

EMERGING ADULTS AND A-HA MOMENTS: PRACTICAL  
THEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF THEIR FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES  
INVOLVING CRISIS, RELATIONSHIPS, AND PRACTICES

By

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To my family, my friends, and emerging adults everywhere.

In memory of Don Browning.

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## INTRODUCTION

These are the voices of college students who answered the question: What has been your biggest “a-ha moment” in college?

- This year my ‘Aha moment’ came when one of my good friends suddenly died. My friend’s death was hard to deal with. It filled my mind with questions, anger and sadness. Through all the emotions that I was feeling, her death made me realize that tomorrow is not promised. I may be here today, but I don’t know about tomorrow. For that reason, I need to live my life to the fullest.
- The atmosphere that college engenders is exactly the atmosphere where ‘aha’ moments are born. For the first time, we are independent from our families, making decisions on our own, and away from everything familiar. Not only this, but we are asking questions about ourselves: who we are, who we want to be, and what the purpose is for our lives.
- College is a time where you do an incredible amount of growing in a short period of time. Sometimes huge discoveries are made and other times circumstances change so rapidly that you can barely keep up with yourself.
- College seems to be a time full of ‘aha!’ moments for most young adults. In fact, sometimes I wonder if it’s not more that we’re young adults entering a new phase in life than that we’re college students. Whatever the case, almost all college students I know (specifically those who’ve gone away to school) have dealt with the same issues. The same feelings crop up at about the same time for thousands of students all over the country each year.
- It was a big struggle for me coming to college and knowing only one other person. To make matters worse, the one person I knew was my girlfriend of two years who had just broken up with me. Also, within the very first week of classes, I found out that one of my very close friends from back home had committed suicide. So I found myself at college, not knowing anyone, two hours from home, and heartbroken over the loss of my girlfriend and very dear friend... This time in my life became a deep valley and the lowest of lows for me. I didn’t want to eat. I stayed in my room constantly. And I slept a lot because I couldn’t feel the pain when I was asleep. I was hurting and I needed help.
- College and University studies today have come to be seen almost as a rite of passage. Most people have gone through this ‘rite’ have experienced moments in their studies that have formed, shaped and ultimately changed them. In my own journey of studies, I too have had experiences that have left a lasting impression on me... My formative moment did not end in the discovery of these early texts though. My exposure to these early texts helped blaze a trail

on the path of my own spiritual renewal. Merely reading a text was not enough for me. I began to realize that although these texts were ‘ancient’, they were far from dead. I found that the practices I was reading about were alive with meaning and symbol”.

- I have had many experiences in my college career that have shaped the way I view my life and my calling, but none have been as formative to my understanding of my calling as the knowledge I gained in a class I took my sophomore year at –blank – .

A central claim of this dissertation is that the voices in these essays have something significant to add to the growing interest in the lives of college students. My main argument is that we need a rich, thick, and complex set of lenses to understand the experiences described within these essays; furthermore, the inherently interdisciplinary approach of practical theology, grounded in critical hermeneutical theory, will guide this search. Critical hermeneutical theory, as both a method and methodology, offers a framework for holding together multiple theoretical lenses to allow comparative analysis with religious and scientific sources. My hypothesis is that a study of the lives of college students, as expressed in their own words, has some explanatory power for interpreting and understanding college student development and formation.

By constructing a set of critical lenses to view the essays, a richer, deeper, and thicker understanding of these formative moments of college students can emerge. By uncovering the wisdom in the reported experience of these essayists, the hope is that insight can be gained into the lived experience of others. The voices in the essays are from sources not always well-represented in current theory; furthermore, I claim that these voices have important lessons and insights to share, a kind of *phronesis*. A study of these essays has some explanatory power for understanding pivotal moments of formation of college students as well as offering lessons of interest to those in higher education.

