerful source of our strength and relevance within a media culture can come from our ability to give people access to the symbolic, narrative and sacramental meaning-making resources of a faith community. Such a role necessitates standing as a witness to the prophetic voices emerging both from within and without faith communities. Media education tools are an essential element of that process, because they support the development of a responsible imagination that can in turn nurture reinvestment in, and reconstruction of, religious community.

What do I mean by a “responsible imagination”? Laurent Daloz, Cheryl Keen, James Keen, and Sharon Parks completed a study a few years ago that sought to identify what if anything people who had lived long lives of commitment to the public good might share in common. Among other things, these scholars identified what they termed a “responsible imagination.” Because their study is so important, and their eloquence so rare in academic analysis, I will quote them at length:

The people we studied appear to compose reality in a manner that can take into account calls to help, catalyze, dream, work hard, think hard, and love well. They practice an imagination that resists prejudice and its distancing tendencies on the one hand, and avoids messianic aspirations and their engulfing tendencies on the other. Their imaginations are active and open, continually seeking more adequate understandings of the whole self and the whole commons and the language with which to express them.

Their practice of imagination is responsible in two particular ways. First, they try to respect the *process* of imagination in themselves and others. They pay attention to dissonance and contradiction, particularly those that reveal injustice and unrealized potential. They learn to pause, reflect, wonder, ask why, consider, wait.... They also learn to work over their insights and those of others so that they “connect up” in truthful and useful ways. They seek out trustworthy communities of confirmation and contradiction.

Second, they seek out sources of worthy images. Most have discovered that finding and being found by fitting images is not only a matter of having access to them but requires discretion and responsible hospitality — not only to what is attractive but also to what may be unfamiliar and initially unsettling....

Living with these images, the people in our study appear to know that two truths must be held together — that we have the power to destroy the Earth and the power to see it whole. But unlike many who seek escape from the potent tension this act of holding requires, these people live in a manner that conveys a third and essential

power: the courage to turn and make promises, the power of a responsible imagination. (Daloz, et. al., 1996, 151-152).

It is this kind of responsible imagination that media education tools can help to nurture within religious education, and it is this kind of imaginative task that I will attempt in the rest of this essay.

the journey to Emmaus

I want to begin by moving into more explicitly theological language than I usually use, and picking up a pericope from the book of *Luke* as a conversation partner. In using this story I am not performing detailed exegesis, nor am I seeking to work out a sophisticated liturgical theology, both tasks which might engage this text. Rather, I am simply imagining ways in which this story might evoke a path towards more authentic and effective religious education amidst media culture.

The story I want to use is found in the last chapter of the book of *Luke*, and tells of two of Jesus' disciples who were walking to Emmaus shortly after his crucifixion. During their journey they encounter a stranger who is all the more strange to them because he seems at first to be unaware of the world altering events of the past days. As they continue their walk, they discover that not only is he aware of their anguish, but chides them for their foolishness in not believing in the words of the prophets. This stranger, who unbeknownst to them is the resurrected Christ, reinterprets their context to them, and then they respond by inviting him to dinner at the end of the day. He joins them, and the author of *Luke* uses starkly ritualistic language to describe the way in which this stranger blesses and breaks bread with them. At that moment the disciples recognize Jesus and he vanishes. They remark on the way in which their "hearts burned within them" as he talked with them, and explained scripture to them. The story ends with the two disciples immediately returning to Jerusalem and telling of their remarkable encounter.

There are, as with any scripture passage, multiple ways of hearing and interpreting this pericope, some of which are central to the Christian community's Eucharistic traditions. But for the purposes of this paper, I'd like to reflect upon the ways in which this story has come to function as a mnemonic for me of the ways in which media education tools can be integrated into religious education.

This particular story, found in this detail only in *Luke*, has been, like the story of the "Father and Two Sons," one of the biblical narratives that contemporary Christians find very resonant. There is something profoundly familiar about the dilemma the

disciples found themselves in, something that resonates with great depth as this millennium draws to a close. We, too, as Christians struggling to be faithful after the *Shoah*, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, witnessing to the devastation and despair in Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, not to mention just around the corner in our inner cities and rural farm fields, wonder where Jesus is for us, what if at all his presence means. Our world is dying around us from our own greed and wastefulness, our children often hold guns in their hands, drugs (both legal and illegal) are flowing through our streets, and church communities often seem like little more than fragile havens in the midst of postmodern culture.

