



The Hinge

International Theological Dialog for the Moravian Church

Moravian Theological Education

Papers from the Moravian Theological Seminary

Bicentennial Symposium:

Partnership of the Seminary and the Church, March 2007

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Special Feature by

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One of the early offices of the Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pa. was that of the Hinge: “*The office of the Hinge requires that the brother who holds it look after everything and bring troublesome factors within the congregation into mutual accord without their first having to be taken up publicly in the congregation council.*”

— September 1742, *The Bethlehem Diary*, vol. 1, tr. by Kenneth Hamilton, p. 80.

The Hinge journal is intended also to be a mainspring in the life of the contemporary Moravian Church, causing us to move, think, and grow. Above all, it is to open doors in our church.

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Notes from the Editor

I have the privilege of teaching the history of theology at a divinity school in my hometown. If history teaches us anything, it is that the great movements of the church were the result of theological reflection. Whether we are talking the Apostle Paul's reflections on the meaning of the death of Jesus or Zinzendorf's reflections on the self-emptying of God, ideas have shaped and moved the church forward. Theologians like John Hus and Reinhold Niebuhr labored to reform the church because their critical reflection on Scripture and doctrine led them to a radical critique of the church's life. Churches send candidates for ministry to theological seminaries to study the faith and practice of the church, but there is no predicting how those students will in turn transform the church.

Many of the great thinkers of Christianity were pastors serving congregations. Whether it was Hildegard of Bingen advising her nuns, Schleiermacher serving as a hospital chaplain, or Rauschenbusch ministering to his flock in Hell's Kitchen, pastoral engagement informed theological reflection. The Word of God (Theo-Logos) is not merely a written word to be analyzed and hammered into a system; it is a living word that must be breathed from the pulpit and incarnated in the lives of Christians.

Our Moravian ancestors valued education, but they rejected the theological education of their day. They recognized that scholasticism had become a form of intellectual elitism and that the Inquisition was staffed with trained theologians. The Unity of the Brethren reclaimed the right and duty of ordinary believers to engage the Scriptures and the doctrine of the church. They brought theological education to the people and raised up pastors from the people.

Under Zinzendorf, the Moravians transformed theological study again. They made potters and carpenters missionaries and bishops. Most shocking, they taught theology to women as well as men. In 1807, the Moravians in America decided to open a theological seminary in the U.S. because it was too burdensome to send potential pastors to Germany to study at the seminary in Barby. That decision illustrates two important things: the importance of theological education in our church and the church's flexibility in making such education available. Moravians value education — and we are practical as well. In 1807 we adjusted to the reality of the times and built a new seminary. How can we deal with contemporary realities?

In March 2007, Moravian Theological Seminary held a symposium on theological education as part of its bicentennial celebration in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. It was appropriately titled "Through 200 Years: At the Crossroad of Church and Seminary." In this issue of *The Hinge* we have selected three of the papers delivered at that symposium. In different ways, each addresses the importance of critical theological reflection and active Christian mission in the world. As always, we hope that these papers will stimulate discussion in the local church. Also in this issue is a special feature from a recent graduate of divinity school.

Twenty-six Theses Regarding Theological Integration

Christopher Thomforde

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.
I Thessalonians 5: 19-22

1. I am delighted and honored to speak on this important matter before us, namely, how to integrate theological reflection into the Seminary's curriculum more effectively so that our graduates can serve the church and the wider community more faithfully. It is easy to think of theology as an academic discipline, appropriate for the seminary but something not directly related to the daily life and work of a congregation, an institution of the church or the wider unity of the church.

2. Today let me argue that the model of "pastor as theologian" is a means by which theological reflection can be integrated with the ministry and mission of the congregation and the church at large.

3. I rejected this when it was first presented to me in seminary more than thirty years ago because it seemed to me to present an elitist model of what a leader of the church should be. I was more interested in the model of pastor as healer of souls, involved in the life struggles of his or her parishioners. I could imagine myself being a new Henri Nouwen. I was more interested in the model of pastor as agent of

change, bringing new life to the congregation. I imagined myself being a new Robert Raines. I was more interested in the model of pastor as community servant, the one who spoke truth to power in the neighborhood and so brought justice to the community. I imagined myself being a new Dorothy Day. I was more interested in the model of pastor as priest, the one who presided over the liturgy in an elegant way and thereby brought a bit of heaven into the daily humdrum existence of so many weary parishioners. I imagined myself being a new Cyril or Methodius. But pastor as theologian? No! Maybe Karl Barth had preached to the prisoners in Basel but for the vast reaches of Christendom his systematic theology was, and continues to be, a great and lofty height to be climbed by only the bravest and brightest.

4. Now, thirty years after ordination, with experience in a variety of the church's expressions, I find myself persuaded that the seminary should find ways to integrate theological reflection into its curriculum for the purpose of raising up more "pastors as theologians" and that pastors so trained and formed should understand a significant portion of their ministry to be involved with training and shaping their parishioners to be active theologians as well.

5. By “theologian” I mean a person of faith who can reflect critically upon the ebb and flow of life, one’s own life as well as the great forces, events, and personalities of the larger communities of which one may be a part, through the lens of the Gospel. I am aware, of course, that there are different schools or types of theologians, for example, systematic, biblical, philosophical, or historical. Regardless of the particular method used by the theologian, theologians in general are passionate about critical reflection upon life through the lens of the Gospel.

6. One goal of such critical reflection is to bring clarity about a particular controversial matter. The theologian should be able to help the church, in its various expressions, large and small, to be clear headed about the issues at hand. At a time when the church is beset by a host of controversial issues, being clear about just what the salient features of an issue are so that the church can know what it is confronting is a gift to the church.

7. Another goal of such critical reflection is discernment. Critical reflection upon life through the lens of the Gospel can help the church answer the all important question, “Where is God at work?” And the related question, “Given God’s activity now in this place among these people in this way, what is expected of us as a faithful response to God’s activity?”

8. Critical theological reflection moves along a continuum from wonder to analysis to communication to action. In this understanding,

I have been deeply influenced by the writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel, especially *God in Search of Man, a Philosophy of Judaism*.

9. One begins with wonder. Wonder has to do with standing in the face of mystery. The vastness as well as the intimacy of creation, the breadth of the human story, the pathos of individual experience, the dynamics of love and anger, resentment and forgiveness, jealousy and kindness as people seek to live out their lives in community — these are examples of mystery. Wonder captures our attention and will not let us go easily.

10. In particular, a Christian theologian wonders about the proposition that God is alive and at work in the world, creating, saving, and sanctifying. The appropriate response to the mystery of God’s living and active presence in the world is wonder.

11. Having become a captive of mystery in wonder, the theologian moves on to analysis. The tool which the theologian uses at this point is reason. Reason allows the theologian to dissect the object of wonder apart, to consider its various aspects, their individuality and their interrelatedness, and to discover the dynamic forces at work in a particular wonderful occurrence. As mystery moves to wonder, for the theologian, so too critical reason moves to the understanding of power and its workings.

12. Communication now comes into play for the theologian. How can I share what I have discovered about mystery through analysis with the community in a way that is coherent and constructive for the community? Here

the theologian can make use of the tools of language, of shape and color and form in art, of the posture and motion in dance, and of sound in music.

13. Finally, the theologian's insights call for faithful action on the part of the community. This action is a response to God and what God is doing in the world, as discerned by the work of the theologian. The alignment of one's own passions and gifts, or those of the community, with God's passion for the world is the faithful response, the right action. At this point, I am influenced by H. Richard Niebuhr and his book *The Responsible Self*.

