A Yinist Pedagogy: Theological Education at the Well

—Young Lee Hertig

In an era of accelerating global change, the survival of human institutions depends upon prompt adaptation in the forms of collaboration, partnership and networking. No institution survives as an island any more. In this environment, institutions of all types are restructuring; the field of theological education is no exception.

In this rapidly changing world, scholars in North America continue to carry on a debate over the field of theological education. The very identity of the theological institution has been the target of these debates. The core questions are: What is the role of today’s seminary? Is the traditional identity and goal of theological education relevant for today’s context? Is seminary graduate school or vocational school?

The answers to these queries are seldom simple. The fact is seminary is neither a graduate school nor a vocational school. It can be argued that divinity schools within universities are more effective graduate schools than specialized seminaries. Yet stand alone seminaries very often focus on academic preparation over ministerial equipping. This can be a disservice to those who come to the seminary to learn how to be practicing ministers. Many seminarians are thus left underprepared for their vocation. Standing on the academic side of the gulf between theological education and practical ministry, these gifted and inspired men and women toil through cognitive exercises and large, impersonal classroom settings.

We have fallen into the trap that Richard Shaull cautions against, where “our advanced technological society is rapidly making objects of most of us and subtly programming us into conformity to the logic of its system.”

An answer to this quandary is the development of a holistic approach, based on a prayerful and reconciling frame. This kind of encounter oriented process bridges the gulf and provides a path to synthesis in this otherwise binary environment. As Parker Palmer writes, “The mind immersed in prayer no longer thinks in order to divide and conquer, to manipulate and control. Now, thinking becomes an act of love, a way of acknowledging our common bonds and assuming our rightful role in the created community.” With Palmer’s ideas in mind, this paper approaches theological education holistically, advocating the integration of both the knowledge and the knower as the purpose of theological education.

2 Parker Palmer, To Know Whom We Are Known (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 11-12.
While the information superhighway promotes large-scale data dissemination, it is a process of high touch but low contact. People are left alienated, having acquired an infinite web of knowledge, but at the cost of a shrunken experience of community. The existential psychologist, Rollo May, expresses this concern in his conceptualization of the paradox between technological advancement and the human condition:

We in our age are faced with a strange paradox. Never before have we had so much information in bits and pieces flooded upon us by radio and television and satellite, yet never before have we had so little inner certainty about our own being.  

May asserts the importance of the encounter as the balm to the malady of alienation. There is no better example of the authentic encounter than that described in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John. Here, Jesus models the process of encounter through which a downtrodden woman rediscovers herself through God's given grace. Through loving dialogue, Jesus demonstrates a theological education that is engaging and thus transformational. This encounter is at once deeply personal and yet also theologically and intellectually complex. Theological education today could do well to take this example more seriously. We are in need of encountering our prophet at the well.

Despite debates about the applicability of the Bible in a contemporary context, there are some fundamental principles of Jesus that can function as meta-narratives for all humanity. Among these meta-narratives are the core Christian doctrines that: 1) the world is broken and full of wounded people; and 2) the power of loving contact cannot be substituted by anything else. This essay seeks to explore how Jesus embodies a theology of encounter.

The Power of Vulnerability

Jesus' curriculum is both open and contextual, taking place in the world of human contact. His teaching takes place in synagogues, fields, homes, in the places that people live their lives. This includes, of course, the well. This setting finds Jesus exhausted and thirsty. It is of great relevance for theological education that Jesus is vulnerable in this situation. It is not power that thaws the icy walls of gender, race, class, and religion. It is through the position of weakness. Too frequently empowerment is imposed from the top down, which merely perpetuates a circle of injustice. As Jesus sits down by the well, a Samaritan woman comes to draw water. From his position of weakness, without a bucket, Jesus approaches the woman, in her position of strength, and asks, “Will you give me a drink?” (John 1:6-7).

Without formal greetings or meaningless pleasantries, Jesus engages in the reality of the present moment: he is thirsty and she is someone who can help him quench his thirst. This simple yet multifaceted request transcends the human prejudices of their time. By asking a favor from a Samaritan woman, Jesus redefines who she truly is and can be. He repositions her from her disposition.