The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus seeks to call us back into a primary relationship with God, and suggests some ways in which we can learn to “open our eyes” once again. It has been for me a very apt mnemonic of a process for utilizing popular culture within religious education. First, the story tells about the mundane way in which the disciples met Jesus — as they were walking along the road, in the midst of their daily practices. Second, the disciples engaged in conversation with this stranger on the road, a conversation that included their retelling of the events of the past few days, and the stranger’s interpretation of their embeddedness in a community that stretched back over several centuries. Third, and finally, they quite literally “broke bread together” in the midst of community.

Openness to encountering God in daily life; engagement in interpretive dialogue amidst difference (that is, “with strangers”); and sharing hospitality in a practice that has deeply symbolic resonance — these three actions produced a context in which the disciples could recognize the “burning in their hearts” and in which their “eyes could be opened.” Neither one of these practices was enough in and of itself, but all together created a transformative framework.

My research into how religious educators can and should integrate popular culture materials into religious education has identified a similar process.³ It is imperative that religious educators recognize, first, that it is more than possible, it is inevitable that people will encounter God in the midst of popular culture. Popular culture “rituals” are the “amniotic fluid” (to use Beaudoin’s phrase) in which we swim (1998, xiv). I have argued in other contexts (Hess, 1998, and Hess, 1996), as have Hoover, Clark, and others (Hoover, 1998, Clark, 1998, and Hoover & Lundby, 1997)

³ For more on this topic, see: Hess, M. (1998). *Media literacy in religious education: Engaging popular culture to enhance religious experience*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston College, Massachusetts. See also the findings from the “Religious Education and Challenge of Media Culture Project,” available on the web at: http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/acavp/irepm/challenge/mrcsource.html.

that more and more, people use the elements of the cultural databases with which they are most familiar to name and claim transcendence. In many cases those elements are found within mass mediated popular culture texts.

The second part of the “Emmaus process,” and really the primary way in which media education tools are useful within religious education has to do with exploring the ways in which various pedagogical interventions might open up such fledgling encounters with transcendence and create viable connections from them to elements of historically grounded religious practice. Within the Emmaus story, for example, Jesus spent an entire day in scriptural interpretation: “starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself.” (Luke, 24:27). What might religious educators do with scriptural interpretation amidst media culture? More than anything, we need to help people re-encounter, re-interpret, or in some cases (perhaps many cases, given the increasing number of young people who have never been involved in any kind of church context) encounter for the first time, the scriptural “database” if you will, of our shared Christian heritage. I have found, over and over again, that working from popular culture texts into scripture and then back again, can be enormously liberating and energizing. Such a process demands openness to critical engagement with difference. I will have more to say about this in a moment.

The third part of this kind of approach involves finding ways to reclaim and reconstruct elements of religious ritual practice, so as to promote insight and resonant recognition of belonging in faith community. It is not enough to have the emotional, bodily “burning within,” nor simply the cognitive, rational exercise of interpretative skills upon scriptural or doctrinal texts. Both of these can be practiced in individualist isolation — although that is not the story of the Emmaus journey, it is often a message of our contemporary culture. Instead, these elements — the affective, the physical, the intellectual — all must be integrated into practice within community. It is this latter part of the process that is so often lacking within contemporary communities of faith. We live immersed in a media culture that is rich in music, image, bodily posture, and other systems of communication. As Boomershine (1999) notes, we reason in this electronic culture more by “sympathetic identification” than by philosophical reasoning, and this form of identification is fostered by ways of knowing that are more than simply cognitive.

I have argued in other contexts for the ways in which the first step of this journey — the emotional or affective encounter with transcendence can occur in

mediated contexts.⁴ For the rest of this paper I'd like to focus on the second and third element of this journey: encounters with "strangeness," and embodiment in ritual practices; and the ways in which media education tools can help religious educators to engage these elements of the journey into communities of faith.

moving through estrangement

The first element of the pericope that I would like to return to, is the way in which it was crucial that the disciples on the road did not recognize Jesus until his point of departure. Throughout their long journey that day they were continually being confronted by his strangeness, and his reinterpretation of the stories they had lived with and through. In what ways can religious educators participate in this kind of process? How are we inviting strangers into our midst, and how are we being open to reinterpreting our communal — and explicitly prophetic — histories/herstories/stories?