14. What I have described so far is the work of critical or analytical thinking. What makes this theology as opposed to critical reflection upon life in general is the lens of the Gospel. The Gospel, says Paul, is "the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1). John's Gospel reminds us that "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1). This lens focuses critical thinking upon God and God's saving work so that the theologian may have words to speak about God and what it is that God is doing in the world.

15. The kind of critical theological reflection I am seeking to describe is always done on behalf of the community of faith and within the community of faith. The pastor as theologian is never an agent apart from the community of faith. While the history of the church is replete with significant moments when pastors as theologians had to stand over

against the community of the faithful in their communication of what they had discovered and speak in a prophetic mode, they did so on behalf of the community and for the community's good. They did not speak on their own behalf and for their own benefit.

16. The mystery is that God is alive and at work in the world. Reason asks how and where and to what end, even why. The lens of the Gospel focuses the attention of analysis on God. As the answers to these questions are communicated, a response is required of the individual and/or the community. This response is their act of faith active in love for the sake of justice.

17. For example, Moses was confronted by the mystery of the burning bush and the voice which came forth from it. He turned aside to see. This is what I am calling wonder. He entered into a dialog, an argument, a reasonable critique with the Voice, and discovered the voice of God. This is what I am calling analysis. Moses communicated, through Aaron at first, what he has discerned of God's presence in the world, through speeches and through physical signs, to Pharaoh and the people of Israel. This is what I am calling communication. Pharaoh and the people of Israel responded in various ways, both faithfully and unfaithfully, and acted accordingly. This is what I am calling action. These are the movements, in broad strokes, of the theologian.

18. By "pastor" I mean a person called by God to sustain men and women in their vocation. This sense of call is recognized and

affirmed by the community of the faithful. This sense of call may or may not be ordered by the community. This understanding of “pastor” is directly influenced by the writings of Seward Hiltner.

19. The pastor can perform this sustaining ministry in a variety of roles. As priest, the pastor makes use of the sacraments and the rites of the church to care for brothers and sisters. As a teacher, the pastor makes use of the teachings of the church and the culture at large to care for others. As a preacher, the pastor makes use of God’s word in proclamation. As counselor, the pastor makes use of God’s word and the therapeutic method to listen and to speak to the heart of others. As prophet, the pastor makes use of God’s passion for justice and the techniques of community organizing. These are some of the various ways in which a pastor may sustain others as they live out their vocations.

20. These various forms of pastoral ministry will be most faithful and effective if they are informed and shaped by critical, theological reflection. The work of the critical theologian separated from the pastoral ministry will lack agency. The work of pastoral ministry separated by critical theological reflection will lack clarity and runs the great risk of becoming idolatry, that is, man’s presumption of working on God’s behalf but without God’s command.

21. The pastor as theologian, therefore, is one who can think critically about life through the lens of the Gospel. The work of the seminary, if it seeks to integrate theology with the daily life of the church, is to train and

shape such pastoral theologians. In so doing, the seminary will seek to train its students to think theologically rather than view theology as a discreet subject matter to be acquired through study. One would study the works of the theologians of the past and present in order to be shaped by their turn of mind not simply to become familiar with this or that set of insights and propositions or arguments.

22. The role of the pastor as theologian in the local community of faith is, in part, to train and shape others to be able to think theologically, to reflect analytically upon the issues of their own individual and communal lives through the lens of the Gospel.

23. It would be a compliment of the highest order, therefore, for someone to say, “Those Moravian Theological Seminary graduates! They are always wondering, questioning, and sharing their startling insights. They are always calling for direct action! They are too clear headed! They are too tough minded! Can you believe it, they actually imagine that God is at work in the world, creating, saving, sanctifying! They are always on the alert to discover where and how! And to make matters worse, the members of the congregations they serve are just as bad! Always wondering and questioning! Always speaking up and acting out!”

24. Historical examples of what I am seeking to describe can be seen in the life of Luther and Zinzendorf, Rosemary Radford Reuther and Phyllis Tribble, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, especially the first several pages of his *Letters and Papers from Prison, What We Have Learned Thus*

Far, and Martin Luther King, Jr. All were able to integrate rigorous theological inquiry with the life of church and the life of the individual Christian. Certainly, these men and women of faith served the church and the wider culture in a rich variety of ways, but they were crucial to the life of the church then and now because of their ability to wonder, to analyze, to communicate, and to call the community to faithful action.

25. While eminent men and women of yesterday and today have fulfilled this calling of pastor as theologian and thereby integrated the life of theology with the life of the church, so too have so-called everyday Christians like Ralph Kurtz. Ralph Kurtz was a member of the congregation I served, St. Paul's Lutheran in Dansville, NY. He was a welder, working for Foster-Wheeler Energy. He was married and had three children. He was no stranger to heartbreak. One of his sons was estranged from their family and one of his daughters was hit and killed by irresponsible driver. Ralph was active in our congregation's life and loved to talk and argue at various retreats and study groups. He also came with me on various occasions to visit inmates at Attica Prison. Members of the congregation and I regularly visited inmates on Fridays for many years while I was serving at St. Paul's and cared for inmates' families while they were visiting inmates. Occasionally, inmates would be released and our congregation would help to find housing and work and provide regular guidance for men during the first 100 days of their release. On one visit, when Ralph and I were talking with a group of about one dozen inmates, the discussion turned toward

the topic of work. One inmate, in particular, was quite outspoken in rejection of daily work. He had "earned" hundreds of thousands of dollars by selling drugs in New York City. Why work in a factory? He could earn in one weekend more than Ralph could earn in a year. Ralph entered the discussion with passion. He set forth a clear exposition about the meaning of work as a means of supporting his family, of providing a product of valuable use for others, in fact for many others whom he would never meet. Ralph spoke of the community of fellow workers and the expression of his gifts and abilities through work. Ralph was not an educated man. I am not sure he graduated from high school. Nevertheless, he set forth a clear and articulate presentation of Luther's concept of vocation. The inmate was forced to look at work in a new light because of Ralph's work that day as pastoral theologian in Attica Prison. Ralph, through his engagement in worship life and various study groups, had been shaped to wonder, to think critically, to share his insights with genuine force, and to call other person to more responsible action. The theological training which the pastors of St. Paul's Lutheran Church had received at a variety of seminaries was integrated in the life of a small, rural congregation for the good of a group of inmates in Attica Prison, through Ralph Kurtz.

26. How can we integrate the theological studies of seminarians at Moravian Theological Seminary with the life of the congregations of the Church? By means of training, shaping students to be "pastors as theologians," who in

turn can shape the lives of the men and women and children of the communities they serve to become theologians as well — men and women with a critical turn of mind, in the grip of mystery, setting forth what they perceive,

calling brothers and sister to align their lives with the great rhythms of God's life for us. The church needs, I believe, men and women who are clear headed and not just sincere.

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Pastor As Translator

Amy Gohdes-Luhman

I am grateful to be invited to speak on the topic of “Theology and the Seminary” at Moravian Theological Seminary, my alma mater. I am also thankful to be paired with President Thomforde, who was my president first! That is, he was President of St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, where I teach in conjunction with the pastoral work I do at Main Street Moravian Church. So, many thanks!

I remember typing papers at Hamilton Hall and thinking of all the men (and they were all men then) who had lived in that hall. I have heard some of the names of my dad's contemporaries: George Lloyd, Bob Rierson, Jim Saldwedel, Bob Smith, Jimmy Newsom (the old Jimmy), Henning Schlim, Will Harstine. I called my dad, Bob Gohdes, to get some dirt, something stupid one or more of these young seminarians may have done, but he gave me nothing. He insists they were all straight-laced

and proper — nothing but the Lord's work all the time. Right.

