

Theological Education for Life Abundant
Vanderbilt Conference on Theology and Practice
Friday Morning Presentation
Charles Marsh
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In the summer of 1994, while teaching theology at a Jesuit college in Baltimore, I was surprised to discover that my thoughts and dreams, and increasingly my journals and notebooks, were suddenly filled with memories of my childhood in the Deep South. I had planned to write a book on the doctrine of the Trinity, but I had trouble concentrating on this marvelous sacred mystery. (I seem to suffer from some sort of doctrinal attention deficit disorder; maybe the result of too many dining room debates between Calvinist uncles and Amenenian cousins over meals in my childhood.) In any case, I put the book on the Trinity on hold.

Though my childhood in south Mississippi and Alabama had been intense and eventful, the South had changed, and I had not thought a whole lot about the civil rights years in college or graduate school, but now I could think of nothing else.

On a hot July morning in 1994—thirty years after Freedom Summer of 1964, when a thousand students went to the southern theatre to work in voter registration work—I got in my Honda wagon morning and headed south, with not much more than a full tank of gas, a microcassette recorder and a credit card.

I had a notion that I would write a book on religion and civil rights. I had no knowledge of field research or oral history, and couldn't really tell you what I was hoping to accomplish. But with God's help and the good cooking of many gracious hosts, I plowed ahead into the unfamiliar territory.

I spoke with anyone willing to tell their story. The cast included not only movement heroes but also people who sat on the fence, white ministers, school teachers, attorneys, business leaders, black moderates, and members of my own family. My trip followed only an itinerary of the willing and ricocheted back to Georgia, to South Carolina, to congressional offices in Washington, and to my neighborhood in Baltimore (where I lived at the time), which had raised a community of Jewish social progressives, a fair share of whom had travelled to Mississippi in 1964.

Outside of Nashville, on his farm near Mount Joliett, I sat on Will Campbell's porch, trying my best to chew tobacco and shuck corn while he told me of his ministry of reconciliation.

Eventually I talked with the men who so greatly despised the prospects of black freedom that they organized terrorist cells and plotted murder and mayhem. In a private dining room in the back of a gas station on a two-lane highway outside of Laurel, Mississippi, the Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, Sam Bowers, broke his decades-long vow of silence and recounted to me in harrowing detail why he had killed "infidels" and "heretics" in the name of God. He also expressed his hope that were he summoned by higher powers in 1994 (the year we spoke) to take up the cause of Christian terrorism, he would show the same courage as when he regularly orchestrated killings, beatings, fire bombings, and church burnings in the 1960s.

The veering off of the straight and narrow road of my academic training changed my life and it gently invited me into me a theological reeducation. Or perhaps not so gently.

Once in an interview, a kindly minister who had been recalling his years as a staff member of the National Council of Churches and his role in the 1965 March on Selma, paused and said, “You know, your generation is a bunch of wimps.”

Well, the least I could do—being a wimp and all--was to ask a few hard questions about my own vocation as a scholar and teacher and somehow try to make the connection back to life.

As I think about the future of practical theology in America, about theology as a way of life, and of Serene Jones estimation that “[practical theology] may well be poised to take a strong lead—over other disciplines—in charting a new, enlivened course for a form of theological education that is both globally responsive and intellectually rich”!¹—one of the questions I keep coming back to is how can we think more creatively about theology as a way of writing. This is a question that comes up often in workgroups and symposia of the Project on Live Theology as participants reach a point in our collaborations when we ask: so how do we write this kind of theology? It involves asking questions about the style of theological writing; about theology as writing. A renewed consideration of the narrative expression of theological life may help ensure this promising future.

I mentioned last night the outset Ted Smith's generative invitation to consider a genre called "theological narratives of practice". We could kind of go crazy with this wonderfully suggestive idea.

Inasmuch as practice energizes—or as my dear friend, the late Victoria Gray Adams might have said, "enfleshens"—theology, practice in turn it frees theology from constricting expectations and opens up it to diverse literary forms.

One question I might ask is whether the story of Bonhoeffer's theological journey itself a way of writing theology. Can it be? Or is it simply narrative non-fiction, narrative about theology? Not that narrative non-fiction is a bad thing. I would like to think that such narratives can be pervasively and deftly theology without being hagiographic or formulaic.

This is not a call for a retrieval of the narrative theology of an earlier era, when there was much talk about the narrative shape of theology or "narrativity" but little attention to the craft of writing. It is rather the modest proposal that we find ways to make space for the "sheer phenomenality" of the practices of Christian experience in theological writing (as John Webster has written more generally of narrative) in a way that is not only instructive but artful.

Done well, narratives of theological practice may—and I think will—enable us to capture more fully those details of lived faith that resist systematic, philosophical or theoretical analysis—regions of experience that propositional discourse often ignores, evades, or simply cannot reach. For narratives of theological practice encourage

attention to the murky, messy details of life, to what memoirist Patricia Hampl calls the "the secret heaviness of experience", where stories live their complete lives.

Crafting theological narratives of practice will not be an easy task; and some may suspect it is as simply an invitation to gush. Neither do theological narratives of practice and transformation have any privilege claim on truth. Narratives, like systematic and philosophical theologies, may perpetuate lies; precision and honesty are indispensable in theological writing. Practice contributes to theology not by implicitly claiming that theology become story-telling and testimonial—it ought never make such an implicit claim—but by reminding theology that the wisdom, depth and detail of lived experience informs, confirms, measures and often chastens theological claims.

Still, if one engages the world through a "hermeneutics of Pentecost" (David Ford), experience opens always onto wider vistas, and theologians and theological must try even harder writers will need to work with a skillful hand and observant eye.

Theological ideas reach an intensification of meaning in lived experience and that the narration of these exchanges and transactions as theological drama presents us with a plotline that exceeds political, social and economic ends. Theology is storied in a multiplicity of ways; this multiplicity attests to theology's basic interdisciplinary character and in this manner to the promise of the Project on Lived Theology. Every Christian community illustrates a unique theological drama, which may be gleaned for insights and lessons. The promise of practical or lived theology lies in its ability to narrate this drama in clear and vivid ways.

ⁱ Serene Jones, "Practical Theology in Two Modes," *For Life Abundant*, p. 211.