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EDUCATING THE HEART: CHRISTIAN NURTURE

Dittmar Muendel

THE FRUSTRATING GAP

A perennial frustration of any serious teacher of the Christian faith is that learners often know some biblical concepts and Lutheran doctrine intellectually, but do not reflect this knowledge in their daily actions. We diligently teach the doctrine of grace. Yet, many of our members continue to measure their worth by their achievements at their job, at home, or in the community. We teach, “love your neighbour as yourself”. Yet, many loyal church members are very reluctant to acknowledge people fleeing for their lives from Central America or Southeast Asia and seeking to settle in our midst as our neighbours. This is true even though so many of us are children or grandchildren of political refugees.

Why does this frustrating gap between Christian knowledge and Christian action appear in so many areas? It is too simple to blame the gap on our “old, sinful Adam” who refuses to carry out our lofty intentions. A fair portion of the blame must be ascribed to our approach to Christian education. The content of our instruction may be both biblical and confessional. However, the approach, the method, and the aim of our education may be neither.

Rather than to nurture the developing faith of the young with God’s grace, we have often simply informed their minds about what Lutherans believe. Rather than to use the means of grace to help liberate the heart from its

devotion to false gods, we have limited ourselves to teaching the doctrine of justification. Yet, we cannot overcome the gap between knowledge and action by substituting interpersonal relationships for doctrine — as people did in the 1970's. Nor do we overcome the gap by presenting unclear (and often un-Lutheran) theology wrapped in feelings — as many of the songs used at many of our Bible camps do. Neither knowledge, nor interpersonal relationships, nor emotions are the key to our way of responding to the world around us — though all of them are important aspects of becoming fully human.

The gap between knowing and doing can be overcome, if we learn to educate the heart. Luther has shown us that “the heart” (also called “the spirit”, “the inner man”) is the key to our way of looking at life and to our way of responding to the challenges of daily life.

THE HEART: THE KEY TO OUR OWN RESPONSES TO LIFE

The educational model we use is at least implicitly always based on a view of human nature. If we follow the “classical” tradition then humans are a composite of the physical, emotional, and mental, with the mind directing the other two. We will expect that giving knowledge and developing reasoning skills will make people responsible. If we follow the “romantic” tradition, then we will distrust reason and knowledge. We will expect rather that our feelings will give us the necessary clues to our true natures and to life itself.

Luther has a broader, a more biblical, view of human nature.¹ He acknowledges that, as “outer persons”, we have body, mind and feelings. But this outer person is only one dimension of human nature. It is the dimension that relates to the world of people and things. Good information and clear reasoning are very important when we are relating to the world of people and things. Our survival as a species may depend on our not becoming lazy in getting the facts and not being fuzzy in thinking through the implications. Our feelings are important too, as we relate to people and to our world. We should be in touch with our fears and our most basic human hopes. We rightly fear the cold and calculating politician.

However, the outer person, even with the most developed mind and the most sensitive feeling, has its limits. Neither mind nor feeling can tell us the purpose or goal of our life. Something else within us determines to what ends we use our minds and feelings. Will we use our mind and knowledge only to enhance our own position in life? Or, will we use them for the welfare of others? The mind by itself cannot answer this. Will we only become more and more sensitive to our own wants and hurts? Or, will we increase our ability to feel with others? Feeling by itself cannot answer this. “The heart”, as Luther

1. See David Löfgren, *Die Theologie der Schöpfung bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), pp. 67-79.

understands it, provides the answer.

“The heart” is that aspect of our being which always puts its trust in something to direct our lives. At the same time, the heart is our will which chooses one course of action over another on the basis of its object of trust. So the heart is the very center of our personality and the key to how we respond to life around us. For example, if my heart puts its trust in my career, then I will make those choices which appear to enhance my career, even at the expense of my family’s well-being. If my heart puts its trust in the Creator, then I will willingly do those things my Creator asks of me, even at the expense of my personal or financial security. My heart’s object of trust is really my god, as Luther teaches in the *Large Catechism*.

Once we recognize the role the heart plays, it is easy to see why informing the mind is an inadequate approach to Christian education. One may *know* moral principles but not put them into practice because, in Pascal’s words, the heart has its reasons which reason does not know. The attachments of the heart will guide one’s actual responses to situations and not the moral principles which one knows and of which one approves. The reasons our mind gives us for our decisions and actions are often simply rationalizations so we can do what the heart wants. The use we make of our knowledge and of our reasoning powers is guided by our vested interests. Only after God has become our vested interest — our inheritance — will our knowledge and reason be used to discern and do His will.

