

Michael I. N. Dash*

Exploring Spiritual Formation In The Classroom

There is increasing and renewed discussion about spirituality and spiritual formation in Christian circles today. There is no one uniform definition of terms, nor of practice that makes for growth and development. There is, however, a general sense that some engagement in the pursuit of spiritual formation and the strengthening of one's experiences with God will benefit both the person and that person's life in the community of faith and in the community of the world. Most of all, it will creatively address what is being perceived as a deep hungering for God and the way of life in the Spirit.

Evidences of this increased discussion are articles, whole issues of journals and books on the subject. Some treat spiritual formation as an issue, others offer more practical helps for those willing to pursue a journey or pilgrimage. All speak at varying levels about personal growth and development of the Christian life, discipline, commitment, experiments in prayer, and the power that is available through the Holy Spirit.

Ronald Chochol¹ has described the wide range of activities that fall under the heading of spiritual formation. His general

*Michael I.N. Dash is Associate Professor of Field Education at the I.T.C.

¹Ronald C. Chochol, "Spiritual Formation in an Academic Institution," *Spirituality, Ministry, and Field Education: Theological Field Education Key Resources*, Vol. V, ed. Donald F. Beisswenger, Doran C. McCarty, and Lynn Rhodes.

observation is that "spiritual formation is done in a loosely structured and even *ad hoc* fashion." One suspects this is so, because everybody agrees that it needs to be done, but there is no agreement on what form it should take, who is to initiate a process, who is to bear the expense (faculty sometimes are very concerned about how they are to be compensated, if a task is perceived as not fitting neatly into a job description); and where it is all going.

If it is affirmed that spiritual formation is important, then the question is not so much: can it be taught, as how may it be encouraged and developed, how may we find and make time, create openness to and spaciousness for the soul's intercourse with God? Herein lie the challenge and the opportunity. Intentional attempts at exploring spiritual formation in the classroom find some grounding in the "Foundations for Ministry" course at our school—The Interdenominational Theological Center (I.T.C.) in Atlanta, Georgia. It is a basic interdisciplinary course designed to introduce the student to Christian ministry with emphasis on ministry placed within the Black witnessing community. The Foundations for Ministry course is a creative response to a major institutional objective "to maintain an environment in which continued Christian spiritual formation will be encouraged and expected."²

The objectives of this "Foundations" course provide for the introduction, examination, and evaluation of the various components of ministry—human, societal, and spiritual. To fulfill its objectives, each student is given opportunity to participate in a personal assessment of Christian ministry; explore the heritage of ministry; and share in an evaluation of Christian ministry.³

The course is structured to include eight modules of in-

²Interdenominational Theological Center, *Report of the Curriculum Revision Task Force*, 1983-85, rev. ed. (Atlanta: ITC, 1985), 5.

³*Ibid.*, 32.

struction. The modules are:

1. The Call to the Ministry
2. The Theological Curriculum: An Introduction
3. The Theological Curriculum
4. Theological Research and Methodology
5. Critical and Analytical Thinking
6. The Individual and His or Her Religion
7. Christian Thought: Issues of Doctrine and Faith
8. Religious Pluralism and the Protestant Church in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries⁴

Dr. Melva Costen of our faculty served as the lead teacher in a team-teaching design for this course in the first two years that it was offered. She shared the following comments on its process:

Module I of the Foundations course, "The Call to Ministry," begins with an introduction to techniques of spiritual formation. Daily periods of meditation and daily journaling are required of all students. An entire Module Section is spent introducing and demonstrating various ways that this can be done. Although the class is facilitated by different members of the ITC faculty equipped for the task, the following concepts are included:

1. Regularized, daily periods for
 - A. Centering
 - B. Journaling
 - C. Contemplative Prayer
2. Sharing of at least one page of the journal with (small) advisory group of peers and one faculty person.

⁴Interdenominational Theological Center, 1988-1991 Catalog (Atlanta: ITC 1988), 55.

3. Preparation and sharing of "Life, Time-Line," highlighting "transforming moments and peak faith experience as well as low moments in life." The thrust of this significant process is that students can tell their stories and explore their faith by

4. Reading life stories of others published in classical literature, and from newly published "oral" literature, especially among African Americans.⁵

A couple of observations are in order, by way of evaluation of this course and its contribution to development of spiritual formation.