First: media culture stories often appear very strange to people who for whatever reason believe that they do not their lives immersed in that frame of reference. That is one vital way in which popular culture texts have an important role to play within religious education: by making "strange" experiences accessible. I have something very specific in mind, here, however, not simply playing on the X-files trope, or asking why it is that stories of the supernatural and the alien are so popular right now (although that is an interesting and useful question itself). Rather, consider how many ways popular culture has actually functioned to bring people into the orbit of experiences that previously were forbidden, or even unmentionable. There is much to be concerned about with the ways in which popular culture texts may appear to glorify violence, or to applaud sexist harassment, and so on. But there are also many examples of ways in which popular culture texts have actually opened up conversations that people of faith ought to be having, judging only by dictates of justice and peace.

What does it mean to be gay, for instance? In what ways could women provide leadership to communities? How is it possible that a pregnant teenager might be responding to a will to live rather than succumbing to suicide, by choosing to become a parent? How might people of various races and ethnicities live together in a common culture? Certainly these questions are neither completely answered, or even adequately asked, within popular culture texts; but they are at least initiated. Part of the power of

⁴ See note #2 above.

electronic media is its ability to promote, to use Boomershine again, “sympathetic identification.” Ways of being in the world that institutional religious authorities prefer to ignore, or to condemn out of hand, are openly represented and at least in part explored, in popular culture contexts. Indeed, this kind of representation has been identified by religious institutions as the central problem they seek to solve.

In general such concern has centered around the sense that mass media communicate messages that are dangerous, and that if we could organize sufficient numbers of people to boycott the messages, we would go a long way towards easing the danger. But this strategy is only effective if you believe that it is possible for messages to travel in linear directions, from creator to receiver. If indeed media organizations create evil messages that vulnerable people receive, than boycotting the organizations as a way to stop the promulgation of the messages might work. But as I mentioned earlier, the process is far more complex than that. To pluck an example from recent history: there are numerous kinds of hate messages available to be “received” from the Internet.

To make the step, however, of going from the sheer availability of the material to its causal role in actual killings is a big step. We need to consider, instead, how people who act on such information, who actively seek it out and use it, are generally identified as people who are in some ways already isolated and alienated from more common cultural spaces. What are the cultural factors influencing their actions? As Katz and Jhally argue in relation to the shootings at Columbine High school in Littleton, CO:

What this [event] reinforces is our crying need for a national conversation about what it means to be a man.... Such a discussion must examine the mass media in which boys (and girls) are immersed, including violent, interactive video games, but also mass media as part of a larger cultural environment that helps to shape the masculine identities of young boys in ways that equate strength with power and the ability to instill fear —fear in other males as well as females....

There may indeed be no simple explanation as to why certain boys in particular circumstances act out in violent, sometimes lethal, ways. But leaving aside the specifics of this latest case, the fact that the overwhelming majority of such violence is perpetrated by males suggests that part of the answer lies in how we define such intertwined concepts as “respect,” “power,” and “manhood.” When you add on the easy accessibility of guns and other weapons, you have all the ingredients for the next deadly attack (Katz and Jhally, 1999).

Rather than seeing this kind of material as causal, we need instead to recognize that it exists as raw material for people’s imaginations, imaginations that have been socialized and developed within specific cultures. Rather than being so frightened by such material that we close our eyes and ears, and refuse to engage it; we need to

confront it directly, and inquire into its origins and consequences for our communities. It is not something to ignore. I would argue, instead, that one of the gifts of popular culture is its ability to bring disparate voices and representations into contexts in which people can begin to encounter them in settings and with resources that can actively engage them. Far from being a dangerous dilemma, popular culture and its very strangeness provides a very real opportunity, if only we, as religious educators can begin to embrace it. As Miles notes in writing about popular Hollywood films: “the representation and examination of values and moral commitments does not presently occur most pointedly in churches, synagogues, or mosques, but before the eyes of ‘congregations’ in movie theaters. North Americans — even those with religious affiliations — now gather about cinema and television screens rather than in churches to ponder the moral quandaries of American life” (1996, 25).

