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Adult Education and Learning: A Metaphorical Perspective

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Introduction

Adult education is a growth industry. Course offerings continue to expand through Boards of Education and the Extension Departments of Universities and Community Colleges. Training courses in business and continuing education for professionals are other significant contexts for adult learning. On many fronts, our society shows a marked increase in activity in adult education and learning.

Can a similar claim be made for adult education and learning within the Christian churches? Perhaps. Religious educators have begun to notice that learning can indeed take place after confirmation in the teen years. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops through its National Office of Religious Education conducted a major study on adult faith learning. The findings were published in a monograph, *Adult Faith: Adult Church*.² Many Protestant congregations have discovered the potential of Bible study programs like the Bethel Bible Series or Kerygma. However, by and large, adult education does not command top billing in the list of priorities for congregations and parishes. Even so, adults provide the faith community with a new frontier for education and learning.

The contemporary Christian church finds itself in a context similar to that of the first century, when it had to respond to adults unfamiliar with the basic Christian story. In new church development congregations, religious educators face that problem all the time. In Gordon Turner's phrase, they are dealing "with people who have no Christian memory".² The need for adult education exists all too clearly. To resolve that need, I

think we have to start by trying to get a new perspective on the challenge before us. In this paper, I propose to explore adult education and adult learning which are common terms often used sometimes interchangeably, though they have distinct meanings. I want, also, to do this exploration through the language of metaphor.

Metaphors

When we think of metaphor, most of us think of studying prose or poetry or literature. We do not think of the power to inform, to shape, to form, and to transform that metaphors have in our everyday lives.

Sallie McFague, in her book *Models of God*³ defines metaphor as a word or phrase “used inappropriately”. It belongs properly in one context but is being used in another. So one can speak of the “arm” of a chair, war as a “chess game”, or of God as “father”. Metaphor, she says, always “has the character of is, and is not.”⁴ She quotes Jacques Derrida, who suggests, metaphor lies somewhere between “nonsense” and “truth”.⁵ Therefore a theology based on metaphor will be open to the charge that is closer to the former than the latter.

Metaphors are imaginative leaps across a distance. The best metaphors are always both a shock and a shock of recognition. A metaphorical theology will dare to take risks as well, for the recognition does not come without the shock.⁶ Kopp says, “Generally a metaphor is defined as a way of speaking in which one thing is expressed in terms of another, whereby this bringing together throws new light on the character of what is being described.”⁷ In that sense, metaphor makes available to people something which was not available before, because the metaphor provides a new lens—a new perspective, a new slant on things—and it does it in an almost invisible way. That is the shock element. You hear a story one way, and then all of a sudden you take a leap and make a connection with something quite different and some new truth grabs you.

Sallie McFague talks about this leap as the nature of parable. Parables are metaphors. Parables are stories, of course, but stories of a particular kind, that set the familiar in an unfamiliar context—which is precisely what a metaphor does.⁸ A metaphor gives us a new insight. A good metaphor moves us to see our ordinary world in an extraordinary way.

Speaking of parables, of course, thrusts us into a debate on interpretation of Scripture. In his use of parables, was Jesus speaking literally or in metaphor? When Jesus uses the term “father” for instance, was he literally describing a blood relationship or was he using that word as a metaphor for intimacy?

Phillip Wheelright contends that the plain fact is, that not all facts are plain.⁹ Again to quote Sallie McFague, she believes that we gain new insight into the church and into God when we create new metaphors. So in *Models of God*, she offers three powerful metaphors for a fresh understanding of God: mother, lover, and friend.¹⁰

A metaphor, like a symbol, has the potential for the discovery of a variety of meanings. Any symbol for God will also offer the same. We gain richer perspectives by rejecting the assumption that any one metaphor can capture all the meaning, and by opening ourselves to a variety of different metaphors.

I am using this discussion of metaphorical theology as an invitation to look at education metaphorically. Indeed, I believe that much of our learning has been metaphorical already. We grasp ideas and fix them in our experience and memory as metaphors.

When the Jesuit theologian, Avery Dulles, wrote *Models of the Church*, he offered five different models. In reality these are five metaphors for understanding what the church is and does. He referred to the church as institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, and servant.¹¹ Obviously, the church is not identical with any one of these, but each one offers a different way of seeing the church.