I remember being in Theology class or Old Testament class and for some reason, at that time of my life, I was shy to speak. I would send telepathic messages to Paul Couch, willing him to raise his hand and say what was on my mind. And it worked almost every time. But sometimes if he wasn't in class or was not receiving telepathy that day, I would be cringing and writhing with something to say in response to some discussion point, knowing I had the right answer. Professor Hargis or Professor Bechtel could see it on my face and would say politely, “Amy do you have something to say?” Blah Blah Blah! It would all come pouring out, usually not so gracefully.

When I was asked to share in this celebration of 200 years of seminary instruction here at

Moravian Theological Seminary, I started remembering. Contemplating what I would say to you all gathered here, one recurrent memory stood in the forefront. It was a memory that happened most often in Old Testament Class, taught then by Dr. Lyn Bechtel. I count her as one of my mentors and she is one reason (along with an off-handed comment by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Arthur Freeman) for my entering graduate school to study Hebrew scriptures. On more than one occasion, as Lyn was teaching about Deuteronomic and Non-Deuteronomic thinking or group and individual orientation, she would be challenged by one or more students: “This is all well and good for here in the classroom, but what does this have to do with my people in the pews, with my congregation?”

And so that is the question that is going to drive my talk with you here today. *What is well and good in the classroom and how does it translate into the congregation?* Thus, the title of my talk: “Pastor as Translator.” And behind that lies the question: what kind of student do I want my alma mater (of which I am genuinely proud) to produce, what sort of theological training do I think is required for our ministry context today? What kind of pastor is needed in our communities today?

The short answer (in my humble opinion) is: A pastor who can read the Bible.

A pastor who can read the Bible. Let’s unpack that. Not to be inflammatory, but right now our faith, Christianity, stands on the brink of a split. You can call the sides whatever you

like: right and left; conservative and liberal; mainstream and fundamentalist; literalists and non-literalists. Whatever you like. We as a denomination may be the last to feel this split because we are a denomination of the “middle way,” but it is a present and growing divide. At the heart of this sad divide stands the question of the Bible, how to read it, and how to derive a theology from it, a way of talking about God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

So Biblical Theology is where it is at for me. I think of the pastor as a translator standing between the ancient biblical world and the contemporary world and all the manifestations of the world in between. Reading a living text is not easy; it is not the same as reading any other text. So when I say I want pastors who can read the Bible, I am not being glib, nor am I asking for a small thing.

We Moravians say, “the Holy Scriptures are and shall remain the only source and rule of our doctrine, faith and practice” (MCCL, #2). “The Triune God as revealed in the Holy Scripture is the only source of our life and salvation” (GU, pg. 4). So reading the Bible which points to our God is vital. It is a habit and practice we ought, as pastors, to do well.

Learning biblical languages is absolutely necessary. Even if you only learn that the Hebrew and Greek are impenetrable, frustrating, ambiguous, and a major pain in the butt for our modern minds, then you have learned something valuable. These languages are ambiguous, frustrating, and, at times impenetrable and a major pain in the butt,

so hanging your faith on one translated word or verse or phrase besides “Jesus Christ is Lord” may be not the best bet for you or your congregation. Now I am not saying you have to be an expert in Hebrew and Greek, but a pastor should know enough to use the tools. Knowing original languages will keep you humble before the text, and it will make you slow down your reading of text. Sometimes that really slows you down, but humility and honesty about the mystery of the text is a good thing.

Your congregation will want to know when you don't know or understand something. You are a much better pastor when you say: “the Hebrew word here has eight different meanings and I am picking this one, but I could be wrong.” Please know this: your congregations are not full of boneheads. They know that the Bible was written a long time ago in another language and culture and they would like some frank and loving conversation about that.

Ellen Davis is a beautiful woman, long grey hair, high cheek bones and big deep warm eyes. She is a professor at Duke University in Old Testament. I saw her speak at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Conference on the topic of Genesis. I could tell by the way that she talked about the text that she loved it, that she was in love with it, like she wanted to marry it (as children today might say).

Without remembering her, I picked a book off my shelf, in preparation for this talk, called *The Art of Reading Scripture* published in 2003. Coincidentally it was co-authored by Ellen Davis.¹ Her opening chapter is titled, “Teaching

the Bible Confessionally in the Church.” She is a seminary teacher, and she states the need for Christian seminarians to know that biblical interpretation can be genuinely dangerous (p. 24). I know that we want to know exactly what the Bible says — what the one right interpretation is — and we want our professors to give that to us. And my response would be (I don't think this would be Ellen's because she seems so gentle and nice), “I can certainly give you that one right interpretation, but then I would have to kill you.”

There is in the air now an anti-intellectualism that is quite disturbing, and I pray our seminary does not fall prey to it. Honest, transparent, interpretation of the Bible done with rigor and integrity is desperately needed and desired by your congregation and by Christendom in general. That does not mean you will end up as pastors and teachers producing the one valid and conclusive interpretation of one or more biblical passages, but you are beholden to shift out the best interpretation for your congregation with the guiding of the Holy Spirit and the responsible voices of scholarship and the accountability of your larger church community and tradition. You will need skills.

Ellen Davis reminded me that the word for heart (in Hebrew *leb* and Greek *kardia*) has been argued to refer to not the organ that pumps blood (though it is that), but for the biblical thinker it may refer to the seat of imagination, just like the term translated in the King James as “bowels” or “kidneys” may refer to the seat of emotions. “And Joseph

made haste; for his bowels did yearn upon his brother: and he sought [where] to weep; and he entered into [his] chamber, and wept there.” I love that. Yearning: bowels. From the Psalms: Lift up your hearts = Lift up your imaginations. The Bible often speaks in symbolic imaginative ways, which makes sense because its writers are struggling to express the ineffable. To speak of the sublime, to illustrate that thing that which can not be seen: God. And so our interpretations remain partial, as Paul says: we see in a mirror dimly.

But I am telling you things now you already know.

Another thing I remember hearing in Old Testament class is this: That is all well and good, but where is Jesus in all of this? My glib response (always in my head) was he wasn't born yet, idiot. But that just shows how poorly I had read the Gospel of John or Proverbs 8. In Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified as the woman Hokmah in the OT and this same figure is called Logos (the Word) and is identified with the figure of Christ in John. This figure of Wisdom is said to be with God in the act of creation. Christian pastors cannot read too quickly through the Old Testament to get to the New Testament.

Those thirty-nine books of the Old Testament are not just introductory pages to the Gospels, they are the Holy Scriptures according to Jesus. Remember, he did not have a clue about the Gospels or the Pauline letters when he went to the synagogue and read from Isaiah. What Christ held as God's sacred Word was little more than 2/3 of the OT and none of

the NT. He didn't imagine Revelation when he stopped on the road to Emmaus and explained, beginning with Moses and working through the prophets, what all of the scriptures had to do with the Messiah. And, likewise, the writers of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings of the OT didn't have a clue that the messiah that some of them (certainly not all of them) were waiting for would be some carpenter's son from Galilee.

Some people do not like the Old Testament. I was doing a Saturday (all-day) workshop for a Methodist Women's group a few years back and they let me pick the topic. So I picked "The Bible: A New Look at an Ancient Book." And I began by admitting that since most people don't have a good grasp of the Old Testament outside of the Psalms, I was going to spend most of the day in the Hebrew Scriptures. A hand shot up, right at that moment in my introduction. It was a woman in her late 60s, early 70s. "Yes?" I said. "I don't like the Old Testament. I stopped reading it a long time ago. I don't like that God, and I don't think I am going to enjoy your talk much today." Brilliant.