## Listening Love

It is important for me to approach these essays theologically, rather than scientifically, and to listen to the voices embedded within the essays. Theology offers particular perspectives and approaches to the topic of listening. For example, twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich develops the concept of “listening love” in *Love, Power, and Justice*. For Tillich, the ultimate challenge of faith is how to put love into action where “the first task of love is to listen.”<sup>1</sup> He states: “Listening love is the first step to justice in person-to-person encounters. . . . In order to know what is just in a person-to-person encounter, love listens. It is its first task to listen.”<sup>2</sup> Listening love becomes the first task of love because no human relation is possible without listening. Listening love is not love as an emotional state, but instead reflects “God as the source of love, power, and justice.”<sup>3</sup> For Tillich, “Love in its attempt to see what is in the other person is by no means irrational” and instead should use the tools provided by “psychology which give unexpected possibilities of discovering the intrinsic claims of a human being.”<sup>4</sup> He adds:

All things and all men, so to speak, call on us with small or loud voices. They want us to listen, they want us to understand their intrinsic claims, their justice of

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<sup>1</sup>I was introduced to Tillich’s concept of “listening love” by the Reverend William Warr Rogers. Bill and his wife June are so taken by the concept that they erected a garden and display dedicated to listening love. This “spot of beauty” sits in the front of their house, Bird Haven, which was also my home during much of the writing of this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (Oxford University Press, 1960), 84-85. Tillich discusses the different dimensions of love: *agape*, *eros*, *philia*, *libidio*, and *epithymia* where *agape* cuts through and into *libidio*, *eros*, *philia* and *epithymia* and elevates them above self-centeredness. See, Tillich, 28-34, 116.

<sup>3</sup>Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 109.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 85. Tillich adds that “It (love) uses all possible mean to penetrate into the dark places of his motives and inhibitions. . . . Through it (psychology) we have learned that human expressions can mean something quite different from what they seem or are intended to mean.” 84-85.

being. They want justice from us. But we can give it to them only through the love which listens.<sup>5</sup>

Listening love is the first task of love, a love that is grounded in “the basic assertion that love is one.”<sup>6</sup> Love listens. By listening to the voices in the essays, according to Tillich, I am taking up the first task of love.

### **Don Browning and Listening**

Don Browning also reflects on the importance of listening and love. Browning echoes Tillich’s perspective when he discusses the fundamental need for people to be understood and the power of love to do so. Using Reinhold Niebuhr’s insights into the nature of love as *agape*, Browning reflects upon love as mutuality and equal regard.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, according to Browning, if anything has been learned from hermeneutic theory and psychotherapy, it is that human beings have a deep hunger to be understood.<sup>8</sup> Because of this, Browning affirms the act of listening:

When we listen, we do not simply receive information passively. We listen in order to describe, and the description comes from a particular perspective. We hear, listen, and empathize out of a particular social and historical dialogue. Listening is the first part of conversation and dialogue. Listening is never perfectly neutral, objective, or internal to what the other person or group is saying.<sup>9</sup>

Listening involves an active sense of empathy and is fundamental to the conversation process. For Browning, listening is a fundamental characteristic of all the practical

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 27. Tillich focuses on “an ontology of love” and declares that if love is understood in its ontological nature, then “love is the drive towards the unity of the separated...Life is being in actuality and love is the moving power of life.” 24-25.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 147-155, 158.

<sup>8</sup>Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 284.

<sup>9</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 286.

ministerial arts and should be “understood under the rubric of descriptive theology.”<sup>10</sup> Through listening, descriptive theology attempts to describe a “deep understanding of others, their situations, and their identities.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Browning, doing descriptive theology helps implement love and positive regard. He states: “The very act of doing descriptive theology is restorative. Individuals and groups like to be understood.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, descriptive theology attempts the deep understanding of persons and their situations as an act of empathy. He states: “Descriptive theology, in attempting to understand people and groups in their concrete situations, communicates affirmation, preserves the cohesion of selves and identities, and builds on strengths.”<sup>13</sup> And towards this goal, descriptive theology “can integrate the moments of listening and description characteristic of all the practical ministerial arts.”<sup>14</sup> He affirms that the listening and empathy so fundamental to pastoral counseling should be understood under the rubric of descriptive theology.<sup>15</sup> In short, for Browning, it is important to “see listening as an act of descriptive theology – an act that in itself witnesses to God’s grace in creation and redemption.”<sup>16</sup>

## **Descriptive Theology**

Descriptive theology is the first step in Browning’s four-fold method of a fundamental practical theology. He outlines this method in *A Fundamental Practical*

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 286-7. These practical ministerial arts are listed as: “counseling, education, preaching, worship, church development, social ministries of various kinds, and so on.”