In a lighter vein, Lyle Schaller uses metaphors like cats and dogs and gardens and houses and mansions and ranches and nations to describe the various kinds and sizes of congregations.¹² Very small churches with 35 people or so often function like aloof cats, whereas a ranch best describes a huge church with 450–700 members. And, any church with a membership larger than that needs to be thought of as a nation. By inviting his readers to think about a congregation metaphorically, Schaller offers new insights into how various sized congregations function.

I think it is also interesting that one of the contemporary books written on preaching from a feminist perspective has

the exciting title *Weaving the Sermon*.¹³ Weaving has been a powerful metaphor in the women's movement. So Christine Smith has chosen it to describe the way women create sermons as a work of art, woven together. Morton and Belenky et al. have employed the metaphor of giving voice to, as the way that women's experience must be claimed, named and articulated.¹⁴

Metaphor may be more than a way of seeing—it has the power to change our lives. Medical research with cancer patients has demonstrated the power of image meditation. This technique encourages patients to visualize their immune system as powerful, and to visualize the cancer cells as weak and being destroyed. That process, which is simply a metaphor, has lengthened some people's lives.¹⁵

But—and this is the connection with education—the researchers found that the process works best when the patient creates his or her own metaphor. That personal symbol system will reflect how one understands the immune system, and how one understands the cancer. So one creates one's own metaphor of encounter between those two. Whatever the image is, it needs to come from within the person's own experience.

The power of metaphor also shows up in the training of physicians. Young interns are asked what metaphor they have of a physician. Do they see themselves as someone with all the answers, or do they see themselves as a partner, a resource to the health of another person? The metaphor that they have of themselves clearly will have a profound effect on the way they will practice medicine.¹⁶

Similarly, I believe that the kinds of metaphors we have about adult education and learning will either enhance or hamper our efforts to experience and to understand.

The Process of Education

The educational process, by and large, is carried out in a particular pattern without the users recognizing that it is metaphorical. The critical factor is seen to be the transfer of information from someone who knows to someone who does not know, from the competent to the uninformed. This external process is always very dependent upon a teacher. Our society has a deep commitment to that understanding of how learning happens. We believe that it is essential to pass on to the next

generation the information and values that we believe they need to know. In many ways, education in the church closely reflects what is happening in society. The church has usually seen education as the need to indoctrinate people. The educational process has focused on how information gets transferred from people who know to those who do not know. The result is the creation of a kind of "guru mentality". That is, people see themselves as inadequate, so they find someone who looks like a guru and they go to sit at his or her feet to learn. This explains why popular speakers like Scott Peck and Matthew Fox can draw thousands to hear a lecture. They offer exciting material. I am not questioning the quality of their teaching, but pointing out that they can only do this kind of leading because people have come to believe that somebody else has the truth. Therefore, the real search for truth is not a search within, but an external search for somebody else who will convey it to them. Even in graduate school, students often want to study with the most learned professor in their field.

One pejorative way of looking at this metaphorically, is to label it the "mug and jug" theory. The major activity in the educational process is to transfer the conceptual content of the jug to the mugs. That metaphor of education has limited our ways of understanding. It contains a set of assumptions about how people learn, and about the purpose of learning. What outcomes can we expect as a result? What can we expect from people and what people are going to do with us? One problem with this kind of teaching is that the learners often feel stranded. They have new information but they don't know how to integrate it, or how it will make any difference in their lives.

Although these concepts of education have been under discussion since the time of Socrates, several writers in the field of adult education have begun to heat up the challenge. They have also begun to shift the focus from education which is an external process controlled by someone else, to an understanding of learning which is an internal process and unique to the individual.

Educators like Virginia Griffin have reminded us that each of us is both a teacher and a learner.¹⁷ In some areas we teach others; in others, they teach us. There is both a teaching and a learning part within each of us. Teachers who have

quit learning are dull; the most exciting continue to be eager learners themselves.