Once we recognize that our heart is an attachment to what we are most concerned about in life, we can also readily see why Christian education must be more than getting in touch with our feelings and more than inducing certain feelings in others. As Robert C. Roberts argues in *Spirituality and Human Emotion*, emotion is founded upon “concerns”. People are often “driven” by some passion or another — “whether it be love of country, concern for intellectual and moral integrity, or the love of God . . .”² One’s basic concern or passion is the basis for one’s varying emotions. If we are genuinely to affect peoples’ ways of reacting to life — including emotionally — we have to be able to affect their basic concerns or passions, i.e., the trust of their heart.

WHAT THE HEART FEEDS ON

If we want to be able to educate the heart, we must understand how the heart comes to attach itself to a particular god, concern, loyalty.

Luther anticipates contemporary research in hermeneutics and faith development. He states that the trust of the heart comes from hearing either the Word of God or another word, a word not from God. To be able to put its trust in God, the heart needs a concrete form of God’s promise of grace to which it

2. Robert C. Roberts, *Spirituality and Human Emotion* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), p. 14.

can cling. A person's feelings and experiences speak with conflicting voices. A person's mind cannot arrive at an absolute certainty that a well-meaning God exists. A person's conscience often tells the person that he or she is not acceptable to God. Therefore, God binds his gracious intentions to concrete forms such as Word and Sacrament. The heart can now gain confidence in God and say, I have you by your word.³

Just as trust in God comes from the concrete communications of "Word and Sacrament" (as Luther's shorthand puts it), so the heart's trust in a false god comes from listening to another word. In discussing the story of the fall, Luther says, "For the chief temptation was to listen to another word and to depart from the one which God has previously spoken . . ." ⁴ The false gods also use words and even "preaching" to win the trust of the heart.⁵ They interpret life, its meaning and challenges, in a way that is different from God's Word.

Contemporary research in hermeneutics (the art of interpretation) supports and deepens Luther's insights. Sallie McFague in *Speaking in Parables* demonstrates convincingly that our way of interpreting life is based on metaphors. The Christian way of interpreting life in the context of God's gracious presence is best communicated in Jesus' parables — and in forms of communication which are parabolic.⁶ The parables present daily reality and human interactions as they are unexpectedly reformed by the logic of God's grace in contrast to our everyday logics. God's grace becomes available to us by means of the familiar/strange world which the images of the parables create.

Studies in faith development also show the role which "words" or the communication of images of life play in shaping a person's trust of the heart. James Fowler in *Stages of Faith* shows how tacit and explicit images both shape, and grow out of, our centers of value and power to which our faith gives allegiance. It may be worth quoting him at length:

Metaphors, symbols, concepts — and many, many other kinds of representations — serve to bring our shared images of an ultimate environment to expression. The lasting world religious traditions prove again and again to be the lively custodians of *truthful* images of the ultimate environment. They awaken persons to an imaginal grasp of the ultimate conditions of existence and enable them to celebrate or assent to the visions of transcendent value and power they mediate.⁷

Fowler is not analyzing Christian faith *per se* but rather how any faith in some ultimate concern or highest object of trust occurs. The images of our ultimates are not only present in discreet metaphors and symbols but in stories shared in communities, in rituals and symbolic actions.

We can conclude that the heart's attachment to God or to false gods is

3. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 37 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955), p. 68.

4. WA 10, I, 1, 202.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), chap. 4.

7. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 29.

established and nourished by images, stories, ritual actions, metaphors and symbols — in short by a whole culture. A culture includes all the forms of symbolic interaction such as language, the arts, and customs.⁸

The educational issue for us becomes: What “words” or cultures predominate in interpreting life and its most important concerns for us? The tasks that arise from this issue are twofold: 1) to nurture the developing faith of those entrusted to us within a Christian “culture”, and 2) to provide a form of Christian instruction that challenges predominant symbols and images of life espoused by our mass culture. The remainder of this article will deal with the first task. The next article will look at Christian instruction as a challenge to idolatrous symbols.

