

Theological Anthropology:  
Being Human is To Teach

Paul Michalec  
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*“When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things”* (Mark 6:34 New Revised Standard Version).

*“Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people”* (Matthew 4:23 New Revised Standard Version).

*Introduction:*

A recurrent image throughout the New Testament, as the scriptures from Matthew and Mark proclaim, is Jesus as teacher or rabbi. His primary pedagogical tool is the parable. In his teaching Jesus goes beyond mere didactic teaching about God’s compassion, the virtue of right actions, or the role of the church. Instead, Jesus invites his listeners/students into the process of co-imagining a human identity that flourishes under the loving guidance of God and the Holy Spirit. Jesus, as educator, is focused on human wholeness beyond normal existence as a product of a deeply loving relationship with the Divine. Jesus is both human and Divine, but he is all teacher. This paper will explore the pedagogical implications, particularly in higher education, of teaching as a central defining element of what it means to be human. In the ancient world the most effective teachers were the mystagogues who specialized in the mystifying the curriculum. In this way the mystagogue was much like Jesus, teaching through parable and story.

The counter part to the mystagogue in antiquity was the pedagogue who used the techniques of rote memorization, strict intellectual discipline, and physical punishment to facilitate learning (Hogan, Goff, and Wasserman, 2017). Although not characteristic of all professors the educational spaces of many higher education classrooms are didactic, deterministic, top-down, transactional, and favor a passive student orientation toward learning. Higher education faculty tend to teach more like pedagogues than their mystagogue counterparts of old. The evidence supporting this critique of college teaching is the number of books and articles encouraging faculty to reduce the frequency of lecture and increase interactive forms of teaching (Rice, 2017), anchoring instruction in love not power (hooks, 2003), and defining student flourishing as “moreness” not compliance (Huebner, 1999). This paper will argue that embracing the metaphor of teacher as mystagogue, someone who mystifies learning, will encourage human flourishing in the classroom. And an instructional environment defined by the spiritual attributes of wholeness, openness, vulnerability, and wonder; favoring an engaged and transcendent student orientation toward learning (Rendon, 2014). This shift from pedagogue to mystagogue requires an articulation of human anthropology as teacher.

*Education as “soul murder”:*

In too many classrooms the cost of learning is the loss of the soul—the Divine spark—the passionate center of learning that is unique to each student. Because the dominant metaphor for teacher is pedagogue students are denied access to their inner-wisdom, divine identity, and sense of participation in something greater than self (Huebner, 1999). Laura Rendon (2014) in her book *Sentipensante* argues that didactic instruction fosters and supports the “negative elements of an educational system that effectively slaughters our sense of wonder” (p. 4). Alfred North Whitehead (1929) in *Aims of Education* notes that a central purpose of education should be

“enjoyment”, a lifting of the spirit, and according to this standard the British universities “should be prosecuted for soul murder” (p. 56). Dwayne Huebner (1999) in his articulation of the relationship between spirituality and knowing makes the following critique of traditional models of schooling: “If the student is brought into the deadness of inert knowledge, the student is deadened, alienated from the vitality that co-creates the worlds of self and others” (p. 351).

Perhaps the most well-known critique of educator as pedagogue and standard forms of teaching that dampen the human spirit’s drive to unite with something greater than self, is the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) describes education that oppresses the human spirit as “the banking model” of education because knowledge is directed inward, often through direct and indirect coercive means. In contrast to the imposition of knowledge from above, Freire argues for humanizing the curriculum with the goal of liberating the oppressed. He believes that dehumanization, contrary to the primary pedagogical choices of most modern educators, is not consistent with human ontology: “Dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed”.

Freire’s critique of the pedagogue who dehumanizes students through the curriculum is strikingly similar to Copeland’s (2010) argument that black bodies, especially the bodies of black women, were dehumanized by slavery. Their bodies as subjects—embodied images of God—were turned into objects of desire, fear, and commodity. In one telling passage that leans towards a critique of modern Western ways of knowing in education, Copeland writes: “In this white, racially bias-induced horizon, the relation of presence to absence leads to skewed regulative logic” (p. 16). As an example she offers: “black presence is absence and white

presence is presence” (p. 16). The dominant theory of learning in Western ways of knowing is Cartesian rationality; “I think therefore I am”. The impact of this epistemology on learning and development is devastating to the work of the mystagogue and embodied ways of knowing. To paraphrase Copeland: “emotional/spiritual presence is absence and rational presence is presence”.