1. Faculty who were involved in this course, as was expected, brought their particular angles of vision in the theological enterprise to this experience. The God to whom we bring our varying gifts, however, rejects none. So our own spiritual lives, our openness, honesty, willingness to invite others to journey with us become a vital means of fulfilling the task.

The quality, intensity, enthusiasm or lack thereof of students in groups led by individual faculty varied from one group to the next. The majority of us have had no specialized training, but share according to the depth of our own growth and commitment.

3. Some movements toward integration were carried over into other parts of the curriculum. The disciplines developed in this course enabled students to begin to make connections to the total curriculum. Occasions that evoked "Aha," "Yes," "Heavy," were gifted moments of experiencing the real presence of the Spirit.

4. Small group processes in which members developed in-depth relatedness, care for one another, trust, willingness to share, inevitably enhanced the spirituality of participants.

⁵Dr. Melva Costen is Helmar Nielsen Professor of Music and Worship at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. She was chairperson of the ITC Curriculum Task Force, and subsequently served as faculty coordinator team-teaching the "Foundations" course 1985-87.

5. Students continued to develop and grow in their own personhood for ministry. They continue to affirm in testimony and in practice.

During the last several years in our Field Education reflection program, and particularly in the reflection seminars, we have determined each year a focus for envisioning, talking about, reflecting on, and engaging in ministry. The challenge in the learning process is to wrestle with questions that are suggested contextually through engagement in ministry. So we have dealt with the ministry of the church in relation to its community. We came to feel that if, from the perspective of the church, we do not define our community broadly, we will not be able to serve all of that community, but we will define our community as those who come within our doors. Students involved in several contexts pursued that basic thesis in varieties of ways. Another year we focused on lay involvement in ministry. Where was such a ministry happening? How were lay people involved, empowered, cultivated, and challenged?

Then we turned our focus to spiritual formation and spirituality for ministry. Halfway through the academic year we shared what was being done in our Area⁶ (The Church and Its Mission) meeting. One colleague suggested that spirituality for ministry ought to be our focus all the time. We talked about our own experiences in ministry, our strengths, weaknesses, failures, and joys, our burdens, and the source and sources of our refreshment for tasks. And we talked about our students—the pressures and burdens they experience, their juggling work and study, their obsession with expecting good grades, and their lack of enthusiasm for hard, critical thinking. Inevitably, wherever we started, the tracks led to spirituality for ministry, and the evidences of its naked absence.

⁶The ITC curriculum is distributed in four Areas. Field Education is located in Area IV, The Church and Its Mission (CAM). All Areas meet monthly to review and evaluate their work.

The challenge was presented to make it a central focus, not for one year, but all the time. The desire to respond to the challenge presented in that Area meeting has had some interesting results. We have sought to explore spiritual formation in our Field Education reflection seminars.

I started my explorations in the classroom by beginning my classes—Field Education Reflection—with what I called a “centering moment.” I felt that since we were about ministry, we should center on ministry as we began our classes. To help in the process I would introduce a passage of Scripture, or an extract from a book that was helping to deepen my own reflections about ministry.

Because I was using that year, *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* by Job and Shawchuck,⁷ I found it a ready source out of which I could share.

One of the earliest of those passages was extracted from Henri Nouwen’s *Making All Things New*:

The Spiritual life is not a life before, *after* or beyond our everyday existence. No, the Spiritual life can only be real when it is lived in the midst of the pains and joys of the here and now. Therefore we need to begin with a careful look at the way we think, speak, feel, and act from hour to hour, day to day, week to week, and year to year, *in order to become more fully aware of our hunger for the Spirit.*⁸ (italics mine)

After the passage was read (with the inflections and intonations suggesting how it was speaking to me), there was pause

⁷Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1983).

⁸*Ibid.*, 324.

for silent meditation on its personal meaning for the hearer. In the beginning we would turn shortly afterwards to the business of the day's seminar. Later students felt that it was important to share in the group how each had appropriated meaning for himself/herself. Several times the passage chosen was so intensely impacting that students pressed for the whole period—one hour and fifty minutes—to be spent discussing its implications for our life and ministry.