The Bible as a *whole* is the incarnate Word of God: a word that bears flesh. It is a conversation bound by time and place, a sacred conversation into which each one of us is invited to participate and overhear. The Old Testament stands on its own as a revelation about God. It is the Holy Scriptures of our Jewish brothers and sisters. But the New Testament (NT) in no way stands on its own.

Matthew would freak out if he knew pastors

were not looking up his numerous scriptural references. He is depending upon the audiences understanding of all his “it is written”s. And the book of Revelation, please do not read that without reading Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah. Ellen Davis points out that the OT can challenge some common misreadings of the Bible as being only about salvation. The OT is much more about revelation and can point us to the fact that much of the NT is about that as well: revelation of God and not simply our individual salvation.

Certainly the theme of salvation figures into the OT, specifically in the theme of the Exodus story of liberation/salvation from slavery. The prophets speak to the exiled nation of Israel about a time when God will gather them up and bring them home, when God will save them. But the OT is much more about revelation of God. It is in Davis’s words, “relentlessly theocentric.” Of the 187 chapters in the Torah, 20 of them are about salvation (God saving his people); about 120 of the chapters are about revelation (God revealing himself as a maker of covenants, as one who is holy, as one who evokes obedience) (p. 21-22).

The Bible is the record of that sacred conversation by people in love with their God, with their messiah, their advocate, and in many and varied voices they seek to explain the Divine. And this conversation happens to be in words, in words that none of us readily understand. So we treat the written word with respect and we seek out historical and rhetorical scholarship as well as our Hebrew and Greek dictionaries.

We set the conversation in its context and see what was at stake and how the truth in that ancient conversation still speaks to us today, because if that conversation is about God or our response to God, which it is, then it will speak a truth to us today.

That brings us to today, and to the other duties of the pastor as translator. Yes, they have to know the original context of the ancient word, but they also have to know the context of their congregation and community. I would argue there are some Christian heresies out there today: My list would include the following: (1) the prosperity gospel — the name it/claim it, Jesus can make you rich gospel; (2) the Bible as rule book — some are in and some are out, follow the rules and you are in and the rest of the players are going to hell gospel; (3) the Bible as affirmation of the individual over the community — it is only about you and your personal relationship with Jesus and the church is your self-help center gospel; and lastly (4) any gospel that induces or calls forth a righteous hatred instead of a radical forgiveness. But that is my list and I could certainly be wrong.

Now lots of people don’t go to church, don’t read the Bible, and think Christians are downright morally dangerous. Those folks are certainly a part of your community; they are probably not in your church. But they are a part of any town, city, village or cow pasture you are serving. And all the heresies I mentioned, these folks think that is what Christianity is all about. So a Masters in Apologetics might be a nice thing to have in your back pocket as a pastor.

As a church, we have some PR problems, certainly problems of our own making, but problems nonetheless. I am not sure if we are moving out the generation of folks who have been hurt by the church (probably we'll never move out of that); but we are certainly into the generation of those who don't have a clue about Christianity and some of the heresies I mentioned may creep into what they determine Christianity to be.

Your church has to know how Christianity is being perceived and be able to speak to that. And it is your congregants, not you, who the community will listen to. Collectively they know more people than you do. So teaching the Bible from the pulpit and in Bible study in ways that address and combat some of these heresies is vitally important for your community. See, I think of the pastor as serving much more than just their congregation. You have a larger community who is called into your care. Always introduce yourself as Pastor so and so. At the drycleaners, the grocery store, the candy store, wherever.

Now, when you do this you commit to something; you commit to knowing things. You commit to being able to answer what the heck atonement means, why God had to kill his own son, and why God in the OT says "Thou shalt not murder," and then turns around and smites everyone he can get his hands on. People will ask you such things or make statements that make it clear that they have a toxic rendering of some Christian tenet and, as a pastor, you can tend to that.

You tend to it in a variety of ways. At Main Street Moravian we have a group called Talk Back. It is for those in the community to come and have a safe place to talk about Christian ideas, doctrine, and theology. It is for people who may have had a less than pleasant church upbringing. It is a place to Talk Back.

You, as a pastor, may think about starting a blog or engaging a community blog when issues of religion come up. Recently an acquaintance of mine told me about an article by our town blogger called "False Prayer." His argument was that all intercessory prayer is false prayer: "Bring my son home safely from Iraq" was a false prayer. Any prayer asking for something was setting God up. The town blogger was reacting to the prosperity gospel that says you can ask God for wealth and power and prestige and you will get it. The acquaintance told me I had to get on the blog and respond. I hate computers. I am not a fan of the Internet...

But there I was at 5:30 in the morning because I couldn't sleep, typing out my response. Trying to explain that prayer was conversation with God. We could and should bring all things before God, that there was great value in intercession, and that the perversion of prayer promoted by the prosperity gospel doesn't make all prayer bad, and so on.

Now as we answer all these questions, we are honest and forthright about what we know and what we do not know. The latter being the bigger category.

In all of this, what I am saying you must do as pastors: learn original languages, know all

the current historical and rhetorical scholarship, know all the varied interpretations that are already out there and grasp all the possible heresies that a text might engender — I know I am asking a lot. I am not saying you have to be a brainiac to open the Bible and meet God there — that someone uneducated has no way to engage the written word. What I am saying is that it behooves you as pastors, who have the luxury of three years of intense study, to know your stuff. To continue your critical Bible study, to reflect on what you hear in contemporary culture and how God is at work in it and how you can aid the Creator in that work.

So in answer to the question posed more than once in my seminary education:

“This is all well and good for here in the classroom, but what does this have to do with my people in the pews, with my congregation?”

The answer would be: Everything. Pastors and educators, your task is not easy, it is only necessary. Study up.

Endnotes

¹ Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, ed. *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

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Rachel’s Story

Sam Gray

Rachel was raised in a good Moravian family. In fact, she had two good Moravian families: her biological family and her church family. Her parents were loving and affirming, and they brought her up in the fear and admonition of the Lord as they had promised to do. She loved her Sunday School teacher, dear old Mrs. Taylor, and she enjoyed listening to her tell all those wonderful stories from the Bible. The pastor’s sermons weren’t always that

easy to understand, and some of the hymns put her to sleep, but it didn’t matter because she felt at home. And besides, the fun that she had at Youth Group kind of made up for it.

She went to camp in the summer and had the mandatory mountain-top experience. She had actually had a part in leading worship, and she thought that was cool. Some of the other kids had told her, “Rachel, you’re like a natural.

You ought to lead worship every Sunday.” And she smiled. But that night she thought about what the kids had said.

Rachel started to notice some things. She noticed that her world was changing. It was becoming a lot more diverse. At school, at the mall, at McDonald’s, she would always see people from different cultures. She heard different languages being spoken. This was a normal part of her life. At the grocery store where she worked, it was even required! But Rachel noticed that the ONLY place that she could think of that wasn’t like that was her church. And that bothered her. So she asked some people about it (her parents, her pastor, her friends), but they couldn’t give her a good answer.

It wasn’t long before she started questioning some other things. Mrs. Taylor was a wonderful person, but did she really believe that some guy had lived to be 969 years old? Or that the world was created in six days? This just didn’t fit with the other things she was learning. And something else bothered her. In confirmation class, they studied church history. Most of the kids thought it was boring. Rachel actually found it to be exciting. But she thought about how committed those folks seemed to be: the sacrifices that they had made; the way they put their lives on the line. And then she thought of her own church — of how hard the pastor seemed to have to work just to get people to show up every Sunday.

She liked the “Moravian stuff,” as she called it, especially the lovefeasts. She even got

to serve on Christmas Eve one year, and that, too, was cool. But that night she thought about the candles. And she wondered what would happen if people really would carry that light with them out into the world.