By utilizing this opportunity I do not mean that we ought to give unqualified acceptance to any and all ways of being that flash across our electronic screens. To return to my earlier example, we need to probe beneath the rhetoric of hate groups to help people discern the underlying problems of poverty and structural oppression that exist in those contexts. But the point is that the conversation can begin, it can be opened up, through engaging the meaning-making systems in our midst. We, as religious educators, ought to be reading, watching, listening, acting, within as many different kinds of mass mediated popular culture contexts as we can so that we can discover what the cultural databases are that our students are drawing upon. Only in this way can we be relevant to and eloquent within their contexts.

engaging media in order to make the familiar strange

How else might pop media function as “strange” in our midst? Tied into the previous examples was my notion that we ought to engage popular media as initiators of conversations. An important finding of recent educational research is the utility of dialogue across difference, of engaging difference as an essential element of helping students to embrace and construct more complex frames of reference within which to engage their worlds.⁵ Part of the power of representational media, of evocative media

⁵ There is a growing literature addressing “teaching across difference.” See, for instance, the Bergin & Garvey series of books, *Critical Studies in Education and Culture*, edited by Henry Giroux and Paulo Freire, especially Kanpol & McLaren ((Kanpol & McLaren, 1995)) from that series. The *Harvard Education Review* has published a set of articles that address these issues from the standpoint of “whiteness;” see in particular (Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997), (Maher & Tetreault, 1997), and (Giroux, 1997).

(here I'm thinking of both image and sound) comes from their ability to provide multiple experiences to multiple people. In other words, three people could see the same film and arrive at three or more very different descriptions of what the film was "about."

Media can be "strange" if we seek to engage them in settings where our own differences can emerge. In many ways popular media provide an excellent opportunity to allow those differences to emerge in ways that allow them to be explored positively. As George Lipsitz, writing about teaching social history using popular culture materials, says: "as my students and I used popular culture texts from the past to gain insight into the complex stories defining our present identities, we found terrains of conflict and struggle in the most unexpected places and allies in the most improbable individuals. Not because these films, songs, and shows reflected our lives directly, but, rather, because they reflected the core contradictions of our lives indirectly enough to make discussion of them bearable" (1990, Xiii-xiv). It is in the process of reflecting our lives indirectly, particularly their core contradictions, that popular media texts and the media education tools developed in media literacy contexts, can be so useful to religious educators.

How can we do this kind of critical engagement? In part by heeding one lesson from Emmaus — that we must be open to the strangers we encounter in our daily lives. Here I mean to suggest not only that we ought to pay serious and sustained attention to media texts, but also, and perhaps more importantly, that we need to give ourselves over fully to questioning who and what is "strange" in our lives, and "estranged" from us. For people like myself, who most often inhabit the higher end of the pyramidal structures of power, finding out from whom we are estranged often means that we must consciously and intentionally ensure that we are seeking voices from those who are oppressed by these same structures.

Media education tools are a crucial element of this kind of careful attention. In a world where billions of dollars are spent on "capturing" our attention for just a few seconds, "attention" is indeed a very precious resource. Just as historical critical textual tools have helped to focus attention on scriptural texts, and various kinds of spiritual formation practices have helped focus attention on interiority in the midst of community, media education tools help to focus our attention on a specific set of issues in relation to mass mediated popular culture texts.

These issues include the following characteristics of mediated messages: “messages are constructions,” “messages are representations of social reality,” “individuals negotiate meaning by interacting with messages,” “messages have economic, political, social and aesthetic purposes,” and “each form of communication has unique characteristics” (Hobbs, 1997, 9). Each of these characteristics, which form in large part what media literacy activists refer to as the core group of “media literacy principles,” help us to focus our attention not only on the ostensible “meanings” of a particular message, but also all those other ways in which media messages participate in our meaning-making. In particular, they give us some handy tools for keeping our attention clearly focused on the ways in which systemic structures of oppression help to reinforce and reproduce themselves.

Using these tools to consider how broadcast and daily news is presented, for example, leads to the inescapable conclusion that far from being an “objective” representation of shared reality, these newscasts are simply a construction of a very limited range of events, a construction that is heavily dependent on the resources involved in “gathering” and “choosing” what is newsworthy, and then in turn on the underlying decision of what is profitable, what will “sell” a newscast and capture people’s attention. How do media education tools do this? In part by helping to bring into the conversation other voices that are not present, to stay with this example, in broadcast news.

A standard media education exercise might be to ask a group of students to trace the coverage of a local event through several kinds of news sources, including alternative sources such as neighborhood “zines,” and online sources. Once initial coverage is gathered, these same students are then asked to seek out people who were involved in the event in question, particularly those who were not represented in the gathered coverage. If the event is one that the students themselves were involved with, so much the better.