In the model of Western educational logic at least half of what it means to be human, particularly the emotions and spirit, occupy limited space in the classroom. Through the rejection of core human qualities the student is de-humanized by education. The educational philosopher and curricularist Dwayne Huebner (1999) argues that traditional forms of curriculum, with its emphasis on goals, assessment, accountability, and content, limits the fullness of human flourishing. Huebner names this human desire for transcendence as “moreness”: “The moreness in the world, spirit, is a moreness that infuses each human being. Not only do we know more than we say, we “are” more than we “currently are.” That is, the human being dwells in the transcendent, or more appropriately, the transcendent dwells in the human being” (p. 404). The curriculum of the academy is driven more by Cartesian logic than Huebner’s vision of “moreness” and the embodiment of transcendence. And as such human flourishing in all its complexity is often missing in college classrooms.

*To be Human is to Teach:*

The scriptural passages from Matthew and Mark in the epigraph of this essay highlight the educational mission of Jesus. His human identity is as much a teacher as his Divine identity is the son of God. The two identities are intertwined at the crossroads between his humanity and Divine Spirit. In Luke 4:14-15 we read: “Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach

in their synagogues and was praised by everyone”. The scripture from Luke is one of the earliest descriptions of Jesus where we see him as human teacher, embodied subject (Copeland, 2010) responding to the call of the Spirit to educate and uplift the hearts of his listeners. In this passage from Luke we see that Jesus was a skilled educator who was “praised by everyone”. He was the human depiction of God as “Divine pedagogue” (Hogan, Goff, and Wasserman, 2017). If the human qualities of Jesus are embodied in the role of teacher then an important part of being human is to teach. And the content of Jesus’s teaching, the human to human interaction of teacher and student, is the relationship between the Divine and the creaturely aspects of humanity.

The word education draws meaning from the Latin word, “educere” which means to “draw out”. There are two questions for educators that fall out of this definition, 1) what is being drawn out by the teacher? and 2) where does that aspect of what it means to be human reside? For pedagogues the answers are 1) nothing is drawn out. Instead, knowledge is poured in as water is poured from a jug (the teacher) into a mug (the student); and 2) to be educated is to develop a rational mind and intellect. This is far from the image of Jesus as teacher. Instead, Jesus teaches in parables, higher-order questions, and the mystification of scripture. He is not opposed to direct instruction, telling his students the basics of what they need to know, but direct instruction is only a means to the end of deep learning about human and Divine relationships. Jesus is better understood as the quintessential mystagogue; a teacher who takes normative truths and understandings and turns them inside out in an effort to move the student to deeper and more complex forms of understanding.

### *Teaching as Transcendence:*

How far back in history can we track an educational model premised on the goal of drawing out knowing as a spiritual aspect of humanity? Karen Armstrong (2009) in her book *The Case for God* believes that there is a distinct human propensity, across time and cultures, toward religion and religious practices. She argues that the earliest records of human history archived on cave walls and sacred places proclaim the message that we “Homo religiosus” are hardwired to connect with something bigger than self. As far back as 50,000 years ago early humans conducted rituals and practices intended to connect learners, young members of a community, with the life force of the great “being”. She argues that these early educators—mystagogues—intentionally disrupted “...the normal [to] allow for access to inner resources resulting in identity transformation” (p. 7). For Armstrong, the cave paintings and religious practices of ancient human history suggest that “transcendence” is the essential human characteristic, an experience of life not simply “out there” but ultimately “in here” at the deepest level of our being” (p. xviii).

In the life and writings of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic Teresa of Avilla we see a similar urge to draw out the transcendent nature of humanness (Kennedy, 2016). Chief among her many educational successes was founding the Carmelite community where many of her mystical experiences were formalized in the curriculum (McGinn, 2017). Her well-known teaching text *The Interior Castle* describes her mysticism through her lived experience of how to transcend the self and unite with the Divine. In excruciating detail she articulates the mysterious, deliberative, and progressive pull toward an interior life for both herself and her soul: “...one noticeably senses a gentle drawing inward, as anyone who goes through this will observe, for I don’t know how to make it clearer” (Kavanaugh, 2017, p. 140).

In a final example of the transcendent in education, the 21<sup>st</sup> century theologian F. LeRon Shults (2003) uses what he calls the “interdisciplinary method” (p. 49) to develop an argument that relationality with the Divine is core to human identity. The interdisciplinary method consists of three stages: traditionalist, modernist, and postmodern. The postmodern orientation to knowing is relevant to this essay as it is the most complex and inclusive of transcendent goals for learning. Shults, in his description of this stage of human understanding, speaks of the ways that the knower (self) can transcend human limitations to enter into relationship with the Divine. In his articulation of what human transcendence might look like he quotes the theologian Loder: “the hypostatic union ... constitutes the ontological ground for claiming that relationship is definitive for reality” (p. 57). Taken from the view point of an educator, Shults’s model of postmodern relationality with the Divine suggests two goals, 1) to develop one’s inner capacity to discern the presence of God, and 2) to create a learning space where one can encounter the Divine presence and consequently experience transcendence; becoming a new creation.