I think part of the problem with adult education in the church is that often the teachers have not been good models of learning themselves. But a subtle shift is possible, if the lesson is conceived of in terms of what the students will learn and not structured in terms of what must be taught. Once the focus shifts to what people will learn, it changes the whole way one approaches the process and the important content.

The church with its penchant for the limited metaphor of information transfer has not really come to grips with some of the significant discoveries and theories in the world of adult education and learning.¹⁸ To take but one example, we need to recognize that adults are not very excited about deferred learning. The organized system of schooling, in the case of graduate school, is still able to keep some adults at the task of deferred learning, but even this is being challenged. In reality most adults are interested in learning in the present—that usually means a problem-solving approach to learning.¹⁹

In public school, one learned the multiplication table because at some time in one's adult life one will have to know how to multiply. That is a kind of deferred learning. Compare that to the adult learner who takes a night school course in car maintenance to cut down the cost of garage bills. Or those who take a course on parenting because they are having difficulty with teenagers. A lot of adult learning is problem focused and problem motivated. It tends also to be much more directly related to the experience of the individual.

David Kolb, a contemporary writer on educational theory, identifies four sequential steps in the experiential learning process:²¹ 1) doing something; 2) reflecting on it, looking at it, and examining it; 3) thinking about it, relating it conceptually to what others have said and experienced; and 4) finally experimenting with how one would do it differently or change. Out of his understanding, Kolb has discovered that people have different learning styles. Some prefer doing certain aspects of these learning activities more than others. One of his valuable contributions is to help us see that adults are not all the same when they learn. Some learn better by doing, others by reflecting, others by discovering the principles and still others by experimenting.

Tighe and Szentkeresti list six categories of adult learners. They draw their categories from the writings of Houle and Morstain and Smart.²² They identified non-directed learners as those who learn, like Sir Edmund Hillary climbing Mt. Everest, "because it's there". They keep on learning all their lives because there will always be a lot more to explore. Then, there are goal-oriented learners. They have an immediate reason to learn, like the people who register for a course in car repair. Social learners are not as concerned about what they will learn as with establishing and maintaining relationships with others. Career-oriented learners are concerned about work-related issues. Stimulation seeking learners are interested in escaping from the ordinary. Life change learners are concerned with the changes that they are facing. Any educational event in the church may have one or more of these types of learners present. Which group will we focus on and which will we ignore, if we concentrate on the transfer of information only? Other metaphors—if we will explore them—will significantly alter our understanding of adult education in the church by expanding our perceptions to include additional ways of learning and other motivations.

Some Learning Metaphors

Journey is a very powerful metaphor for many people when they talk about their learning in terms of their faith. Its religious roots go back to the Exodus and pilgrimages. Some congregations have developed programs in Christian Education with names like the "Faith Journey Model". James Fowler in his book *Stages of Faith* articulates a theory of faith development.²³ Any developmental theory, of course, is only a map—it is not the journey itself. Trouble arises when the map becomes confused with the territory, the lived faith experiences of the individual. All a map can do is help one discover some things, or alert one to watch for some elements, or to give direction. At its best, it is only a metaphor for the real thing.

One notes how powerful metaphors can become when one realizes that a lot of the research on the moral development of children and adults was done by Lawrence Kohlberg—and it was done all with males.²⁴ The assumption was made by many that the same map or metaphor would be true for women.

Carol Gilligan²⁵ and others have indicated that women have different ways of making ethical decisions.

The value of a metaphor like “journey” is that people can pour into it a lot of different meanings. One can take a journey in a canoe; one can take a journey in an airplane. The metaphor allows some richness.

In my own on-going study, many of the metaphors I have discovered deal with journey, but not all of them. Another has to do with cooking. Learning is like preparing food, getting the ingredients together. One person explained to me, that the really exciting thing is making the meal—not eating it. So it is with learning.

Another kind of metaphor comes from the field of classical music. Learning is viewed like the movements of a symphony, where the same themes get developed in different ways with variations and nuances.

These metaphors confirm the sense of the uniqueness of each learner. I can share with somebody else, but the experience and the meaning are not the same.

Another metaphor used sometimes for the Christian faith is one of growth in nature. As a tree grows it adds layers and expands—but even the smallest stalk is still a tree. An individual can be a person of faith whether they are a small child or an adult. This metaphor does not permit distinctions about whether one is a person of faith or not.