CHRISTIAN NURTURE: PROVIDING A COUNTERCULTURE

The hearts of the young and the old constantly feed on images of life, symbols, and word-pictures. The question for the Christian parent or teacher is whether these images are wholesome food or not. The question is particularly urgent in our culture in which the mass media are so pervasive. Do the images of the good life on TV, in the magazine stories, in the commercials attach the heart to God or to false gods? How is life interpreted in our mass culture? What is most important? Where does one gain a sense of worth? How does one measure an “abundant life”, materially or spiritually? If we look at the images and symbols of our mass culture and try to answer these questions, we quickly see that the food is not wholesome. The images, stories and ritual actions of our present consumer culture are very powerful and persuasive “other words” contrary to the Word of God. They are successfully trying to win the trust of many hearts.

A quick way of recognizing some of the assumptions that underly our mass culture is to read (or see) John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*.⁹ In one chapter he analyzes commercials as the language of the consumer culture. The common proposition most ads make indirectly is: transform yourself by buying something more. Our god-given worth is taken away from us and sold back to us at the price of the product. The aim of these constant transformations is to be envied by others for what we have. Since money is the power to consume, it is the key to allowing us fulfill life’s (redefined) goal. In theological language we can say that the consumer culture is based on a new, works-righteousness; we achieve our self-worth by buying.

The consumer culture does not offer its view of a worthwhile life in intellectual concepts. The call to endless self-improvement comes in images, pro-

8. See John B. Magee, *Religion and Modern Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 289.

9. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), chap. 7.

jected fantasies, and stories. Not our conscious mind, but our desire to live joyfully is addressed. The Middle (supposedly “dark”) Ages built gigantic cathedrals. Our (supposedly “enlightened”) culture builds gigantic shopping malls.

The “language” of the consumer culture is in the air we breathe. By contrast, our exposure to the language and culture of faith is very limited. We must therefore wean ourselves and our children from over-exposure to the images of the consumer culture. And, as importantly, we must develop a counterculture based on the language of faith. The language of faith must be expressed in liturgy, life-style, and stories — to name but three of the important forms of nurture.

Liturgy

That Christian faith is nurtured by a culture which is *counter* to the dominant culture of our society is most clearly seen in our liturgies. Our liturgies embody our central stories, our most basic beliefs, our way of relating to God, and our view of how God relates to us. Even so-called non-liturgical congregations are not without liturgy in this sense. Even without singing the same scripture verses in the same sequence and even without special vestments for the worship leaders, worship entails liturgy. The only question that must really concern us is whether or not our ritual actions, our singing, reading, praying, celebrating the sacraments clearly express God’s way with humans.

The aim of or liturgy in song, word, and action should be to provide a new perspective for looking at the experiences and challenges of our daily life. The heart of the new perspective is the grace of God, which the new work-righteous culture knows nothing about. By means of this perspective the liturgy seeks to release us from the pressure to achieve our own worth by our work or by our consuming. The liturgy offers to free us from our failures, guilt and the shame of our past week or day. At the communion rail, the liturgy takes us out of the isolation of our sin and restores us to community. By freeing us from our preoccupation with our own successes and failures, the liturgy points us to the needs of the people who surround us during the week. By song, words, images and actions the liturgy addresses our conscious and unconscious desire for a life worth living and channels that desire toward its true fulfillment.

Our faith must be nurtured by the images of life which the liturgy provides. As parents, our task will be to develop “liturgical lifestyles”, if I may use that phrase. As teachers, our task will be to find liturgical expressions of our faith that speak to the young and to families without losing the depth of our confessional heritage. In other words, we need hymns, biblical images and stories, prayers, rituals and celebrations to frame our days and our years. According to Luther, a sacrament is a physical reality framed by God’s Word. We must bring together God’s Word with God’s concrete presence in the joys and challenges of our daily lives. A liturgical lifestyle will thus help us to have a

sacramental view of life.

How can we begin to develop daily liturgies? How can each day be patterned so that in our work and our play we live before our gracious God? First of all, we have to examine how our present days are patterned. For example, we must ask, is the TV guide our bulletin and is gathering in front of the screen our daily ritual? Are our children constantly exposed to images of life which feed their hearts with desires for our culture's idols? As we answer these questions for ourselves, we must think of positive alternatives for patterning our days. What time do we have for prayer or worship as individuals and with the family? What time do we have to be a family by doing things together (work, play, or sports)? How can we select and suggest reading, films or videos which open our children's minds and hearts to the reality of our world: to its beauty and pain, to its despair and hope?