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

*Theology* where “I argue that theology as a whole is fundamental practical theology and that it has within it four submovements of *descriptive theology*, *historical theology*, *systematic theology*, and *strategic practical theology*.”<sup>17</sup> Each of these submovements is very complicated; Browning refers to his process as “monumentally complex and probably requires the efforts of finely tuned research teams.”<sup>18</sup> Bonnie Miller-McLemore confirms the monumental effort involved when she writes that “serious practical theology takes time, requires a rich and variety of complex resources, and works best, despite the vast complications, with multiple authors.”<sup>19</sup> For this reason, and others, I attempt to take only one step of Browning’s full theological methodology, the first step of descriptive theology.

Descriptive theology, as the first movement, is interested in all situations that are part of life. Furthermore, the task of descriptive theology is to advance multidimensional descriptions of situations. In this sense, Browning advocates that the primary task of descriptive theology is to render a “thick description” of the contemporary situation.<sup>20</sup> He states: “The task is to describe it in its thickness” so that the situation can be made to be seen “in all of its situated richness.”<sup>21</sup> The term “thick description” will be expanded upon later in Chapter One, but a good example of descriptive theology can be seen in *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*. Specifically, Part One is an attempt to do descriptive theology by rendering a “thick description” of the contemporary situation of

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<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 8, original emphasis.

<sup>18</sup>Don Browning, *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 35.

<sup>19</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Feminist Theory in Pastoral Theology,” in *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 93.

<sup>20</sup>Don Browning, “Congregational Studies as Practical Theology,” in *American Congregations: Volume 2 New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James Wind and James Lewis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 206 and Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 94.

<sup>21</sup>Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 94.

families. Towards this end, the authors state that “we first listened at length to a number of real families.”<sup>22</sup> In this way, the authors tried to utilize “a principle consistent with hermeneutic social science and used within the methods of practical theology as exemplified by the writings of Miller-McLemore, Couture, Lyon, and Franklin.”<sup>23</sup> This first part of *Culture Wars* presents demographic trends and causal factors that help explain marriage and family trends in contemporary America.<sup>24</sup>

One more important aspect of descriptive theology needs highlighting. Browning advocates that good theology, especially good practical theology, should somehow address problems, situations, and conflicts in contemporary society: “It should try to describe these conflicts and, to some extent, explain what is producing them. All of this is part of *descriptive theology*.”<sup>25</sup> In order to address these problems, other resources found outside of theology, and specifically in the human sciences, must be used in descriptive theology. Browning states, “The vision of descriptive theology that I propose makes a place for the special foci of the human sciences. These sciences are treated as moments within a larger structure of understanding conceived as dialogue and conversation.”<sup>26</sup> The descriptive tools of sociology, anthropology, history, and psychology offer power to the

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<sup>22</sup>Browning, *Equality and the Family*, 396.

<sup>23</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s work with listening to mothers is in *Also a Mother: Work and Family as a Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994). See also, Pamela Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor: Women’s Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991); K. Brynolf Lyon, *Toward a Practical Theology of Aging* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); and Robert M. Franklin, *Another Day’s Journey: Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

<sup>24</sup>The central question of this first part is “are there signs of increased family disruption in North American society, and, if so, how should they be understood from the perspective of Christian ideals and classics?” See Browning, “The Relation of Practical Theology to Theological Ethics,” *Equality and the Family*, 396.

<sup>25</sup>Don Browning, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Pamela Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon, and Robert M. Franklin, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 337, original emphasis.

<sup>26</sup>Browning, *American Congregations*, 200.



insights of descriptive theology.<sup>27</sup> For Eileen Campbell-Reed, the movement of descriptive theology is one where “the practical theologian attempts to describe and by various means, including theories from the social sciences, the richness and multiple textures of the practices, events, contexts or crises which are under study.”<sup>28</sup> One of Browning’s central claims in *Culture Wars*, and in other texts, is the following:

When done rightly, good theology will look a lot more like good social science; that is, it will describe the world it is addressing with much more care and nuance than theology generally does. The converse is also true. When done rightly, good social science will look a lot more like good theology; that is, it will take more responsibility for revealing and critically defending the implicit norms and ideals that unwittingly guide its descriptions of the social world.<sup>29</sup>

For Browning, theology and the social sciences are very similar. If both are done rightly “then only a thin line separates such hermeneutically conceived social sciences and theology.”<sup>30</sup> As an example of a “good social science” approach, Browning refers to *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah.<sup>31</sup> A central methodological move of *Habits* is to locate itself within some historical tradition and that its own “descriptions and explanations of contemporary trends must always to some extent be influenced by the

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<sup>27</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 112.