This latter kind of metaphor invites one to see learning as extending oneself, as growing. The journey metaphor invites one to progress through various points towards a destination.

Yet a third set of metaphors invites one to think in terms of relationships. The metaphor of family, for instance, does not necessarily imply either personal growth or progress but a life within a system or relationships. The focus is taken off the individual, and directed toward others and the faith community. Another type of relationship is that of friendship. Robert Browning in his 1989 presidential address to the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education spoke of the need of educators to help persons friend and befriend a bruised and broken world.²⁶

Martin Marty, the Lutheran Church historian, once remarked in a lecture that in the church we are in the “text and

people business".²⁷ That forms the basis for another metaphor that I have used, the metaphor of conversation or dialogue. Learning invites people to conversations at a number of levels within themselves, with others, and with the text or biblical story. Where does my story touch the text, and where does the text touch my story? What are the common elements that begin to interact with each other? How does my story change as I bring it into the light of the text? How does the text change as I see it in the light of my story? Both sides change through the dialogue.

In facilitating someone else's learning, one might think of being a bridge builder. Then, one asks what in the learner's experience might link to this text? By building a bridge, or perhaps building several bridges, that person can, in a sense, begin to see, hear, feel or experience the dialogue.

Adult learning takes seriously the fact that people will engage in deep conversations if they are given the opportunity, the resources, the support, and the permission. One of the key dynamics in adult education is to give people permission to do their own learning, because often it has been taken away by the educational system they have previously experienced.

I suspect that many adults do not attend church because they are afraid that they will not be invited to an internal dialogue between their life and the text. They suspect that their experience will not be taken seriously or be discounted and the experience of someone else made normative. I think a lot of people also feel that any education in the church will be in a sermonic model. Somebody up front and centre will deliver whatever needs to be known. But many are no longer prepared to be on the receiving end, even from a guru- -they have their own agendas to pursue.

A further possible reason for avoidance may also be in the expectation that this institution has not done a particularly good job of educating them so far, so why should they expect any change now? Some research in the United States has looked at why people do not go back to an educational institution for more help.²⁸ The answer is obvious. They did not get help the first time, so they are unwilling to take another chance.

One of the basic principles of adult education, that everybody affirms, is that one can only start where the people are.

Unfortunately, many educators start where they wish people were, or where they think the people are; but, not where they really are. Then, these educators wonder why a learning conversation does not get started. So it is really critical to know where the learners are, and not to make value judgments about where they ought to be.

Then one designs a program so as to invite participants to grow and change, to try out new ideas, to become reflective about life, and do critical thinking²⁹—that is, to think about the implications for their life and their Christian life-style in today's world. In other words, to explore new metaphors or models. Or, perhaps, to examine their present metaphors more critically.

Implications

Adults raised in our present culture will have had some kind of contact— either positive or negative—with some dimensions of religious faith. What are those dimensions? What do they believe? Where do they find meaning? By what process? Adult educators need to spend more time discovering where people are instead of assuming—to use another metaphor—that they could somehow graft meaning on to the stem of another's life. I find the metaphor of grafting on a tree distressing.

Another implication, for a lot of people, is that they begin to see the link between how they live in the world all the time and their Christian faith. In the kind of daily ethical dilemmas that they face, what resources does the Christian faith have for them?

The church has to take seriously how it resources adults at all ages in their faith journey. For instance, we must not assume that because people have retired they do not require any further opportunities to discover their faith. In fact, they may have more time and more interest than they have had in their adult years to this point. The secular world is very much aware of that age cohort as a learning group. In contrast, within the church there does not seem to be much interest in adult learning for seniors.

Any time we work with adults we need to recognize that our perspective needs to be lifelong. That horizon takes away some

of the urgency of making things happen right now. Rather, it gives us the chance to allow people to move at their own speed, and in their own time.

We need to work really hard to get people to take responsibility for their own learning. That means involving people at all levels of learning— planning, goal setting, actual leading, and evaluating the experience. People must really feel a part of their own learning. They must not feel that something is being done to them by somebody on high.