To develop home liturgies we should again learn to sing hymns by heart, both old and new. Luther wrote hymns — in part for his children — because the music and the words together let life-giving images enter their hearts. We need hymns for all occasions and seasons of the church year, and not just for Christmas. You may think that you and your family are not singers. But isn't it amazing how many of us *can* and *do* sing at Christmas? Why not in other seasons? Singing at home is also the basis of good congregational singing. Our children join in with gusto, if they already know the hymn. And whenever a hymn or a part of the Sunday liturgy spoke to them, they will sing them at home spontaneously. But not all "religious songs" are equally good, even if they are easy to learn. Some have quite a distorted image of how God deals with us. Others trivialize "death, sin and the devil" — either in the words or in the tunes. So we need the Church Boards of Worship and Music to help us (and our camp counselors and youth leaders!) find singable and theologically sound hymns which are appropriate for the various seasons of the Church year.¹⁰

Our home liturgies also need biblical stories and prayers. We have to help parents find the narrative and poetic portions of the Bible. It is these which best capture the attention, the imagination, and the heart of their children. What the growing heart needs most are interpretations and models of life, not the end products of the Church's reflection on these stories expressed dogmatically or moralistically. So we nurture the heart best by telling the stories with a love for the details, the images, and the story-line. We also need to learn to pray together. In addition to spontaneous prayers, it is important for our nurture that we, as a whole family, learn well-formulated prayers by heart. The prayers we learn by heart help us both to broaden our scope in praying and to pray

10. In 1965 the Commission on Worship and Music of the American Lutheran Church put out *The Hymn-of-the-Week Song Book*, (Augsburg Publishing House, 1965). The song book and an accompanying record were dedicated to the homes of the church. The commission realized that congregational singing is closely related to family singing.

when our feelings militate against it.

To complete a liturgical life-style, we must learn to celebrate. We must find appropriate forms to celebrate the various festivals of our church year. It is a clear indictment of our failure as congregations and families that parents and children are aware of the various fairs and consumer-fests that are coming up; they greet them with anticipation. Yet, they find out by reading in the bulletin a few minutes before worship starts that “Today is Pentecost”. Preparing special foods, making distinctive decorations, and spending time together with various activities help us to anticipate and celebrate. Foods, decorations and games are not in themselves “Christian”. Yet they give a concrete form to our celebration of what God has done. If we don’t consciously give a form to the holy days, someone else will: our children’s peers, the stereotypes, or the TV series.

By means of worship, singing, story-telling, praying and celebrating at home and in the congregation, our days and our years will be framed and ordered by the perspective of God’s gracious presence.

Life-style

A second form of nurture occurs by means of our life-styles. If we want to keep our own faith alive as well as to nurture it in our children, we must make our life-styles consistent with the trust in God which we profess. Life-styles are “words” or metaphors which point to the underlying trust of the heart. In our search for a source of meaning one can rely on, we observe what people do rather than what they say. Our children do the same. They observe our actions, how we spend our time, our money, our energy. They notice the expectations we have of ourselves and of others. They sense how attached we are to our possessions. All these details give our children clues as to what we truly rely on. If, by means of all these subtle signs, we communicate that we are attached to the idols of our consumer culture, our explicit attempts at giving our children — or our parishioners — a Christian education will be thwarted.

For fear of being legalistic, we have often backed away from consciously developing a life-style that counteracts the life-style dictated by our predominant culture. We have ended up conforming to the patterns of society, rather than being ourselves totally transformed to discern God’s will for our lives. Conformity to our dominant culture is a sign that we have misunderstood God’s grace. God’s grace always liberates us from false attachments. We are freed to act in ways that are consistent with His will. God’s grace ceases being grace and becomes a destructive concept when it immobilizes us — or even makes us ridicule those who impose various disciplines upon themselves to be faithful to their Lord.

When it does not immobilize us, our fear of legalism can be a healthy corrective. It prevents us from imposing our own decisions and disciplines on others, as if there were only one true model of a faithful life-style. However, the alternative to legalism is not the absence of guidance and discipline. The alternative is discipleship. In discipleship, obedience to Jesus rather than the

standards of our prevalent culture becomes the norm of our actions.