It may have been that thought that made her have the dream she had that night. There was this homeless man walking by the church, and he was cold. And he looked in the window and saw all the candles and could almost feel the warmth. And then he saw the people start to walk down the aisles; they were coming toward the door. Were they actually going to bring their candles outside and surround him with light and warmth? It was too good to be true!

Yes, it was. When they got to the door they blew out the candles (as they had been told to do), and his hopes went up in smoke. When Rachel woke up, she did something she had never done before. She got down on her knees right there and said a simple, spontaneous prayer:

“Oh God, let me be your light in this world for someone like him.”

There was no turning back now. The clincher came a week later when a missionary came to a potluck supper at her church. He showed pictures of people in far-away places. And then the pastor announced that there was going to be a mission trip to Camp Hope in Jamaica. And Rachel was hooked.

It was on that trip that Rachel realized that she was being called — called to ministry, called to mission.

She wasn't really sure which one, or, even if they were two different things. She couldn't really explain it, but she knew it was happening. So she spoke with her pastor and together they charted a course that would eventually bring her to Moravian Theological Seminary.

At first, she didn't think that there was a very extensive "mission curriculum" beyond History of Christian Mission and a few other courses, but then she started to realize that many of the courses helped her to look outward — look beyond herself, and listen to many different voices. And wasn't that what "mission" was all about? Her courses didn't always answer all of the questions that she had about her faith, but they helped her to understand that it was OK to ask them. And that was important to her.

The Seminary community was everything she wished her home congregation could be. There were people from different countries, different cultures and different perspectives. That wasn't what she found, though, in the congregation where she did her guided ministry or internship. That's when she decided that "mission" for her would be not taking off across the world somewhere. No, she would transform her first call — her first congregation — into a "missional" community (that was a word that she had learned at OMSC).

When Rachel graduated from Seminary, she was cross-culturally aware. She could relate to and, yes, minister to all kinds of people. She found it somewhat frustrating in her first call when she was reminded that those skills — those attitudes — wouldn't really be that necessary.

She had heard someone from another seminary use the term "homogenous unit." She found it disturbing, even offensive. But there was no getting around it. That's what her congregation was. That's who they were. But Rachel loved them. And they loved her. There was a great sense of fellowship. Oh, sometimes they thought her ideas were a bit wild or extreme. But they attributed that to her age ("she'll grow out of it"). That didn't bother her.

What did bother her was the fact that their focus seemed to be so inward. When they sang "for us, for us the Lamb was slain," they were pretty convincing! At Board meetings, the only mention of the outside world seemed to be a discussion of how they could attract them and get them to come in. What kind of programs, music, services, and activities would inspire people to come and join them? That sounded great, but, for some reason, Rachel wasn't sure that those were the right questions. Because it seemed to her that if they wanted to attract people (and do it well), then at some point they would have to decide whom they wanted to attract; and, Rachel thought, like it or not, whom they were choosing to neglect or shut out. That didn't seem right to her.

One of those crazy thoughts crossed her mind: what if, instead of bringing them in, we would go out to where they are and *be* the church with them — maybe even *be Christ* with them? They're right. I'm young. I'll grow out of it.

All too often the meetings seemed to be about things. Rachel joked to herself that they

seemed to have what she called an “edifice complex.” They were obsessed with their buildings. She laughed at her own play on words. That night, though, as she lay in bed thinking about it, her laughter gave way to tears.

She thought to herself: when we spend more on being comfortable and secure and maintaining what we have and less and less on caring for orphans and widows, feeding the poor, and breaking down cycles of economic, social and moral oppression that keep people from embracing the unconditional love, mercy, grace and forgiveness that can be theirs in Christ Jesus, then something is wrong!

Even in her own life, as a pastor, Rachel could see that her practices didn’t always reflect her priorities.

The next evening, the Mission Committee was meeting, and Rachel could tell that they really had a heart for mission — they were mission-minded. But they talked a lot about sending and supporting, but very little about being and doing. They talked a lot about going across the world, but not much about going across the street. And afterwards she thought: why should we even need a mission committee?

It’s as though mission was one expression of our ministry and not the essence of our existence or, as the *Ground of the Unity* says, our reason for being.

Well, an amazing thing happened. Rachel was at Home Depot one morning, of all places. And she met a young woman in line at the

check-out counter. She was Hispanic (from Costa Rica), but she spoke English well enough to have a conversation with her. It turned out that her name was Raquel. That was Rachel in Spanish! Rachel thought, “This can’t be a coincidence. God is telling me something. God is doing something here.”

So she invited her not to church, but to her house for dinner. And they became friends. One Sunday Raquel did come to church. And Rachel was happy (relieved) to see that the folks gave her a warm welcome. They were nice to her. So, yes, there was hope! The Worship Committee chair even said to Rachel after the service, “if she comes again, we ought to sing that Spanish hymn in the *Book of Worship* and make her feel at home.” And Rachel said, “Yes!”

Things seemed to go really well for several months. But then one day Raquel called Rachel and said she wanted to talk with her. They sat at the kitchen table and Raquel had a tear in her eye as she said, “Rachel, I’m sorry, but I’ve decided to look for another church.”

Rachel was devastated. “Don’t you feel welcome? Don’t you feel accepted?” And Raquel replied: “No es que no me siento aceptada; es que no me siento involucrada.” “It’s not that I don’t feel accepted; I don’t feel involved.”

Rachel forgot her pastoral counseling skills for a moment and said, “What do you mean you don’t feel involved? You take part in lots of things. You’re more than welcome to be a part of everything that we do.”

Raquel shook her head. “How can I say

this, Rachel? You remember when I brought you those coffee beans from Costa Rica? You love coffee and you were anxious to try my coffee. And I was glad. But when you went into your kitchen you laughed when you realized that you couldn't just put the beans in your Mr. Coffee! You had to go out and buy a coffee grinder. You see, in order to truly appreciate my gift you had to make some changes. Rachel, sometimes in the church I feel like I'm the coffee beans in a Mr. Coffee machine. The cool water of your worship and your fellowship flows over and around me, and it's refreshing — it really is! But I'm not sure that any of my flavor is coming out. And it wouldn't be fair to ask you, your church, to go out and buy a grinder — to change the way you do things so that you can truly appreciate my gifts. No, I need to find a different machine, a different structure, a different form. Because you, Rachel, my sister in Christ, *you* have helped me to understand that there's a lot of flavor in me. And I need to find a place where it can be shared.”

What went wrong in Rachel's story? The members of her congregation will be shocked and confused when they hear of Raquel's decision. Things seemed to be going so well.

Father John T. Ford, in a publication of Churches Uniting in Christ, reminds us of a similar situation, a similar story, in the early church as recorded in Acts chapter 6. Everything seemed to be going so well. We have heard that ALL who believed were together and had all things in common. There was not a needy person among them.

Well, I guess that depended on who you asked. Because, as the times changed, and as the church grew, the church somehow ended up reflecting the inherent prejudice and cultural bias of the society around it. The system was favoring one cultural group (the Hebrews), and discriminating against (or at least ignoring) another group (the Hellenists or Greek speakers). The structure of the church was not serving the stated mission of the church.

So what did they do? They restructured! They went out and bought a coffee grinder. I'm not sure if, almost 2000 years later, we realize how amazing that really is! Now, granted, the decision concerning what was best for these Greek women was made by twelve Hebrew men. Thankfully, they were guided by God's Spirit! 2000 years later one would hope that we would be beyond that. In other words, we should involve at least some of the Greek women not only in articulating the problem, but also in formulating the solution.

