

A Life of Conversations

I. Preface

This paper was inspired by a process of self-reflection that I underwent last . Summer and early Fall as I assessed my life in preparation for graduate work. In deciding which graduate schools to apply to, I asked myself hard questions about my life, my values and my goals. Furthermore, as I worked on my statement of purpose to send to these various graduate schools, I contemplated how I could convey the significance of my life to admissions committees. In some ways, this essay is an extension of that statement 'of purpose. In other ways, it is a departure. Since the time of my initial draft of my statement of purpose, many of my ideas have either been nuanced or considerably altered. There are many ways that I could convey my values to you, but I feel the most effective, and most telling way, is to express them through a discussion of the substance of my intellectual life.

II. Introduction

In Martin E. Marty's Theological Autobiography entitled "Christian Theology and the Modes of Experience" he recalls

the view that "any real life has one effect and one effect only" (54). In preparing to graduate from college and enter graduate school in theology, I have pondered this statement carefully. What is the essence of my life and my proposed work? What are my core set of values and where do they come from? In responding to both of these questions, I have come to the conclusion that my life is centered on conversation. Conversation offers the key to my intellectual development, my intended theological work, and my personal fulfillment and happiness.

To me, life is a series of intense, lively, instructive, transforming conversations. These conversations take place with our family, our friends, ourselves, past thinkers, professors, other students and the surrounding world. As participants we share, explore, become engaged, learn, and form relationships.

Conversations result in commitment to community because they necessitate a interaction in which individuals become members of a community by both listening and responding to what has been said by others. In turn, conversations also require that individuals have their own

voice in order that they may share themselves and their ideas. A strong personal voice is needed to be able to inform, persuade and be heard.

II. Intellectual and Personal Development

As a young child, my first interactions were with the natural world. Every day was a new experience as my mind was constantly bombarded with fresh, exciting new sounds and images. Every time I saw or heard something new, I discovered a different perspective from which to view the world.

Growing older, my conversations shifted to other people, namely my family. My favorite recollection of the holidays involved my sisters coming home from college. Our entire family would sit around the kitchen table discussing politics, the purpose of history, chaos theory, or our own personal work as scholars. In our conversations, we shared, offering our own thoughts and ideas to each other and learning more about ourselves and each other in the process.

Upon my arrival at Gustavus Adolphus College in the fall of 1992, I began to have even more intense, lively discussion with my peers. During that freshman year, I still recall staying

up until 3 a.m. discussing whether or not Plato had the right to claim absolutes. Such conversations allowed me to build relationships as I worked with others toward the common goal of increased knowledge and understanding.

Throughout my time at Gustavus Adolphus College, I have also participated in conversations with great thinkers through class discussion, personal readings and most importantly research. In particular, I have extensively researched feminist theology and its important critical voice in theological conversation. Another research project considered the post modern relationship between religion and art. Last Fall, my independent study-in both German and English-on Ernst Troeltsch's work examined politics and the importance of history in religion. Through these conversations with great thinkers and great ideas, I have learned in two ways. These conversations have been instructive, giving me a more comprehensive understanding of an issue and constructive, helping to shape my own imaginative ideas and opinions about an issue.

Above all, conversations have transformed me, by opening my mind to new ideas and altering my view of the

world. When I studied abroad in Hirakata City, Japan, my conversations involved people whose ideologies and belief systems feelings and ideas, I broadened my scope, expanded my knowledge and learned . how much my previous conversations had been shaped by my Western perspectives. This interaction with Japanese culture changed many of my views of my own development, ideas and voice. Now I am more critical of what I accept and believe,

Now, as I prepare myself to graduate from Gustavus, get married and enter the School of Theology at Claremont, I look to how conversations will shape my life in the future. In terms of my personal growth, I envision conversations as a continued way to maintain and cultivate my responsibility towards myself, towards others and towards the world in general. Conversations will also have an important impact on my intended theological work.

III. Intended Theological Work

Conversations are an integral part of my intended theological work Currently, I see American culture as lacking a sense of community. Breakdowns and barriers often exist in our conversations. We search for a common language and a

greater sense of meaning to link and unite us. I have chosen to study religion because of its essential role in our lives. It imbues our lives with a greater sense of meaning, giving us direction and shaping our thoughts, desires and attitudes,

Religious conversations relate to our ultimate concern and our identity and purpose. We look carefully and critically at claims made about religion and religions. We share our voices with each other, offering our ideas and listening to and accepting other's ideas. Religious knowledge and understanding through conversations enriches our lives; for this reason I wish to continue the study of religions and to teach religion to others.

In particular, I see my work with conversations being involved in the study of feminist theology. My senior thesis, which I just recently finished, concerns feminist theology and the claim of women's experience. In this thesis, I looked at the category of women's experience and how it has been used by feminist theologians as an essential tool in developing both their critical and constructive projects of theology. This category, however, is problematic because it has tended to universalize white women's experience and has often failed to

include the experiences of women of color. In the conclusion to my thesis I offered several suggestions for rescuing the category of women's experience from this problem. Most importantly, one of these suggestions was the need for conversations and conversations necessitate a commitment to interaction between participants, requiring that women not only hear what each other has to say about their own experiences but that they listen and respond. Katie G. Cannon, a black womanist theologian, affirms this, writing that "When two parties, people, races, nations, etc., are dialoguing they respect whatever their intellect, spirit, culture and traditions tell them is sound in each other, with an attitude of openness for growth dialogue across traditions. Unlike narratives, which involve one person "reporting" their story to others, and change ... The open-flowing energy between the two removes alienation" (Mudflower Collective, 36).