How does the Samaritan woman respond to this unfamiliar encounter with Jesus? The woman's response reveals the unconventional nature of Jesus. In a state of surprise, she turns the question back to Jesus, “How can you ask me for a drink?” (4:9). Her question discloses both surprise and anxiety. Being treated by Jesus as a subject rather than an object likely surprises the woman. Stepping out of her secure boundaries, no matter how oppressive they may be, demands an adjustment and thus induces the discomfort of uncertainty. In her anxious moment of discourse, she actively uncovers the deep-seated issues of their encounter.

It is this radical movement of the Samaritan woman from object to subject that transforms this encounter. A basic assumption on which Paulo Freire operates is that a person’s ontological vocation should be as a subject who takes action and transforms the subject’s own world, and in the process “moves towards ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively.”

Likewise, the Samaritan woman ceases to be an object of oppression in her dialogical encounter with Jesus.

Jesus said, “Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (4:14, NRSV). Freire asserts that no matter how a person has been silenced, she may be renewed by dialogical encounter.

The more the woman engages in the dialogue, the closer her encounter with Jesus becomes. Jesus brilliantly thaws the woman’s frozen self-perception, which has been shaped by conventional prescriptions. Even her deep interior fixations surface as she discovers herself in a subject-to-subject encounter. The barriers between Jews and Samaritans, males and females, previous and present prophets, no longer matter. Jesus understands the woman’s readiness to deal with her well within.

Jesus’ model embodies the unity of yin and yang in contrast to the disproportionately *yangish* model of theological education. The term *yangish* refers to the Taoist concept of masculine energy, which is based on principles of competition, development, and causality. Modernistic, yang-oriented theological education compartmentalizes the church and mission by chronically favoring the ideology of the masculine over that of the feminine. When theological education turns to a holistic approach it flows freely from the seminary to the church and back. This flow results in faithful witness as manifested by the Samaritan woman.

However, the process of wholeness is not simplistically the reversal of the current state of theological education, replacing one binary opposite for the other. A truly transformative process requires a fusion of yin with yang. It is the model of Jesus and the Samaritan woman that demonstrates the reconciliation of *yinish* vulnerability and *yangish* confrontation. Jesus’ radical breaking down of the walls of racism, sexism, classism, regionalism, and religion is done in a *yinish* manner of vulnerability. His vulnerability comes not from the ego but from the depth of a living well within. Meanwhile, his willingness to be direct and confrontational demonstrates the yang principle of externalized force. This holistic encounter is what produces the woman’s transformation.

**Moving from exterior to interior**

Once Jesus progresses the dialogue to the subject level, he moves the woman to a journey inward. At this time it is she, not Jesus, who asks for the water. “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water,” she asks (4:15). By confronting Jesus with questions, the Samaritan woman’s request leads to deeper challenges. Jesus uncovers her soft spots by asking her to “go, call your husband and come back” (v. 16).

An important aspect of the Samaritan woman’s liberation process is seen in how Jesus deals with her response, “I have no husband” (v. 17). Unlike in his confrontational question, Jesus affirms her reply. He says, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true” (v. 18).
Why does Jesus affirm her twice when he assumes that she already has a husband? Perhaps Jesus is revealing to her that since her present “husband” is not truly her husband, she needs to move forward. Responding to Jesus’ double affirmation, the woman also affirms Jesus as prophetic by admitting to the truthfulness of Jesus’ words (v. 19).

At this point, the interplay of their dialogue is striking. What could have succumbed to resistance instead manifests the authenticity of truth-speaking and transformation. Jesus models his vulnerability allowing the woman to encounter him from her vulnerability. In response to Jesus’ acceptance and affirmation she also affirms Jesus. In her most vulnerable moment of self-disclosure, her eyes are open and she understands that Jesus is the Messiah (v. 27).

Here what could be a distant and exterior theological discourse transforms into an interior theological encounter. It is at this moment that the woman discovers her true self; she taps into her interior well. The external, utilitarian well becomes a fountain within. The journey of an amazing transformation begins. She no longer shies away from her community but turns the whole village upside down as she herself is turned inside and out. Theology no longer functions at the cerebral level but is now embodied.

The entire dialogical encounter portrays a most beautiful dance of reciprocity initiated by Jesus and followed by the woman, poetry in motion reaching the peak of human potential. Their back-and-forth point to the beauty and power of human dialogue. Dynamically interwoven, this encounter shows the realization of hope in the midst of despair.