But I'm not sure that we would be willing to change the structure even if we would see that it is keeping us from doing what we know God wants us to do. Someone who *is* academic and scholarly said it like this: “To attempt to live by Kingdom principals is a radical paradigm shift for even the most devoted followers of Jesus, and few are willing to make the kind of sacrifices necessary, especially when we are quite comfortable in our existing religious structures and ministries, despite the reality that those structures are failing to serve humankind as they once did.”

Raquel was right. It's asking a lot of a church to expect them to go beyond programs and projects and strategies and be willing to undergo a radical rearrangement that would result not only in a new way of doing church but in a new way of being the church. But imagine a church where every member understands their place and their purpose within the body: a church where every member is going out and ministering, not just coming in and being ministered to. There are lots of Raquels out there and in here who want to share their flavor. And they don't all speak Spanish. I'm sure you know some of them.

But what do they have to do with the Seminary? The Seminary's job is to prepare Rachel and give her the theological background and the tools and skills for ministry so that *she* can reach out to Raquel, isn't it? Well, since you asked (or at least Brother Dreydoppel asked) I'd like to offer the Seminary another job, another mission, should you choose to accept it.

You have taken very seriously the task of helping Rachel to examine critically many of her theological assumptions including many of the things that Mrs. Taylor taught her and some of her Western ways of viewing the world. That's not always pleasant, and I don't even always agree with you, but I think it's an important process. And I'm inviting you now to help us, to help the church, engage in another kind of "form criticism." That is, a critical examination of the forms and structures within which we do ministry and mission. I'm asking you to ask the question that was posed by one of your former deans: "does the present structure help or

hinder the work of God's Spirit in and through the church?"

And I would add some further questions: does our way of being the church allow and equip Raquel to use whatever gift she has been given for the work of ministry? When we tell Raquel that she is welcome, are we really saying that she is welcome to be like us? Of course, you would ask these kinds of questions with the intent not to destroy but rather to strengthen. You could offer us what Brueggemann has called "Biblically-informed fresh configurations." And you would do this with what Ian Barbour calls critical realism, embracing a combination of faith and doubt — commitment and enquiry.

I know, the real question is "why?" Why should *you* do this? Aren't you the Theological Seminary, not the Structural Seminary? Yes, but sometimes our structure doesn't reflect our theology. It doesn't always allow us to *be* that which we *believe*. So I'm not asking you to de-Moravianize us.

Actually, I think I'm asking you to re-Moravianize us. To help us strip away the layers of editing and get back to the original text — the original intent. To rediscover how our dearly loved Moravian Church can be and remain a living one.

We can learn a lot by looking back. We can learn a lot by looking around. The Western world is the only major segment of the world's population in which the Christian church is not growing. According to George Barna, in 2004 there had been a 92% increase in the number of unchurched Americans in the last thirteen

years. In 1991 there were 39 million unchurched Americans compared with 75 million in 2004. “Stay the course” is not working! And changing it will not be easy. Isaac Newton said that everything continues in a state of rest unless it is compelled to change by forces impressed upon it.

When millions of people are dying of AIDS...

When children are being sold as sex slaves...

When hundreds of thousands of people in the richest country in the world are hungry and homeless...

When countless young people are begging us to let them use their gifts and talents in mission...

When people all around the world are dying without ever hearing the good news of Jesus Christ...

I would say that we are compelled to change! Well, maybe this wasn't what you expected to hear about global mission. But, you see, if we can't get past these walls then it's kind of pointless to talk about getting across the ocean. So we have to start right here. No, we have to start... right here (in our hearts), because mission is not a place. Mission is an attitude. Mission is a heart — God's heart.

So, what about the ending of Rachel's story? You'll have to tell it to me sometime.

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***You will find all of the papers from the symposium online at
<http://www.moravianseminary.edu/bicentennial/symposium.htm>***

***Past issues of *The Hinge* are also available online at
<http://www.moravianseminary.edu/center/hinge.htm>***

Moravian Scholars

Since this issue of *The Hinge* is focusing on Moravian Theological Education, it seems good to offer a list of the “human theological resources” in the Moravian Church. Through the centuries, our church has recognized the need for pastors with advanced degrees to teach theological disciplines. Over the past two hundred years, most of the professors at Moravian Theological Seminary were ordained Moravian clergy who were qualified to offer advanced instruction. Many of the people listed below graduated from Moravian Theological Seminary and are indicated by a star (*). All were ordained in the Moravian Church and earned a PhD in a theological discipline.

Serving in a Moravian Institution of Higher Education

- * Frank Crouch (New Testament)

Currently Serving in the Moravian Church

- * Craig Atwood (Historical Theology)
- * Daniel Crews (Historical and Systematic Theology; Medieval Literature)
- * Lynette Delbridge (New Testament)
- * Truman Dunn (Theological Ethics)
- * Amy Gohdes-Luhman (Old Testament)
- Joseph Nicholas (Theology)
- * Carol Vogler (Human Ecology)
- * Peter Vogt (Theology) — serving in Germany

Serving Outside of the Moravian Church

- * Gary Kinkel (Theology)
- * Roy Ledbetter (Church History and Systematic Theology)
- * Eleanor Stebner (Theology and Ethics)

Retired Moravian Professors with PhDs

- Lyn Bechtel (Old Testament)
- Howard Cox (Old Testament)
- * Arthur Freeman (New Testament)
- David Schattschneider (Church History)
- * Jim Hilander (Sociology)

Moravian Pastors with PhDs in areas other than theology

- * Reed Acheson (Physics)
- * Rebecca Behrend (Psychology)
- * Wally Yarbrough (Chemistry)

Please write to *The Hinge* if anyone has been inadvertently left off of this list.

Special Feature

Verifying Me: Narrative Snapshots of a Spiritual Life

William Earl Elliott II

The act of spiritual writing is ancient in its roots, and since the earliest days of the various Christian movements in the ancient world, people have attempted to write their spiritual memoirs. People have continued to reflect upon their experiences through writing since that time and for myriad reasons. Augustine wrote his *Confessions* for many reasons, but it is clear that in his writing he was attempting to offer readers a sermon. Moravians have long since had the practice of composing a *lebenslauf*, a reflection of one's life, to be read at one's funeral by the pastor. Today we benefit from contemporary writers such as Sue Monk Kidd and Karen Armstrong, who have actually published their spiritual memoirs to enrich the reading public.

To write about God, about reality, about one's life, is a practice that begs several significant questions and raises many theological issues. A primary question that all writers must ask is "Who is my audience?" Such a work, I began to realize, is for *me*. It is true that I have undergone transformation as I have begun this work, and certainly, this is only a beginning, but there is the very real possibility that in twenty years I will approach this work again. Will I look on these pages and recognize myself in them? Will the stories, the way that I have told them and my reflections upon them, verify me? Or will I come to a crossroad where what I have seen is so foreign to me, that I will need to boldly set my forth in another direction?

Additionally, as I have written, I have considered God as a spiritual reader along the way. This is no mere journal of my experiences. Rather, these stories of mine, even if God is not explicitly mentioned in some of them, are intensely spiritual for me as I interpret my life experiences through a theological lens. As I have written these narrative snapshots, I feel that I have been dancing with the Spirit. I have been a klutz as many times as I have been graceful in this dance, but God has not left me standing alone and awkward. It is a dance I continue even as I continue to reflect and write.

Death Came Slowly

Death came slowly, more slowly than I had expected. I had been sitting with dad for an hour, watching attentively as his breaths became slower and less frequent. A slight inhale; a soundless exhale. Followed by a pause that cradled an eternity.

I held his hand just like they told me. With his fingers and palm resting atop of mine, they said

it would be easier for him to let go when the time came. They said that in this way, he would have the freedom to slide his hand away from mine and slip into death.