Whatever else was done, this centering exercise became an important part of our learning together. I have constantly sought ways to engage students in reflecting on: 1. *Personhood*, i.e., being, who I am, especially in my initial and continuing relationship with God in Jesus Christ); *Skills*, i.e., doing, what I do with the gifts or talents, and the training I receive and acquire; *Theology*, i.e., thinking/reflecting about God, how I interpret the presence and the activity of God in my life, how I talk about that; finally how all these go together, how they integrate for effective ministry.

Out of this perspective we have discovered and developed some *working* definitions for ministry that ultimately suggest helpful approaches to spirituality and spiritual formation. For example: "Ministry is the function of faithful individuals and communities of God" (adapted from Dieter T. Hessel)⁹. Ministry begins as response to the encounter and experience of a gracious God who calls us to live out the meaning of that encounter in our life in the world. This exercise forces us to think about and take seriously what we do, what God does with what we do, how we order our lives, what we offer to God for God's use, how we act out our faith both in the private and public arenas, and the necessity of always cultivating and deepening the relationship with God in Jesus Christ through

⁹Dieter T. Hessel, *Social Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).

adventurous experiments in prayer.

Students were asked to share in small groups (not more than six in a group), *one* story from their experience that interprets the definition of the ministry taking place in and through their lives and in their congregations. One result of sharing that followed the work done with Hessel's definition was that a number of clue-words were suggested and listed as we spoke of ministry. Love, giving, self-giving, caring, service, witness, etc. Challenges to ministry that came out in the discussion and were articulated follow below:

- Engagement in doing things in response to growing and developing understanding of how the grace of God works in our lives.
- Working with others to make that grace known and experienced by those who need to know it in the faith community (church) and in the world (the larger arena where we meet, associate with and encounter others).
- Seeking to be faithful and consistent in our choices and actions for daily living.

Several passages of Scripture were chosen and offered as discussion starters. Out of them critical reflection emerged. One such passage was Ephesians 4:1-16. This is a seminal passage in an understanding of ministry. Ministry is a calling to a life of commitment, and to a particular life-style. It is a calling that is *charisma*—grace gift. A calling for which gifts are apportioned. Ministers, therefore, are persons with gifts to share, to be used in ministry. Perhaps most importantly, ministry belongs to *all* God's people. As Henri Nouwen reminds us, it is a vocation which is not the exclusive privilege of monks, priests, religious sisters, or a few heroic lay persons. God calls everyone who is listening. There is no individual or group for whom God's call is reserved. But to be

effective, a call must be heard, and to hear it we must continually discern our vocation amidst the escalating demands of our career.¹⁰

Vocation to ministry is always a call to a collective adventure, a community journey. We are pilgrims who are on the road individually, but who are also collectively a community of faith. This reality must be incorporated in our thought and practice of ministry.

The nature of ministry is a continuing engagement in witness, love, and service. It is living so that God can use us anywhere, at any time. As the African American spiritual puts it, and Aunt Jane continually expressed it, "Use me Lord, until you use me up." And the end of our ministry is maturing in Jesus Christ. There is no way we can experience our *full* personhood in Jesus Christ except by being engaged in ministry.

Some other Scripture passages that we examined allowed us to reflect on different aspects of our personhood, our life, and our ministry. *Gen. 25*; *Gen. 12:2-3*; *cf. Gen. 4:9f.* These suggested to us that *people* not *programs* constitute authentic ministry. *Matt. 25:31-40*. The challenge to ministry is that we accept Jesus Christ as Master and serve him. Our neighbor becomes the person whom we must serve; to whom we must minister. "I have AIDS," Jesus cries, but it is my neighbor whom he is describing. I may find it difficult to *love* my neighbor, but it should not be impossible to *love* Jesus. *Phil. 2:11*.

Ministry goes beyond the giving of gifts. It requires the giving of self. The heart of ministry is this self-giving to others. *Matt. 13:44*. We cannot work for God unless we make God's work our own by putting everything we have into it.

About two years ago, we used two novels to explore this concept of spirituality and ministry formation: *Go Tell It On The*

¹⁰Robert Durback, ed., *Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 95.

Mountain,¹¹ by James Baldwin, and *Ascent Into Hell*,¹² by Andrew Greeley. One of our objectives was to examine critically the central characters of each novel and discover what we might learn from them about spirituality and ministry formation.