Another critical factor, I think, is that we must keep the focus on learning. We may have responsibility for an educational process, but that process itself needs to focus on learning. That is, we believe that God is at work in the world; God is at work in and through individuals; it is not our job to usurp God's position, it is our job to trust in God. Therefore we are challenged to be faithful in what we plan for people to learn, and we must not assume a responsibility for their learning, which was never ours in the first place.

A final thing, that I think is absolutely crucial, is that if we are going to talk about dialogue in learning, it has to be a dialogue with the real experiences of people. It cannot be a dialogue in an imaginary world or an abstract world of right and wrong that exists only in our minds or in books.

Conclusion

We cannot do any of this if we limit ourselves to a single educational model or metaphor. I think that up to the present we have assumed that there is only one process. But there are a lot of metaphors, and a lot of ways of looking at education and learning. We are invited through those metaphors to discover, to think about, and to reflect on different ways of being with adults, of modeling good learning for adults, and of inviting them to struggle with what it means to be a Christian in the world today.³⁰ Recalling a phrase quoted earlier, we invite learners to be in the text and people business in the community of faith for the sake of the world.

Notes

¹ Joanne Chafe (ed.), *Adult Faith, Adult Church* (Ottawa: Publications Service, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986).

- 2 Gordon Turner. Title of a course given in the Continuing Education Division at The Toronto School of Theology called "Evangelization with people having no Christian memory", February 6-10, 1989.
- 3 Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).
- 4 Ibid. 33.
- 5 Ibid. 34.
- 6 Ibid. 35.
- 7 S. Kopp, *Guru: Metaphors From a Psychotherapist* (Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, 1971) 17.
- 8 Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 4.
- 9 Phillip Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968) 86.
- 10 McFague, *Models of God*, 78.
- 11 Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1987).
- 12 Lyle Schaller, *Looking in the Mirror: Self-appraisal in the Local Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984) 16.
- 13 Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).
- 14 See N. Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) and M.F. Belenky, B.M. Clinchy, N.R. Goldberger, and J.M. Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).
- 15 O.C. Simonton, S. Matthews-Simonton and J.L. Creighton, *Getting Well Again* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1978).
- 16 A.H. Carter, III, "Metaphors in the Physician-Patient Relationship," *Soundings*, LXXII/1 (Spring 1989) 153-164.
- 17 Virginia Griffin, in a seminar presentation to The Society for the Advancement of Continuing Education for Ministry, Toronto, June 1986.
- 18 See A.B. Knox, *Helping Adults Learn* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986) and S.D. Brookfield, *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986).
- 19 D. Brundage and D. Mackeracher, *Adult Learning Principles and Their Application to Program Planning* (Toronto: The Minister of Education, Ontario, 1980) 103.
- 20 Ibid. 99.
- 21 David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984).
- 22 Jeanne Tighe and Karen Ann Szentkeresti, *Rethinking Adult Religious Education: A Practical Parish Guide* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) 51. See also: C.O. Houle, *The Inquiring Mind* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961) and B. Morstain and J. Smart, "A motivational typology of adult learners," *Journal of Higher Education*, 48/6 (November-December 1977) 665- 679.

- 23 James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).
- 24 Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).
- 25 Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- 26 Robert Browning used this metaphor in the president's address to the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education meeting in New York, November 1989.
- 27 Martin Marty. This phrase was used in a lecture to The Society for the Advancement of Continuing Education for Ministry, Chicago, June 1983.
- 28 B.A. Quigley, "Learning to work with them: analyzing nonparticipation in adult basic education through resistance theory," *Adult Literacy and Basic Education*, 11/2 (1987) 63-71.
- 29 S.D. Brookfield, *Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987).
- 30 Some textual resources that may prove helpful are: Donald Brundage and Dorothy Mackeracher, *Adult Learning Principles and Their Application to Program Planning* (Toronto: The Minister of Education, Ontario, 1980); Nancy T. Foltz (ed.), *Handbook of Adult Religious Education* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1986); Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980); John M. Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults From Learning?* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1985); Malcolm S. Knowles, *Self-Directed Learning: A Guide For Learners and Teachers* (New York: Association Press, 1975); Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983).