Theological education today is in need of softening its power through vulnerable service to humanity in crisis. Seminarians, reflecting the population at large, are broken and hungry for wholeness. The response to their brokenness and hunger is found in the model of Jesus affirming and challenging the Samaritan woman. Through this she becomes whole. People today thirst for such an encounter.

A startling irony is that the very encounter people hunger for is beyond their reach as higher education confronts tsunami-like change. As this institutional confrontation rages, theological education needs to seek deeper levels of encountering, even questioning its deep-seated orthodoxy. For such an engagement to be possible, theological waters need to be reexamined and revised. It demands the plunge into an intimate transforming process as demonstrated by the woman who rediscovers herself and thus discovers her mission in life.

True spirituality sends us down a road toward truth, wherever that may lead. In the words of Parker Palmer, “true spirituality will understand that fear, not ignorance, is the enemy of learning, and that fear is what gives ignorance its power. It will try to root out our fear of having our ignorance exposed and our orthodoxies challenged . . . .”6 The road to educational renewal demands a willingness to be remolded like clay in the potter’s hands. It demands a turn from mere intellectual rigor towards the integration of interior and communal processes.

The unfortunate reality is that educational values and their praxis continue to favor monologue rather than dialogue. Even when introducing the importance of dialogue it is done in monologue, ultimately reinforcing the status quo. In a one-sided educational setting, a communal encounter between teacher and learner and between learner and learner is not feasible.

6  Palmer, To Know Whom We Are Known, xi.
The Power of Denial

While the transformed woman is engaged in her new mission, the disciples are literally out to lunch. Even when they return they choose disengagement. Shocked by their teacher’s forbidden interaction with the Samaritan woman, the disciples resort to denial. They deny themselves the transforming moment that leads to true action. Meanwhile the formerly imprisoned woman is freed from social, racial, and theological taboos. Her theology no longer serves as a boundary keeper but a liberating tool.

Like the woman at the well, I have been blessed in my encounters with theological mentors who saw my potential when I could not. That is why I am able to testify to the power of education when it embodies the whole person. Theological educators need to stop by the well and rediscover a refreshing and life-generating fountain in the midst of academic life in the fast lane.

In our classes and churches there are many Samaritan women and men who need fresh and living water in their spiritual wells within, just as Jesus ignites the spirit of a prophet within the woman. Immediately she is activated and turns her village upside down. Like the disciples in the narrative, theological education in general lacks an understanding of its inherent power of transformation. It is focused on the head-trips of theological debates, which rarely move people's hearts and surely not their feet.

Having served in both church and seminary settings, I discovered the power of transformational learning when it touches the heart of the people. Yet false beliefs within institutions continually breed fragmentation and deprivation. This transformation only occurs when these false beliefs are broken down, allowing dialogical encounters to act as occasions of change.

A Rationale for Developing a 3rd Space for Encounter

A nuts and bolts model of networking and partnership is needed to recast theological education into a new framework. This framework should take both experiential and theoretical approaches and treat them as two sides of one coin. The reflection of the former stems from my experience of running a nonprofit organization, ISAAC (Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity) and the latter from my theological journey since 1981, which runs parallel with an ongoing postcolonial dialogue.

Positioning in a 3rd space often accompanies unpredictability, uncertainty and confusion. However, it is this very unpredictability that allows for the opportunity to go into the wilderness, as the people of God, relying on manna and faith, with no reserves. In the intellectual and highly strategic “INTJ” world of academic culture, unpredictability and uncertainty are deemed undesirable. Nevertheless, it can be both challenging and rewarding depending on one's perspective.

As a nonprofit organization, ISAAC is positioned in a 3rd space as free-standing, interdependent, intersectional, and interdisciplinary. It is both the academy and the church; it is both yin and yang. Forging partnerships from this 3rd space presents challenges as well as opportunities. In transforming a network into potential partnerships, ISAAC confronts a myriad of power variables, including those of money, time, and fame.

The first challenge involves issues of and around fame. Although no groups are impervious to the effects of celebrity, it has been my experience that Asian Americans gravitate strongly to individuals and institutions that carry name-recognition, popular appeal and establishment credibility. When an entity such as ISAAC does not embody these features, it becomes challenging to attract the attention of Asian Americans outside of
the ISAAC’s immediate community. Yet, when ISAAC works under a mainstream institutional umbrella, it is susceptible to being directed by institutional agendas and interests.