Religious themes dominate *Go Tell it on the Mountain* as they do in so much of Baldwin's work. The significant event of the novel is the religious conversion of an adolescent boy, John Grimes, who is the central character of the novel. In the long autobiographical essay which forms part of *The Fire Next Time*,¹³ we are in no doubt that Baldwin is writing of his own experience.

Other autobiographical situations find parallels in *Notes of A Native Son*,¹⁴ and *Nobody Knows My Name*.¹⁵ There is, as Jocelyn Whitehead Jackson has stated, "the pervasiveness of considerable personal experience in a literary genre that generally is impersonal."¹⁶

Baldwin contends that fear was the principal motive of his own conversion: "I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life afraid—afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without."¹⁷ "For the wages of sin were visible everywhere, in every urine-splashed hallway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, in every helpless, newborn baby being brought into this danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue."¹⁸

Sex and race drive the young John Grimes to surrender his sexuality and give up any ambitions that would force confrontation with the White world beyond the Harlem ghetto. Through the

¹¹James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1952).

¹²Andrew M. Greeley, *Ascent Into Hell* (New York: Warner Books, 1983).

¹³James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963), 29-61.

¹⁴James Baldwin, *Notes Of A Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 13-23.

¹⁵James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Dial Press, 1961).

¹⁶Jocelyn Whitehead Jackson, "The Problem of Identity in Selected Early Essays of James Baldwin," *The Journal of the ITC* VI:1 (Fall 1978): 1-15.

¹⁷Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 30.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 34.

storefront church he is freed from guilty feelings about sex, dirt, skin color. He is saved and safe, but isolated from his context. Baldwin proposes this as the historical betrayal of the Black Church, an uneven trade of the power of the Word for the personal loss of sex and the surrender of the social power of one's people. This thesis, as Baldwin articulates it, has proved to be a starter to many an animated discussion in our corridors and other settings long after the course was ended.

Andrew Greeley's *Ascent Into Hell* is one in a series of novels in which the author examines the power and the glory, the tragedy and frustration, of the priest's role in contemporary life. *Ascent Into Hell* deals specifically with the agony of choice, "the story of why one man became a priest and why he left the active priesthood."

Greeley is careful to advise his readers not to assume that "because Hugh Donlon (the novel's central character) is a priest and I am a priest that his voice is my voice. Only Maria speaks for me. Moreover, like God, I refuse to assume responsibility for the moral behavior of my characters."¹⁹

Vocation to priesthood seems to have been a manipulated experience for Hugh Donlon. Like John Grimes in Baldwin's work, the pressure of others' beliefs that he would be a preacher when he grew up led to self-affirmation of that belief in his situation and that of Hugh Donlon, Greeley's character. In Baldwin's book it is the young John Grimes who bargains with God. In Greeley it is Thomas Donlon who does the bargaining, pledging his son Hugh to the priesthood on his wife's safe delivery in the birth of their son Hugh.

Hugh's eventual intention to commit to the priesthood is made difficult by the introduction of the beautiful and sensuous

¹⁹*Ascent*, viii.

Maria Manfredy. They meet one summer during his vacation from seminary. Hugh is led to suppress his awakening love and sexual excitement and returns to seminary. He becomes a priest, but priesthood is not as he expects. The pastor with whom he works is selfish and unconcerned about his congregation. The church hierarchy chooses to ignore this situation. Hugh becomes more and more dissatisfied. This is compounded by his relationship with a nun who is experiencing harsh treatment and for whom he becomes advocate.

Several things happen to Hugh in quick succession. He abandons his priestly vows out of a sense of obligation to the nun whom he makes pregnant. He then plunges into the secular world at the Chicago Board of Trade. Public and private tragedies force a re-direction of his life. His mother and Maria, the love of his youth, seeking to reclaim him, create a new experience of salvation. His mother's life may depend on his choice to return to the priesthood. Maria claims to know God's will for the man she still loves.