If we seek to live as disciples of the “man for others”, at least two things are clear: our life-styles must be simple and they must express concern for others.

There is a spiritual and a moral reason why we must develop simple life-styles. The spiritual reason is that possessions and consumer power will always seek to become our gods; they will try to block our trust in our Creator. Gaining and maintaining our possessions quickly become the focus of our lives, even when we do not want this to happen. The moral reason for simple lifestyles is the overwhelming poverty and need of people in our country and around the world. Increasing our possessions can quickly blind us to these needs. So a simple life-style is necessary both to keep our faith in God as the Provider alive and for the sake of national and global justice. Some excellent voluntary disciplines to free us from our devotion to possessions are to minimize our consumption, to tithe, or to use the graduated tithe (which increases as the salary goes up). Our freedom to use money for others will be a decisive clue to our children and others that we have not bought into the underlying assumptions of the consumer culture.

That disciples of “the man for others” should express concern for others is self-evident. Yet it is often not so evident in our life-styles. Concern for others begins in and with the immediate family. As parents we not only help our children to “share” with siblings; more basic than our verbal commands is the children’s experience of us either being concerned about their joys and sorrows or being disinterested and busy. By experiencing affirmation and support in their endeavours, our children become free to affirm others. The less time and personal affirmation they get, the more preoccupied with themselves they seem to become. One way to affirm each other and at the same time to counteract the “do-your-own-thing” philosophy of the “Me-first generation” is to regularly do things together as a family. We shouldn’t laugh at Mormonism’s “Thursday night is family night” until we have found our own order for family time together — and then we won’t laugh at all.

We must also move beyond the family in sharing the joys and burdens of others. If all of our concern is directed toward the family, we become caught in a subtle form of self-centeredness: family-egoism. The concern for others can be expressed in political, economic, or interpersonal activities. In all of these our children and others can sense that we are free to serve. Indirectly, we bear witness to our underlying trust in God who has set us free. This witness of our whole life-style is crucial to the nurture of a developing faith. Actions speak louder than words.

Biographical Stories

A third form of nurture of which we could make more use is the reading of biographical stories of people of faith. In their search for the one in whom they can believe, our young people are curious to know what more or less well-known people believed in. They tacitly ask, What gives their lives meaning and

fulfillment? What do they rely on in life? Is life worth living? They are interested in others because they are searching for possible ways of living for themselves.

In “The Triumph of Mass Idols”, Leo Lowenthal analyzed the type of biographical stories that predominated in our mass media over a period of time.¹¹ He discovered that at the beginning of this century, the stories were about idols of production — people who make it in life by their determination and effort to produce something for society. Since the 1940’s there has been a marked shift toward stories about idols of consumption — people who were noteworthy for what they own and consume. If the imagination of our young people feeds on these kind of stories as they search for meaning, they will either become achievers or happy hedonists.

We have to provide our young people and ourselves alternative stories. We need to read (or see) stories of people who have lived faithful lives. If the (auto)biography is well written there will be a unity of life and thought.¹² We will be able to see the person’s faith in God through the actual decisions and actions of his or her life. Above all we discover that being a loyal consumer or a happy hedonist is not the only option available to us today. An obedient faith is an actual possibility in this century — for us and our children as well. Dag Hammarskjöld, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Dom Helder Camara, and Desmond Tutu — to name only a few — are all a part of our century and our modern, complex world. They have not only kept the faith, but have also translated it into action. *Sojourners* regularly publishes lists of biographies for those who want to help their young people grow up faithfully.

Through liturgy, life-style, and biographical stories we seek to nurture the heart with life-giving images. These images invite the heart to place its trust in the God of grace rather than in the idols of our mass culture. The primary responsibility and opportunity for Christian nurture lies in the Christian home. However, the congregation (and its wider support network) must help its members in learning the fundamentals of being a counter culture. One hour of Sunday School a week can be a complement, but never a substitute, for daily Christian nurture.

The explicit Christian instruction that occurs in a congregation has its own function in educating the heart. We will examine this in the next article. Regardless how good the instruction is, however, if the element of nurture is missing, it will be greatly hampered in its effectiveness.

11. Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1961), chap. 4. [pp. 109-140].

12. Sallie McFague, p. 145.