That reality is deliberately constructed, and that the construction involves multiple decision-making points influenced by multiple sources of power and location, is a recognition that is generally both alarming and potentially liberating to people. When media education tools are engaged primarily within contexts in which alternative forms of meaning-making are disallowed, this process can often fall more on the alarming side of the spectrum as people start to despair over how to ground and challenge their notions of reality. But when the same tools are engaged within a community that is conscious and intentional about its subversion of dominant structures of power — such as a vibrant community of faith — these tools are quite

liberating. They can often lead directly to imaginative, creative and empowering reinvestment in that community as a source for and compelling nurturer of, these alternatives. Here again, paying attention to those things we have become estranged from, and seeking to make the familiar strange in order to focus a different kind of attention on it, are at the heart of this kind of discernment.

There is yet another way in which it is important to think about how we encounter alternative interpretations brought into our discussions through an openness to strangers, and it is highlighted by the most often raised objection I encounter to this use of media elements within religious education. That objection is that bringing all of these other ways of viewing the world into our midst will inevitably relativize and thus make useless a religious perspective.

multiple ways of knowing and constructing meaning in our midst

This objection is powerful only if it is possible to believe that systems of viewing the world exist as so many options, complete in themselves, and in clear opposition to each other, so that in recognizing that other options exist one has to affirm that no system can hold preeminence in one's life. That perspective has a lot in common with the kinds of perspectives often held by adolescents, who are just beginning to think in systemic terms,⁶ and certainly there are more than enough examples that I could draw from within popular discourse claiming this to be the case. But part of the strength of religious communities, part of their ability to remain vibrant and strong incarnations of religious vision century and century, rises out of their commitment to understanding beliefs as embedded in traditions, in ways of knowing, that stretch out globally and through time, and in the process are in a perpetual state of transformation. Religious educators know that we must teach not only elements of traditions as practiced today, but also teach about traditions and the process of traditioning, itself.

Mary Boys writes that: "claiming identity as a Catholic school entails constructing a curriculum that teaches the tradition with all of its painful shortcomings and sinfulness as well as with its distinctive insights and grace notes" (1992, 19). Thomas Groome notes that "to come to religious identity requires that we wrestle, like Jacob of

⁶ See in particular, R. Kegan's *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

old, with ourselves, with our past, with our present, with our future, and even with our God..." (1980, xv). I would extend their arguments by noting that in our contemporary context, where a "hermeneutics of suspicion" should attend every powerful "master narrative," this kind of critical giving of access to a tradition, but also the very real ways in which that tradition is always in a process of transformation, is a highly effective way in which to practice religious education.⁷ It also, by definition, assumes that not only are there various systems for knowing, but that one can begin to perceive how those systems could be in conflict with each other, and yet also be a part of a larger process that tends ever towards the heart of faith.

Thus yet another form of "strangeness" that we must attend to, is the strangeness within our own traditions. We must do so not only in terms of whom is estranged from the community, but also who has the power to construct that estrangement, and in what ways the whole process transforms over time. These are not easy questions, and they raise difficult issues within communities of faith. They are vital questions, however, and if we do not face them our communities will not survive. Media education tools are, again, very useful here, because uncovering how the structures and grammars (including the visual grammar) of various media may assist us in constructing narrow or oppressive instantiations of religious community is ultimately quite liberating, and leads to learning how to construct such locations differently.

the Emmaus journey and ritual

What about the last element of the pericope, this story that I have chosen to use as a conversation partner? The disciples finally recognize Jesus in the "breaking of the bread," a phrase with acutely important resonance in far more complex theologies than I can discuss here. On a purely pragmatic level, it is an illustration of the ways in which we "perform" our beliefs in concrete and embedded ways. Breaking bread together at the end of a journey was an essential part of the process by which the disciples recognized Jesus, just as it was an essential element of their humanness. Who is not hungry and thirsty after a long day's journey? In this pericope we are alerted to a practice that has both normative liturgical elements, and yet is at the same time a daily,

⁷ For more on religious education that moves in this way, see M. Boys, *Educating in Faith, Maps and Visions*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.

quite ordinary element of being human. Both of these kinds of ritual practice need to be renewed if religious educators are to be effective in a media culture context.

What kinds of rituals can and do we participate in that shape our recognition of our “constitutive relationality,” to use Goizueta’s term (1995)? Contrary to what many institutional church officials might believe, the standard performance of the traditional liturgical rituals of our community, and here I will speak very clearly and specifically from my own location with the Roman Catholic community, is neither compelling enough nor accessible enough to vast numbers of people in the U.S. to be very useful as a means of religious formation. Yet at the same time, it is also our liturgical rituals that hold the most promise for providing access to the imaginative resources of our community, the symbolic, narrative and sacramental resources.