"Maria...I must climb out of hell...I can't..." "No you don't. You can't escape that way. You should stretch up your hands to God." She recaptured his hands. "And let Him pull you out." She pulled him back to her. "This way." He wrapped his arms around her.²⁰

Greeley offers a "A Personal Afterword:"

My story is only secondarily about one man's struggle with a priestly vocation. Like all religious stories this tale is primarily a story of God... They are stories of

²⁰*Ibid.*, 356.

adultery, betrayal, incest, family conflict, rivalry, and envy, of treacherous servants and traitorous brothers, of foolish mothers and indulgent fathers, of unjust judges and incredibly soft-hearted judges, of treasure hunters and crafty merchants, of angry kings and crooked stewards, of impudent workmen and obsessive gardeners, of hardworking housewives and clever investors, of dizzy teen-age girls and angry teen-age boys, of feasts and parties, wars and marriages, life and death...Stories of God are designed to disconcert, to open us up to the power of God's shocking love and to disclose to us new ways of living in the world with the illumination and power that comes from that love.²¹

Out of his readings of the two novels, one student developed a brief survey questionnaire, designed to examine class members' attitudes and values on sexuality and power. The class agreed to share in the process. The questionnaires were distributed and completed by everyone. The student drew a score sheet on the blackboard and asked us to report our responses. He collated the answers and gave us an interpretation that suggested a profile of the group. We then broke up into triads for further discussion.

Here are some of the questions, attitudes, and values that we examined, as stated in the questionnaire.

- Belief that being in ministry is response to a divine call.
- Description of view of celibacy
 - unscriptural and unnecessary
 - unreasonable human expectation

²¹*Ibid.*, 369-70.

- supreme expression of personal commitment to God
- a human impossibility without physical alterations.
- How would being unmarried as a preacher affect one's sexual life (a related and previous question dealt with whether the respondent currently was sexually active).
- A choice as to how to deal with sexual urges.
- Tension that may exist between love for another human of the opposite sex and love for God.

Someone pointed out that attitudes concerning power, sex, and money²² were worth our extended examination in subsequent seminars. This happened when Jimmy Swaggart, Jim and Tammy Bakker were exciting media attention by their disclosures and confessions. *Go Tell it On The Mountain* and *Ascent Into Hell* offered students many opportunities for critical reflection. As the character and experiences of John Grimes and Hugh Donlon were examined, some questions that arose dealt with faith formation; formative figures and contexts in that formation; their influence on conversion and the call to ministry; response to call; struggles to determine identity and affirm personhood; and strategies for dealing with those struggles.

Spiritual Formation has to do with living from the Spirit, being nourished by the Spirit, being attentive to the Spirit, being empowered by the Spirit for ministry. Its goal, as Ronald Chochol describes it, is "to foster the recognition, support, and growth of

²²Richard J. Foster, *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life: Christian Reflections On Money, Sex & Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985). It was subsequently discovered that one of my colleagues was using this text in another class dealing with denominational doctrine and polity. The student who introduced the issues as interconnected was also enrolled in that class.

human persons living in the power of the Spirit towards the Father under the Lordship of Jesus Christ in an historical community of faith through the praxis of faith in culture and society and through reflection on that praxis.²³ Spiritual Formation is essential to the whole ecclesial community and not exclusively to the theological academic community. However, for persons preparing for full-time, professional ministry, the importance of spiritual formation for the enrichment of the total church cannot be minimized.

The Program on Theological Education (PTE) of the World Council of Churches held a small workshop in Scotland in 1987 "to identify some of the issues related to the contemporary understanding of Spiritual Formation."²⁴ One of our colleagues, Dr. Jonathan Jackson, participated in meetings here in the U.S.A. that led to that workshop.²⁵ He also spent his sabbatical year, 1988-89, pursuing, at depth, this interest in spiritual formation. It is his considered judgment that the invitation and challenge coming out of the report of the PTE workshop is seminal to continuing and strengthening our common life at the ITC and to fulfilling our task in service to the whole Church. The vision in the WCC report that guides our response is the affirmation that "spiritual formation in most programmes in theological education is fostered by a healthy relationship between academic training and participation in local church life."²⁶

²³Ronald Chochol, "Spiritual Formation in an Academic Institution," 10.

²⁴Programme on Theological Education, WCC, *Spiritual Formation in Theological Education: An Invitation to Participate* (Geneva, Advent 1987)

²⁵Dr. Jonathan Jackson is Professor of Christian Education at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

²⁶WCC, *Spiritual Formation in Theological Education*, 21.