<sup>28</sup>Eileen Campbell-Reed, “Anatomy of a Schism: How Clergywomen’s Narratives Interpret the Fracturing of the Southern Baptist Convention,” (PhD dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 2008), 31.

<sup>29</sup>Browning et al., *From Culture Wars and Common Ground*, 335. Browning adds that “these propositions silently inform almost every page of *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*.”

<sup>30</sup>Don Browning, “Congregational Studies as Practical Theology,” in *American Congregations: Volume 2 New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James Wind and James Lewis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 195.

<sup>31</sup>Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swindler, and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985.) Browning states that the central argument of *Habits* is that social science inevitably must locate itself within some historical tradition and that the social sciences should acknowledge this truth and be more accountable for acknowledging its rootedness in tradition. Browning also states that *A Fundamental Practical Theology* converts Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle into a comprehensive theological method that also has similarities with the social science method that Bellah describes. For more on Bellah, see Browning, “The Relation of Practical Theology to Theological Ethics,” in *Equality and the Family*, ed. Don Browning et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 394-6 and Browning et al., *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*, 334-337, Browning, *American Congregations*, 194-195 and Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 85-89.

ideals informing that tradition.”<sup>32</sup> Bellah demands that social scientists and historians “must not only acknowledge that tradition plays a role in their disciplines but also take responsibility for the critical conversation about the relative adequacy of their tradition-saturated beginning points.”<sup>33</sup> For Browning, if these concerns are taken seriously, then only “a thin line” separates a “good” hermeneutically conceived social science and a “good” hermeneutically conceived theology.

### **Good Social Science**

If I were to choose a “good social science” approach analogous to my own theological approach, it would be the one used by Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule in *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. By conducting numerous interviews with female college students, the authors’ understanding of the development of women was fundamentally changed after listening to their stories. The authors concluded that women’s epistemological assumptions are central to their perceptions of themselves and their worlds.<sup>34</sup> Many women defined themselves in terms of relationships and connections. For example, women were drawn to the role of caretaker and nurturer, often putting others’ needs before their own, which matched a pattern described by Carol Gilligan.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, these findings significantly differed from the prevailing theory on intellectual development and directly challenged models that were based on largely on

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<sup>32</sup>Browning, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*, 336.

<sup>33</sup>Browning, *American Congregations*, 195.

<sup>34</sup>By listening to these women, five basic epistemological perspectives emerged from which women know and view the world: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. See, Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule, *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), xiii.

<sup>35</sup>Carol Gilligan. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

men's experience.<sup>36</sup> The team pored through transcriptions of interviews and through these words, the team found themselves "emerged from this long process with an extraordinary sense of intimacy and collaboration with all the women, even though each of us had met face to face with only a few."<sup>37</sup> By listening to and reading numerous interviews, particular patterns were detected. Belenky and others' approach inspired me and I wanted to approach the essays much in the same way they approach their interviews. Furthermore, the final sentence of *Women's Ways of Knowing* is: "These are the lessons we have learned in listening to women's voices."<sup>38</sup> I, too, wanted to learn from the lessons in the essays and listen to their voices.

### **A-ha Moments**

Each essay answers the question: what has been your biggest a-ha moment in college? No student answered in the negative: either that they had never had an a-ha moment or that the moment resulted in an overall negative outcome.<sup>39</sup> The central theme of the essays is change: a change in perception, a change to self, a change of status, a change in worldview or change in thought process. By its very nature, the a-ha moment is a positive event. In their own words, the essayists describe an a-ha moment as: a

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<sup>36</sup>According to Adrianna Kezar: "Finally, Belenky et al. (1986) found that for women, 'confirmation and community are prerequisites rather than consequences of development' (p. 194) and that contextual learning (from firsthand experience or observation) was more meaningful than the abstract learning process that takes place in a classroom. This new theory of a more 'connected' way of learning provides a contrast to Perry's (1970) widely accepted theory that has portrayed cognitive development as more linear and separate." See: Kezar, Adrianna and Deb Moriarty, "Expanding our Understanding of Student Leadership Development: A Study Exploring Gender and Ethnic Identity," *Journal of College Student Development* 41, no.1 (Jan/Feb 2000), 56

<sup>37</sup>Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing*, xxv.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>39</sup>Negative events, specifically crises, were mentioned in the essays, but as will be discussed, these crises occurred in the context of the a-ha moment and in some case, a crisis precipitated the a-ha moment.