I wished he would. The night before I had watched him nearly suffocate as the cancer had grown so large that it pressed up against his lungs. The cancer held him underneath its fluids and his blood and threatened to drown him. Vomiting had become especially problematic for dad. If I or my mom were not there to help raise him up, he would have most likely choked to death. I remember holding his body in my arms as he threw up into the wastebasket. So much weight had been lost in the last two months. Once, his shoulders and chest had been fleshy and strong. Now his body was emaciated. I could feel his bones with my fingers.

A large tube had been painfully inserted through his nose and down into his stomach. Mercifully, it had relieved some of the growing pressure inside of him. The vomiting had lessened, and no longer did dad gasp and thrash upon his bed, never being able to catch his breath. The touch of caring and efficient nurses was worth my life. Mom had cried.

Now there was only stillness. His eyes were open, but they seemed to look past me and over my shoulder. They told me he might see angels or long lost loved ones, but whatever he saw I never knew. I remembered that he told me a week earlier, with sunlight in his eyes and smile, that Heaven was much closer to us than we ever really thought. Now he looked past me to a far horizon whose sun had already set.

It was almost 11:30 at night. His hand remained immobile in mine. I knew the end was near, and some part of me that I felt guilty about was thankful. I blinked my eyes. Was this even real? The night before was a nightmare I could not blink myself awake from. As death drew near, I blinked. He had been silent for a long time now. How long ago had it been since his last breath? The minutes continued to pass.

My mom went to the kitchen to call people. Hospice would send over a doctor, and family members who were not already at the house needed to be informed. I sat alone with my dad, staring into his eyes. He gazed past me, almost drowsily, from behind his thick rimmed glasses. I wondered why he had never taken them off. His mouth was slightly open and relaxed, and his eyes continued to stare past all seeing.

No tears fell. With my face dry, I wondered numbly why there was no explosion of grief. It was like my emotions had fallen asleep, and all that was left was a strange tingling. Still, I could not take my eyes off of him. Intrusive tubes had been forced into his body, and IV lines that had long since become useless had pierced his skin. All for the greater good, I knew. In the movies I had seen the living close the eyes of the dead, and wondered if I should do the same. The thing seemed absurd to me, and so I merely sat and stared in an attempt to wrap my heart around what had just happened.

Inside myself, I felt the faint echo of relief reverberate throughout. I could not name it in that moment, but now I know it. Dad was dead. The suffering was over and had ended like an unfinished symphony. It was over. The questions would come. I would learn fear. I would learn tears. I would learn rage-filled retreat. I would learn to shake God with the hands of my heart — I would shake God out of puzzlement as to why my dad had to die from a cancer that knew nothing about mercy or dignity. All this would come. But later. With the echo of relief gradually becoming more forceful inside of me, I stood up slowly and unceremoniously walked to the kitchen for a glass of water.

What Dreams May Come

I left the party at night. As I was walking to my dad's old Jeep Cherokee I saw him. The warm light from the porch reached him easily as he stood at the front of the red SUV. Something in his casual stillness gripped me. He was waiting for me.

I approached him — my heart pounding deep from within my chest. He had not changed a bit. The thinning, but bright white hair still threatened to rebel against some poor comb's earlier work. His short sleeved dress shirt was white and made of thin fabric. A dark pen might have been clipped to the pocket over his heart — always handy if he needed to note down a thought. The slacks he wore were dull and dark in appearance, as were his shoes. It had been some time since I had seen him. But the sight was familiar. My dad, who had died on the last night in June that last summer, stood there dressed in his standard work clothes.

He smiled. I reached out and took his hand to shake like we used to. In life, we both hugged and shook hands. Shaking his hand always made me feel like I was somehow his equal. The warmth of our handshakes were as intimate as our warmest hugs. His hands were dry. They always needed hand lotion to soften them up. As we shook I felt the familiar grip of his fingers — it was strong, but not painful.

“Hello,” he said. His voice was like a forgotten Christmas morning. There was a smile on his face. It is not enough to say that I was smiling back. Something rolled through me like a salty ocean wave. I felt joy swelling up inside of me. It was a smile.

What was this I was seeing? Dad had died, but he was alive. How had he been able to visit me? I do not remember if I returned his greeting with spoken words. I can only speculate that he might have felt my hello.

We got into the Cherokee. I stepped over to the passenger side. As I slid in, I half-expected dad to vanish before he could assume his position in the driver's seat. I liked sitting in the passenger seat. This was the seat I sat in during our two-day drives to Kansas City, MO to visit relatives. It had been such a long time! I looked at the seat beside me, astonished at what I was seeing. Indeed, how nice it was to sit in this seat, next to my father and friend. The front two seats of the Cherokee had been

the setting for many a conversation between us. Many a mystery had been considered in the front two seats of the Cherokee.

But I did not want to ask him about life. I was interested in something beyond life. Indeed, it continued to strike me that the man sitting beside me was no longer alive. Sitting there, he looked alive. He seemed as alive as he had ever been. He had died almost a year earlier, and yet, against all expectation, he was here again. I was aflame with wonderment. How could such a thing be? And yet, did it matter? I had missed him. He had been gone for too long. Already I had made mistakes — mistakes that his wisdom would have guided me away from. And his friendship. I missed being able to confide in him. I missed being his son. And now he sat before me. I could not understand how or why, but that was a mystery I could live with. What mattered was that he was back.

“What is it like?” I asked him.

“In some ways very different, in some ways, very similar...” The answer was cryptic. Dad’s answers were rarely clear when it came to big questions. This was the case possibly because no reasonable answer could be anything but a little cryptic. I pressed him further. What is it like? What is God like? What do you do there? How does one really get there? I gave him a barrage of questions. I knew that our time was short — that he would have to leave and that I would be left without his voice in my ears. There was so much to ask, and as I asked he responded.

We talked for what seemed like an eternity. The fade to black, a fluttering of eyes — I woke up. When I woke up it seemed like I could still feel the touch of his hand on mine.

Since that time, much of that conversation has been forgotten. All of it, save one thing. As we sat within the Jeep — I could not yet fully grasp that it had been his and was now mine — he told me something striking. Each person, he told me, has been created by God with special gifts unique to them. In the vastness of time and space, each person is of value and is rich with potential. Furthermore, he said, our lives are hopefully spent cultivating these gifts. Life is growth, it is a process. Still, I was told, this personal growth does not end when we die. Instead, when we die and go to God, the rest of eternity is spent in the cultivation of our gifts. Eternity is spent in the cultivation of our very selves out of love to one another and to God. The growth is *never* finished. There is no final arrival at perfection. There is only the eternal becoming.

The Hike at Panther Creek

I pulled into the gravel parking lot, grateful to see the trailhead at its edge. An hour before I had heard the talk in Alumni Dormitory. Excited voices talked of going to Panther Creek State Park. Through the air I had heard the words “great” and “hiking,” and something inside of me sung like a tuning fork. I accosted them and asked for directions to Panther Creek. My freshman year of college would be starting on Monday, and already I suffered from retroactive cabin fever. I stopped only to

grab a bottle of water before rushing out to my red Cherokee. Feverish with wanderlust, I was like Walt Whitman taking to the open road. As I was notoriously bad at following directions, finding the entrance to Panther Creek seemed nothing less than providential.

The trail I chose was a simple dirt path. The patches of grass I saw were worn down from the feet of those who had come before me. Bits of taller grass and shrubbery reached over across the trail, laying its shadows upon the ground. I could feel them brushing against my shins and calves, and I didn't mind. There was purpose in my pace — an inarticulate driving that called for forward moving footsteps. A vision of Daniel Boone blazing trails across lands unknown to white men conjured itself in my mind. The trail I walked on was not new in itself, but it was new to me. I wondered why human beings have always been lured to explore the unknown. As sunlight fell upon my face, I knew that it could not have always been for profit or exploitation. There exists in our universe those mysteries which have more luster than any amount of gold.