By engaging in conversations, women actively seek to learn about others' experiences, thereby appreciating and celebrating the importance of difference. This appreciation leads to a reorientation of life as being seen in the context of

others instead of merely envisioning oneself as self-enclosed and self-referential. According to another feminist theologian, Sheila Greeve Davaney, this reorientation involves open and flexible boundaries, where women recognize that they are "multitradditioned, shaped by plural contexts and strands of historical processes" (Davaney, 122).

Conversations, in this way, however, do not involve merely a "sharing" of others experiences, where we process and reduce other's experiences to our view of them. Instead, conversations about experiences different from our own, work to "challenge us and stretch us" (Isasi-Diaz, 101). Isasi-Diaz explores this idea, claiming that dialogue "is dialectic and creative, that it thrives on criticism, on difference; that it is not circular and that, therefore, it will lead us to a new place where we will not be afraid, for we will not be alone" (Isasi-Diaz, 101).

Davaney echoes this in her description of the radically democratic conversation. This type of conversation "rigorously examines its participants' values, power and interest ... pledg[ing] itself to the historical project to creating justice seeking solidarity across lines of difference so that our

futures, while they emerge from the past, need not duplicate it" (Davaney, 103).

This challenging and rigorous examination is particularly difficult for white women because it requires that they look critically at their own lives, owning up to ways in which their experiences are detrimental to others. Talking candidly and openly about one's own racism and ability to oppress is not an easy thing to do. It requires tension and conflict, both with others and with oneself. As Carter Heyward writes in a letter to womanist Katie G. Cannon, white women dislike these types of activities because the white liberal tradition has been one that dislikes conflict. White liberal women do not like to get in touch with the difference that race makes. Furthermore, they have been cultured to be reconcilers; to resolve everything.

However difficult it may be, it is necessary for all women to engage in this process of challenging their own experience and others. Entering into conversations that employ such tactics allow women to interact with each other in a way that appreciates differences, instead of trying to replace them with a false commonality. Moreover, as both Isasi-Diaz and

Davaney recognize, these conversations lead in new directions, to more hopeful futures.

This idea of new directions in conversations is discussed by Gordon Kaufman in a chapter entitled "Serendipitous Creativity." For Kaufman, conversations are a "mix of determinateness and indeterminacy" (Kaufman, 275).

Because participants enter in the conversations with a unique set of experiences and history, they interpret what is said in their own unique way. However, as the conversation progresses, "the interchange comes to have a 'life of its own'," leading to new, unimaginable places. The dynamic of such a conversation, where participants respond in new and creative ways to each other's comments, leads to new futures that go beyond the individual participants contributions. As Kaufman writes,

The experience of the conversation may. .. be so unforgettable as to meld the several speakers into a group which lives and develops for a long time, shaping and reshaping the individual lives of its members in the future in ways none could have anticipated during the original exchange (Kaufman, 277).

Although, as Kaufman adds, this is a highly idealized form of conversation, I feel . it serves as an excellent model for

finding ways in which to create lines of solidarity among women.

In my graduate work, which will consist of both M.A. and Ph.D. work in women's studies in theology, I would like to continue developing this issue of conversations. I am most interested in determining ways in which feminist theology can continue to broaden its scope, offering something to all members of the community, including men. Further developing this research on experience, I wish to demonstrate how its reformulation by feminist theology can offer a critical, important voice to all religious conversations. Involved in these studies will be the way in which history and tradition shape our conversations. Implicit in all of this study will be the idea of conversations with purpose; conversations that help us to unite as communities and gain more coherent world pictures.

Upon graduation from the Claremont Graduate School with a Ph.D. in women's studies in theology, I would like to teach at the undergraduate level at a small liberal arts college. I choose this setting because I desire a more intimate, close connection with my students. As a professor, I would like to

share with others the critical voice I have developed through my extensive conversations about religion, and I would like to help them develop their own voices. Through conversations about modern Christian theology, I want to discuss the importance of religion and its study with my students. For example, one of the many conversations I hope to have with my students concerns the way that the study of religion is being attacked by those who either misunderstand its importance or claim that it is no longer necessary. On one side are those who view the study of religion as just an issue of faith, unable to be critically studied. On the other side are those who view religion as a vestige of the pre-post-modern world. For these deconstructionists, religion is a relic of the age of absolutes. By sharing in conversations that have constructive purposes, I hope to enable my students to develop ways in which to respond, with their own voices, to these dangerous criticisms.

IV. Conclusion

This essay on my values tends to stress both the theoretical and intellectual. Indeed, I am an unabashed intellectual who embraces theoretical discussions. Yet, even

though I emphasize theory, I do not de-emphasize more practical, accessible conversations. In discussing my intended career goal, it can be seen that I also value being involved in conversations of understanding and appreciation. I desire in my life to translate my theoretical understanding of certain matters into a more practical understanding for others. For, I am not just an individual, with my own understandings and values, but a member of a community, with a strong sense of responsibility towards others