The second challenge is a perceived power imbalance between the knowledge of specialty versus hybridity. In the academy specialty typically equals prestige. As postcolonial scholars (Bhabha, Dommelen, etc.,) elucidate, hybridity is not a simple fusion of new and old elements of ideology or practice but rather an ongoing development in relation to micro and macro contexts.

The third challenge is one of capital, both social and financial. As Sallie McFague and Kwok Pui-lan describe, the neoliberal economic take-over has virtually reduced human interactions and institutional survival to capital. The call for an alternative theological education to neoliberal education seems crucial.

The privilege of embarking on the task of theological education from a 3rd space involves freedom to partner with diverse institutions creatively in and out of theological palaces. There are many theologians in palaces resistant to the Kingdom and Queendom of knowledge production. Yet many are also unable or unwilling to champion significant change. Needless to say, for the insiders of the palace, change carries with it high stakes: politically, financially and socially. Meanwhile, for the outsiders in the wilderness of the 3rd space, the stakes are much more fluid.

The story of the woman at the well elucidates the 3rd space encounter. Here we see the initial back-and-forth of trial and error give way to a dance of reciprocity between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. In contrast to neoliberal theological institutions and curriculum, Jesus’ pedagogy invites us to an organic dialogue without overhead costs. An epistemological lens in approaching the texts is from a yinist perspective, which I coined in early ’90s, taken from Taoism. Yinist refers to an interdependent yin/yang gestalt that covers both gender and nature.

Positioning one’s mission in a 3rd space requires sacrifice and faith because there is no blueprint except reliance on God’s evolving intervention and daily manna. In the binary “J” culture of the academy where strategic details of blueprint, planning, and outcome hold high priority, working from the wilderness of a 3rd space takes persistence. To become a bridging leader requires wisdom and learning through life’s trials and errors. It takes, indeed, experiential learning beyond cognitive knowledge.

The Characteristics of a 3rd Space

As discussed earlier, the development of a 3rd space that is conducive to the encounter is not simply exchanging the current status quo for its binary opposite. It requires an unusually deft openness to the totality of both divine and human experience. This effort begins with the establishing of a liminal space, an in-between state where the threshold of yin and yang are allowed to interact freely, where the interplay of structure and organismicity are given room to creatively generate novel experiences and relationships. I consider this the merging of divine encounters with institutional structure.
Within this 3rd space, there is the inevitability of clashing worldviews. One such clash is between community and individualism, which can be characterized as between philanthropy and the culture of “winner takes all.” This example is a classic variation of the yin versus yang framework. One is receptive and vulnerable while the other is aggressive and confrontational. As Jesus models in his encounter with the Samaritan woman, this need not be an either/or proposition. Both the community and the individual can exist simultaneously. Jesus’ approach dealt with the reality and necessity of both yin and yang energies. Jesus confronts the woman’s truth while honestly engaging her in her experience. Jesus himself proceeds with openness and vulnerability, leading with his inferiority and weakness at the well. It was, after all, he who initially requested her help.

The benefits of working from a 3rd space are rich and varied. From the most basic level, encounters in the wilderness embody a freedom, creativity and adaptability that is difficult to materialize in structured environments. As new challenges arise, the 3rd space is able to respond quickly to those needs. This is especially valuable in time-limited and urgent matters. From the other side of the coin, when new opportunities are presented, working from the 3rd space allows us to seize these prospects without being bogged down by institutional channels. The result can be unprecedented grassroots coalition building and social movements. In ISAAC’s case, we have been blessed with the capacity to develop bridges with the financial sector in our 5th Symposium and between the Asian American and African American church in our upcoming 6th Symposium.

Conclusion

For some time now, theological education has stood at the crossroads between the practical application of theology and its academic study. This tension has, unfortunately, led generally to an over-emphasis on the intellectual over the experiential. It is my hope that Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well can serve as a profound model for the synthesis of these two positions, leaving neither behind, but instead allowing both to harmoniously integrate into a holistic framework, impacting both the academy and the church in deep and meaningful ways.

Works Cited


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