What does this conundrum reflect? To answer this question, I need to consider the role of ritual in a broader frame than simply the specific practices of liturgical ritual, before being able to elucidate some of the problematics involved therein. First, consider the point I made early in this essay: how we understand media has shifted from a “message transmission” model, to one of cultural ritual. As I noted then, rather than being reliably produced and predictably consumed, media “rituals” provide space for the creation of, negotiation with, and even resistance to, meaning-making. The same point can be made of liturgical ritual.

Indeed, how one engages a media “ritual” may have the same external appearance, but a radically different internal appropriation. Recent experience suggests, for example, that how one appropriates the information the media has provided about President Clinton and the Starr investigations has as much to do with one’s immediate contexts and concerns, as it does with whatever the information was “on the face of it.” This point is important enough that I should state it again: meaning-making practice may “look” the same externally — we may all watch the same newscasts, for instance — but the conclusions we derive, the actions in which we engage as a consequence of our news consumption, may differ radically. This same point can be made in relation to liturgical practice. Certainly the reasons I would offer, as a feminist Catholic, for my continued presence in our local parish liturgy have little in common with the reasons my elderly Dominican neighbor would offer; yet the practice, attending liturgy weekly, is the same. The ability to provide a common activity that serves widely divergent needs is part of the appeal of mass mediated communications. It can also be the appeal of liturgy, but at the moment it quite often is not, at least in the ways in which liturgy is commonly celebrated in many local parishes across the U.S.

At the same time as local parishes are struggling even to provide basic music and elementary interpretations of scripture, new media contexts are providing immersive experiences in which sound, color, physical sensation, bodily gesture, and so on, are exquisitely tuned to create richly evocative and sensorily complex story experiences. Even those forms of media which have been around for that much longer, film and television for example, have begun to utilize the emerging digital tools, making it possible to enhance more traditional production with vibrant and extraordinarily evocative representations.

The cultural databases, or the symbolic inventories to use Stewart Hoover's term, upon which we draw to construct our life worlds are rapidly expanding into these new digital universes, while at the same time the symbolic inventories of communities of faith are fading away, or being drawn into mass mediated contexts in which their root meanings are transformed. Communities of faith that are seeking to enlarge their repertoire, and in doing so draw upon mass mediated popular culture inventories, are finding themselves more capable of creating experiences that energize and challenge their participants. Communities of faith that fear these "databases," however, are becoming more and more marginalized.

Let me give you a very concrete and practical example. When I seek to explain something to my seven year old son, the examples I use are just as often drawn from videotapes that we watch, as they are from books that we've read together, let alone liturgical celebrations we've participated in. My partner and I have worked hard to ensure that our son is just as familiar with "going to church" as he is with the ritual of "watching a video." It has been, however, much more difficult to find ways to interest him in "going to church," because the experience is in many ways alien from that in which he lives most of the week. In church he is primarily asked to sit and be still, or to sing prescribed words at prescribed times. He rarely, if ever, sees other children lead any element of the worship, and God is most often spoken of in abstract or authoritarian terms. Even my son's school, which is a basic urban public school, is more innovative and creative in its educational processes. (Of course, this brief description will tell you a lot about the state of our neighborhood parish, and should not in any way be taken as definitive of good liturgical practice.) Still, in order to draw on theological themes to talk with him about his daily life, we have to consciously and intentionally work to ensure that such themes emerge throughout the rest of the week.

For this reason, video series like the *VeggieTales*, an animated show geared toward young children, is an important resource for us. It places theological themes in the midst of his daily practices, it embeds them in a reality that is broader than our own

family's stories, and in doing so gives us a way to talk about God that grows naturally out of an activity that he enjoys. We do this in non-electronic contexts too, of course, when we are enjoying a garden, or riding on a train, and so on, but electronic media has an aura of representing reality beyond simply our own neighborhood that is in some ways more authoritative than a local walk. Part of what is so attractive about *VeggieTales*, is that it regularly quotes other popular media texts (such as *Monty Python*, the *Simpsons*, *Star Trek*, and so on) from non biblical contexts, thus in some ways pulling those stories into a religious context. Historians of religious community will recognize this strategy as a very ancient one, used over the centuries to form festivals and enhance celebrations.