*Teacher as Mystagogue:*

Teacher as mystagogue can be traced back to the founding of the Christian church in antiquity. Two of the earliest known mystagogues were Clement of Alexandria and his pupil Origen of Alexandria. Both were influenced by the Jewish mystical tradition and Greek philosophical understandings of nature as representation of the Divine presence and logic. In the early church mystagogy was associated with post-Baptismal experiences of new Christians. This stage of spiritual formation targeted the challenges of guiding the novice through the conflicted space of acting with fidelity the words of scripture while living in close proximity to the sins of the world. This integration of inner and outer passions could only occur in the skilled hands of

an educator who helped recent converts understand “the real mystery of learning to live the paradox of creaturehood and Godliness” (Anatolios, 2015, p. 16).

The educational techniques or strategies of the mystagogue were closely related to the mystical traditions of Christianity were the teachings “...were not a matter of intellect alone; it also addresses the heart and soul of the student and seeks to form his character” (Kovacs, 2001, p. 11). Concealment of the truth, parable, answering student questions with more complex questions, allegory, and Midrash like exegesis of text were common pedagogical techniques for mystagogues. These techniques seemed justified given the mysterious nature of the “Divine pedagogy” hardwired into the universe. What better way to approach the mysterious wisdom of God than to be immersed in an increasingly mystifying encounter with content. As Origen of Alexandria notes, metaphorically, there are three stages of knowing the Divine: valley, plain, and mountain. Only the most advanced students could penetrate the mysteries of knowing God as the mountain of our being.

It is perhaps not surprising then that the ideal teaching model for the mystagogue is Jesus the Logos of creation who mystified his teaching to match the understanding of his students. For Jesus the instructional goal is increased relationality between God’s creation—humans—and the Divine spirit. Clement of Alexandria, according to Judith Kovacs, is a good candidate for the perfect human mystagogue teaching alongside the conceptual and practical modeling of the Divine Logos of Creation:

As we have seen, Clement regards himself as an active participant in the divine work of creation and redemption. He follows the Logos in addressing a wide variety of students and in adapting his teaching to the capabilities and the readiness of each one. Like the divine teacher, he designs an orderly progression through the sacred curriculum, and he

takes great care in guiding the souls of his pupils. In order to protect his less mature students, he mimics the concealment practiced by the Logos. In his literary activity, as in his oral teaching, Clement is acutely aware of the high challenge of his vocation as teacher, as he seeks to be a faithful servant— and an intimate friend—of the divine. (p. 23)

When analyzing the field of education the question of content emerges rather quickly in the discussion. What is the material that forms the essence of the mystagogue's lesson? Given the mystagogue's role of mystifying the taken for granted truths about self, the world, and the Divine it seems appropriate to turn to Teresa of Avila for an example of mystagogical content. In *The Interior Castle* she describes her experience with God as like a fire "enkindled in a brazier" and at times an ember will leap out of the fire pit "and so struck the soul that the flaming fire was felt by it" (Kavanaugh, 2017, p. 235). Content for mystagogues is the Divine brazier and the sparks of God landing on the souls of students. Facilitating this kind of learning is not easy nor is it guaranteed, as Teresa notes, "just as the fire is about to start, the spark goes out and the soul is left with the desire to suffer again that loving pain the spark causes" (p. 235).

#### *Contemporary Mystagogues:*

In keeping with Western epistemology and ontology to be educated means the accumulation of large amounts of knowledge banked away for future use. Sometimes the student willingly engages in the process of content mastery but in many instances the infusion of knowledge can feel forced and top down; didactic. As noted earlier in Freire's critique of education this style of teaching is often referred to as the jug and mug theory of education. Students are denied first person contact with knowledge and instead knowing is mediated through the content of the course and the pedagogy of the instructor (Palmer, 2007). This form

of education is closely related to Shults's description of "traditionalist fiduciary structures" (p. 52) where competing notions of truth are viewed as antagonistic and one's own truth is viewed as "fundamental".

In contrast to this traditionalist notion of teacher as pedagogue who pounds knowing through physical punishment into the student the mystagogue uses subtle and complex instructional choices to draw out the student's inner wisdom (Hogan, Goff, and Wasserman, 2017). When thinking of modern day mystagogues, Parker Palmer, comes to mind. In his book *Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (2007) he writes elegantly about ways to invite the soul of the teacher and student back into the classroom. Palmer writes:

The teacher within is not the voice of conscience but of identity and integrity. It speaks not of what ought to be but of what is real for us, of what is true. It says things like, "This is what fits you and this is what doesn't"; "This is who you are and this is who you are not"; "This is what gives you life and this is what kills your spirit—or makes you wish you were dead. (p. 30-31)

His writings are made all the richer and accessible by the stories he tells of his successes and failures as an educator. He approaches teaching through paradox or what he calls the language of the teacher's heart.