It was not long before the trees began to cast their shade over me. The trail began to curve to the left and then back to the right. I crossed a small wooden bridge arched over a dry creek bed. Had the creek any water it would have resembled the waters Ben and I used to fish out of when we were kids. Still, I did not linger over the bridge. The trail was leading upwards into a thicker forest. Tiny flying insects buzzed around my ears. Occasionally I would swat at them, these annoying little creatures whose existence puzzled me. Years ago I had been stung on the lip by a tiny sweat bee. With my lip throbbing, it seemed clear to me that no ecosystem really needed bees of any kind. Still, the bees were necessary and it was unfair for me to demonize them. After all, there would be no bloom without the bee. It seemed like something my dad would have considered, though I never heard him speak of it.

The hike continued. Upwards the trail took me, its curves becoming more sharp as the elevation grew. A pounding began to reverberate within my chest. Each breath came more quickly than the last. An uncomfortable tingling began to spread in my calves. Unused muscles, when woken from their slumber, rebel with fire. The path became more gnarled, I had to watch where I stepped lest I trip on an embedded stone or outstretched tree root.

Another memory rushed through me. There was the time when my youth group traveled to Pippa Passes, KY. The cinema of my mind played clips of those hollers and their people. Up and down mountains they climbed all day, these paradoxically beautiful and ugly miracles living in the hollers of a coal mining community long depressed. Some of us snuck off in the middle of the night to hang out with the girls in their rooms. On the way I mistook a pool of water for a shadow and took an unexpected plunge. I laughed and cursed then. I laughed and cursed up Panther Creek.

My mind inexplicably took me to Florida Sloan of Pippa Passes. Her face was red and dark. She had just gotten her high school diploma at sixty-two. In her spare time she sang songs

into a microphone. A cassette tape had been given to me tenderly. The album was titled “Golden Rocking-Chair” and it was a treasure. She and I were so different, but there was kinship in her eyes as she looked at me. Her love humbled me on her mountain.

The trail had led me far from the parking lot by this point. The sky was mostly hidden by a vast canopy of green. The flesh of the mountain hemmed in my field of vision. Was the mountain not flesh? The dirt underfoot was what remained of a million things once alive and now dead and decayed. Now all of this mountainous flesh existed to offer the plants and trees perpetual sacrament — the bread and drink into life. Sweat poured off of my face. I could taste the saltiness of my body’s water. I stopped to lean on the dark skin of a large unknown tree. In the stillness, my body offered at least one drop of moisture to the dry dirt. Inside of me there was a steady pounding — quick rhythmic thuds like a war drum summoning warriors from their homes. My body was sounding its thunderous gong. It had been too long. It was as if I had been asleep for a year. I pushed off of the tree, my body forming an acute angle with the ground as I leaned forward and pressed upward.

My surroundings were beautiful. But exhaustion and pain blinded me from sensing beauty. The trees that at first seemed peaceful and friendly were now impassive and cold. Were my heart to explode, the trees would take my blood and water dispassionately. The stones would not soften were I to fall upon them. The war was being brought to me by gravity. In the universe gravity is said to be one of the weakest of nature’s forces, but the thing threatened to bring me low. It is hard being nothing more than a speck of dust in the cosmos.

Screw it! I wanted to sound my fury. No time for rest. Step up further! Step up past rock and root. I want to see sky and taste free air again.

Up ahead there appeared a wooden sign. Worn by time and weather, its darkened letters were difficult to make out. I can’t remember the names, but I knew I was on the trail that took me to the top of the mountain. I could turn around — call it quits for the day. The choice was made in the midst of stinging sweat and labored breaths. I set my foot upon the knotty trail. Merely viewing the top of this mountain would not suffice. I wanted to let the place roll over me like a wave.

The rising path began to level gradually, almost imperceptibly. No matter. The muscles of my legs were hot with exhaustion. My breathing would not slow because I would not slow. Shining through the surrounding trees and their leaves I could see ambiguous specks of blue. Such was my disorientation I could not tell if the blue came from sky or water.

At last I came to it. There was an opening in the trees and the ground became level again. Large rocks with a rainbow’s variety of gray beckoned to me. My hand trembled as it brought a bottle of water to my lips. The water was warmer now, but it had never tasted so refreshing. Slowly I lowered my body onto one of the larger rocks. I closed and opened my eyes. From this place I saw Cherokee

Lake seemingly meet the sky. Tiny islands the color of golden brown protruded from the waters. These were bare islands, save their centers, which were populated by rugged trees that had learned to live above constantly eroding soil.

I sat in this place silently. Like Elijah I knew God was near. I said nothing for a time. My heart no longer banged fiercely, and from the center of myself I felt the aching euphoria that occasionally rises out of physical activity. I remained silent, for it seemed that speaking would shatter the delicate moment. I felt God in and around me. The air around me was saturated with God. The air stroked my face. A great journey lay before me. Uncertainties abounded. Invisible arms wrapped themselves around me as I sat on top of the rock staring at the lake before me. It was the first time since dad died that I didn't feel afraid.

Will Elliott, a 2006 graduate of the Divinity School at Wake Forest University, is completing his second year residency of clinical pastoral education in Sacramento, California. His work has been published in Willow Tree and Mississippi Crow.. This is an excerpt from his Senior Project on spiritual autobiography. Craig Atwood was his advisor.

Letter to the Editor

I just read the Winter 2008 issue of *The Hinge* built around the paper by Sr. Elizabeth McOwat. She and all of the respondents make compelling arguments from both a Christian theological perspective and from several sociological, political and psychological perspectives as well. I was quite comfortable with these readings since I share those convictions. However, I was left with the very queasy feeling that this issue will do little to advance dialogue within the Church given the simple fact that not one writer took a stand in favor of the death penalty. In other words, for a dialogue to begin there must be two sides, if I still remember what that word means. The purpose such a dialogue would serve would be to move the discussion from the presentation of what amounts to position papers of one side of an argument toward a true discussion of the practice of theology among the people of the Church at the local level. I see some merit in this if *The Hinge* and other theological journals seek to serve the Church, as well as to speak to it.

I believe a blind poll of local, particularly local small town and rural, U.S. Moravian churches would likely find a majority of members in favor of the death penalty. Many of those members are articulate and would likely be willing to respond given the opportunity.

As it is we have now before us an articulate set of statements opposing the death penalty. But if we are to move towards resolution of a vexing issue within the local churches, then a true dialogue must be established. Conflict resolution in any social setting will not work unless both sides feel that they are equally and fairly heard. Were I to open a dialogue on this issue within the congregation that I serve using this issue of *The Hinge* as the primary resource, for example, no one in favor of the death penalty would likely come since they would feel that they were being forced to play with a stacked deck. And they would be right.

The Hinge has provided a valuable service by showing one side of this issue. Whether in *The Hinge* or elsewhere within the Church leadership, I would think the next step would be to show the other side of the issue as seen by Moravians who do not share the views expressed in *The Hinge* articles. With such a balanced presentation of the issue perhaps then a true dialogue within the Church could emerge on this most important topic.

Rev. Dr. Monte Canfield
Gnadenhutten, Ohio

Editor's Note: The Hinge Editorial Board rarely knows what position respondents will take before they submit their responses, and sometimes it is a surprise when there is little disagreement on a controversial issue. Readers are encouraged to express their own ideas in Letters to the Editor.

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