This example not only points out issues around the cultural database or symbolic inventory in use, but also our repertoire of practices. Singing together in public is a practice that is rapidly disappearing from many hegemonic contexts in the U.S. People may sing "Happy Birthday," they may mouth the words to the national anthem, but people generally do not sing together in public. Similarly, there are very few occasions in which we gather together in large public groups to listen to speakers address us solely with words (as happens within sermons). The only context that comes readily to mind in terms of a place to which I regularly go, along with large numbers of people I may or may not know, and sit and stand together at preordained moments, is the local movie theater. Such practices, assumed as ordinary but also essential components of liturgical ritual, are growing ever more strange and unusual in the daily progress of our lives.

By pointing out this shift I by no means intend to suggest that communities of faith should modify or drop their liturgical rituals. Instead, we need to think ever more carefully and intentionally about how to give people better access to them. How can we welcome people into worship spaces in ways that help to provide the necessary clues to what might seem, on first glance, to be inexplicable behaviors? One way to do that is to take cognizance of the ways in which we are currently socialized in non-church settings, and think through ways to bring the best of those practices into church settings. We know when to become quiet in a movie theater, for instance, because the lights begin to dim. Hearing the same opening credits music alerts us to the beginning of a television show, just as a commercial break gives us permission to get up and move around.

Good liturgists know how to use light and sound to pass along these clues. Indeed, good liturgy is structured in such a way as to give people access to the experience with such ease that they can relax into it and "know" it in ways that stretch far beyond the cognitive. In our current cultural context, we need to help liturgists

become more adept at translating and transitioning people from media culture contexts into church community contexts. Web pages that give immediate information and access to a community, for instance, are one way to help people “clue into” the often unstated and unspoken pathways of a community. Yet how often do such pages do more than list the time of worship and the worship leaders? Why not use those pages as a chance to chart out what an entire liturgy consists of? It is a great “teachable moment,” and could provide far more information with deeper theological insight, than would otherwise be easily accessible to people.

Another way to give people access to our traditional rituals is to take elements that are particularly evocative in non-church settings and bring them into liturgical ritual. Just as slide technology made it possible to project the lyrics to hymns on a screen up and in front of the worshipping community — thus ensuring that voices were raised up and outward, rather than down and into one’s lap — emerging technologies have unique gifts to bring to worship.

Media education tools are useful in this context, as well, because in addition to “deconstructing” exercises (such as the one I noted earlier in relation to news), there are “producing/creating” exercises. Indeed, this is an element of media education that provides an important reciprocal benefit. By struggling to create their own media messages, students learn how media is put together. One of my favorite ways to teach people about scriptural exegesis, is to utilize the ABS CD-ROMs, which provide multiple musical, textual, visual, and video representations of a specific short biblical text. In addition, they provide the space and tools to think through how one goes about producing your own video representation of a text. Asking students to do this not only teaches them about video production (which is an essential part of learning about video), but also gives them the experience of close work with a specific biblical text.

Religious educators can learn from media educators’ experience here: we ought to teach about liturgy not only by “telling about it” and even by immersing students in it (both of which are important elements of the teaching process), but also by helping them to create liturgies that reflect their own concerns, and that draw upon their own cultural databases.⁸ Symbols are far more evocative when people are allowed to experience them and use them for meaning-making, rather than when people are told

⁸ Every year I have graduate students who take my course in “media literacy and religious education” who put together liturgical season reflections (Advent reflections, for instance), and other kinds of educational experiences that utilize popular culture texts. Popular music has been a very important part of these projects. Some of these projects are accessible online, at: http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/acavp/irepm/media/resources.html.

what a particular symbol must mean. Music is an especially important resource in this context; both because it brings meanings, quite literally, “into” people (it is an internally located sense that accepts stimuli from external sources), but also because music evokes images, rather than supplying images. Religious educators ought to be doing more to help our students identify and use music which moves them, particularly by bringing that music, and its embedded themes, into liturgical contexts.

daily practices

In addition to transforming our liturgical celebrations, we need to think carefully and intentionally about our daily practices, about the ways in which we can perform our beliefs in settings and ways that make us consciously aware of them, even if the settings in which we are acting are not themselves explicitly religious. To return to the work of Daloz, et. al. with which I began this paper:

It is said that faith is “meant to be religious.” Faith seeks language, a *shared* system of symbols with which to interpret the whole of life. If imagination is the process of “shaping into one,” religion may be understood, in part, as the distillation of shared images, powerful enough to shape into one the chaos of our experience. In other words, stories, habits, and the rituals of everyday are the content of the imagination by which people know who they are and what they are to do in the world. It is the work of religion, in concert with the whole life of the commons, to do that well (Daloz, et. al., 1996, 142).