Given the readings for this course I would be remiss if I didn't take up Reinders's (2008) challenge to bring <sup>1</sup>Kelly into the conversation about distinctly human qualities and characteristics. In short, if teaching is an essential and perhaps defining human quality, then I think Kelly is an outstanding candidate for mystagogue. This claim rests on a quick discussion

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<sup>1</sup> Dave, I'm interested in your feedback on my attempt to bring Kelly into this conversation of pedagogy and humanness. I'm not sure I did justice to the idea I'm trying to develop here, but it feels like a worthwhile theme to develop. Teacher as a defining human quality. Kelly as teacher and therefore fully human. Paul

of two competing embodied (Copeland, 2010) stances in the world; “othered” and “otherness”. When someone is “othered” they are commoditized and objectified. Copeland’s (2010) description of the treatment of the black female body and Cheng’s (2013) analysis of the LGBTQ community are good examples of this process. The human body in form or sexuality is normalized along narrow dimensions of acceptability that excludes full human flourishing and insures the marginalization of individuals. The reform efforts of culturally responsive educators discourages the marginalization of students because it encourages the educator to approach learners through a deficit lens. The student becomes an object to be fixed or worse saved by the intervention of the teacher.

In contrast, “otherness” offers the possibility of liberation and transcendence beyond prescriptive social, theological, or intellectual definitions of humanness. To enter into an educational relationship of “otherness” with someone or something that is not “I” is to embrace the potential for change in identity, understanding, and knowing. Dwayne Huebner (1999) describes the pedagogical relationship of “otherness” in this way:

Content is, first of all, “other” human beings. Others see the world differently, talk differently, act differently. Therefore, they are possibilities for me. They point to a different future for me, another state on my journey. I could be like them. By being different they bring my particular self under criticism. What I am, I do not have to be. What they are, I could be. Other people call attention to a future that is not just a continuation of me, but a possible transformation of me. Through the presence of the “other” my participation in the transcendent becomes visible—the future is open if I will give up the self that is the current me and become other than I am. (p. 409)

Elsewhere in his essay Huebner, as an educator, speaks to the potential of “otherness” to reframe the educational practices away from rote memorization and compliance with standards to an endeavor consistent with the “moreness” of human potential to flourish. But he argues that “moreness” can never be achieved without the active intervention of an educator who through their “otherness” or the “otherness” of text creates a learning space where: “the transcendent becomes visible—the future is open if I will give up the self that is the current me and become other than I am” (p. 409). In contemporary education language, Huebner is describing both an asset orientation to the particular needs and gifts of students but also an expectation that the teacher will also experience change as a product of the student/teacher pedagogical relationship.

With this understanding of “otherness” as the quintessential tool of the educator and teaching as a defining quality of humanness, Kelly then becomes a master teacher embodied in her unique human “otherness”. In the truest of the mystagogical tradition her teaching is ineffable, mysterious, and transcends normative understandings of humanness. And if as Huebner argues I’m willing to let Kelly’s “otherness” and difference “bring my particular self under criticism” and I accept Kelly’s critical pedagogy then my “future is not just a continuation of me, but a possible transformation of me” (p. 409). Through the human role of teacher Kelly becomes more than one of the “holy innocents” of God, passive in her divine presence. Instead she becomes an essential element of my human transcendence in her educational role of mystagogue.

*Conclusion:*

My goal in this essay was to lay the groundwork for calling higher education faculty back to their historic role as mystagogues. The argument I’m making is contingent on three interrelated concepts, 1) Jesus is the quintessential teacher, 2) Jesus is both human and Divine,

and therefore, 3) to be human is to teach. In many college classrooms learning is driven by instruction that is didactic, rote, and accountable to narrow definitions of knowing. In antiquity, professors were called the “thrones of city” occupying the instructional equivalent of their theological brothers who were the bishops and high ecclesiological authorities (McGuckin, p. 80, 2017). These early professors founded schools and their success was contingent on their educational skills as mystagogues. Their reputation and fortune was tied to their ability to mystify learning and draw students out and into more complex relationships with the Divine. To be educated in antiquity meant transcending one’s normal existence and ways of understanding the world. This vision of education sounds similar in outcome to modern forms of liberal arts education, but what is missing from this formula for human flourishing are the mystagogues of old. It is time, I think, for professors to return to their historic educational practices.

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