One of the more useful resources available for thinking through practices of faith in a daily context is the “Education and Formation of People in Faith” project based at Valparaiso University in the U.S.. Out of that project comes a description of “practice” that is both specific enough to identify a set of historically grounded practices that are constitutive of Christian identity, but also broad enough to be suggestive across creedal and liturgical boundaries. The practices identified are also those that can be practiced on a daily basis, not simply within liturgical celebration.

The Lilly project definition suggests that practices: “address fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human acts,” “are done together and over time,” “possess standards of excellence,” and help us to perceive how entangled our lives are “with the things God is doing in the world.” (Bass, 1997, 6-8). The practices they name in the book that lays out this project, *Practicing our Faith, A Way of Life for a Searching People*, include honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities,

forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives. Each of these practices has various representations within the mass media, and each can itself apply to how someone engages the mass media. What counts as “saying yes and no,” for instance, particularly in terms of prayer and examination of conscience, within the world of the television drama is fairly narrowly described. This is an example of how a specific practice is “re-presented” to us by the mass media.⁹

What might we learn, however, by asking in what ways our practice of “saying yes and saying no” is permeated by the agenda-setting effect of the mass media? What might we learn by discerning in what ways it might be appropriate to “say yes and say no” to how we consume media representations, to how we engage various kinds of mass media? In what ways might our practices in relation to media — escaping into the dream creating space of entertainment, for example — support and/or interfere with finding the internal silence necessary for clear examination of conscience? In asking these kinds of questions, the resources of the media education movement can very easily be brought to bear within religious education.

Here my emphasis is not so much on bringing religious meaning-making into popular practices, as it is bringing popular practices into religious meaning-making. There might not appear to be any distinction between the two, but the difference I am trying to highlight has to do with the perspective from which one approaches popular practices. Rather than having religious communities make films with explicitly religious imagery, for instance, I would rather have them work on engaging the religious yearnings present in popular culture. Rather than condemning media culture and providing alternative texts, we ought to be discerning transcendence in that context, and helping people connect their fledgling, fragile moves toward accepting God into rich and deep embeddedness in religious community. Given the ubiquity of mass mediated popular culture, versus the distribution and creative difficulties present in the “religious media” realm, we might have a far greater impact on people if we could help them to enlarge their daily attention to encompass a transcendent dimension to all that they engage.

If indeed mass mediated materials are raw elements in the repertoire from which we construct our sense of our selves and our relationality, then we can and should approach the making of communication ritual from a variety of vantage points. If what

⁹ It is tempting at this point to explore the ways in which the practice of “forgiveness” has been argued about in recent months in relation to President Clinton. I simply note that this is one example of a “teachable moment” in which a profoundly theological question is being asked within contexts mediated by news formats.

we are trying to do is influence the shape of religious action, not simply cognitive belief, and if that action is lived out on a daily basis, than we ought to be seeking to engage the materials that are present on a daily basis, and shaping the attention and focus that people of faith bring to those materials.

This kind of religious education will have to be far more improvisational than previous conceptions. Meeting people where they are, helping them to articulate their vision, and then challenging it; ultimately, helping them connect it to religious community, is not something that can be done in predetermined or formulaic ways, at least not in our present, chaotic and rapidly changing media culture context. Preparing to educate in this framework will require that religious educators themselves have a deep and expansive fluency in religious beliefs, practices, and locations. The institutions responsible for preparing catechists have struggled towards this recognition slowly, and primarily by searching for ways to “certify” appropriate training programs that have appropriate curricula. Most of these curricula have emphasized relevant course work in ecclesiology, moral theology, Christology, and so on. But while it is crucial that people be knowledgeable about doctrine, it is far more crucial that they be given the requisite formation to engage their own and their students’ faith in vibrant and embodied ways. Few if any of these programs invite catechists into creative production, let alone with new media tools.

To return to the Emmaus story: we need to walk along the road, conscious all the time of encountering God, remaining open, even embracing of strangers, and present to our own embodiedness in practice. Media education tools are a wonderful way in which to engage that journey, particularly as the road meanders through the jumble of music, images, and sensations that pour in ever increasing floods throughout media culture.

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