“significant lesson,” “a perspective gained,” “a moment that really changes one’s way of thinking,” or a “change in perception.” An a-ha moment results in: “a deeper level of understanding,” “personal growth,” “a deeper understanding of who I am,” or even “increases self knowledge” and “revolutionizes thought processes.” A-ha moments are:

- Moments that have made me think of who I am as a person, a student, and a future educator. ‘Aha moments,’ I believe have helped to shape me into who I am. They help me learn and better myself so that I may make a difference in the world.
- A-ha moment that have helped me to come to a deeper understanding of who I am and what my life is asking of me.
- Moment so little as to be virtually invisible, yet significant enough that each one build upon the last in order to bring us farther than be had intended upon – or even imagined – going.
- Experiences that have shaped the way one views life and calling, formative experiences.
- Most people have gone through this ‘rite’ have experienced moments in their studies that have formed, shaped and ultimately changed them... experiences that have left a lasting impression. My formative moment...

The essayists are candid about their a-ha moments and their formative power. A-ha moments help to shape and change lives through a deeper understanding of self. And many of them, about twenty percent of the essays, refer to their a-ha moment in terms of being formed and formation. The last student quoted above used the term “formative moment” and it was the first time I had really heard the phrase. I thought it fitting. The concept of formation offers another way of approaching and understanding the essays.

### **Formation and Formative Moments**

Throughout the dissertation, I use the term “formative experience” and “a-ha moment” interchangeably. Again, many of the essayists used the language of formation, but also as a practical theologian, the concept of formation is important concept. Lewis

Mudge and James Poling's *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology* define formation as the process by which a person comes to be and perdues in the world.<sup>40</sup> For Mudge and Poling, there are complex elements involved in formation and their fundamental question is: how are persons and communities being formed today?<sup>41</sup> Nancy Ramsey's pivotal *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms* contains essays that each highlight the concept of formation and its significance for the field. One essay by Joretta Marshall states that "Use of the word *formation*, has come to symbolize the breadth and depth of an essential component of education."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, in the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, "formation" refers to terms like vocation, moral development, the call to ministry, theological education, spiritual discipline and pastoral care. In short, the term formation is important to the field of practical theology. For the purpose of this dissertation, formation connotes forward development and growth; formation reflects the active sense of the molding and shaping of the whole person, biologically, psychologically, and culturally. I use formative moment and a-ha moment as transposable terms.

### **Important Conversations**

I will briefly highlight four important conversations that help shape the context of this dissertation. The first conversation was a large and on-going conversation that began

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<sup>40</sup>Lewis Mudge and James Poling, *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), xvii. According to the authors, there are many types of formation: intellectual formation, ethical formation, personal formation, community formation, which demonstrates that the word formation is multivalent.

<sup>41</sup>Mudge and Poling, *Formation and Reflection*, xix.

<sup>42</sup>Joretta Marshall, "Method in Pastoral Theology, Care and Counseling," in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy Ramsey (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 149, original emphasis.

when I started working for Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) in 2002. PTEV was a grants initiative funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. to encourage college programs on vocation at 88 colleges and universities. As part of three member coordination team, I was involved in the world of college students on a very wide and concentrated level; I met with students, college presidents, faculty, and staff all about the topic of vocation. A student conference in 2005 asked a group of students to write an essay in response to the question: What has been your biggest “a-ha moment” in college? The answers to that question started me on a path of research and writing, a journey of which I will expand upon in Chapter Three.

The second conversation was with writer and teacher Sharon Parks at the final PTEV conference. She is noted for her book *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* and when I told her about the essays, she remarked that it sounded like “a goldmine.” Because the essayists were from schools across the nation, I essentially had a national survey from which to draw compelling conclusions. Parks also anticipated my question about crisis moments and correctly predicted their appearance. I expand more on this conversation and its impact in Chapter Six, Crisis.

The third conversation was with Hanover College President, Sue DeWine. I was deeply immersed in my research on student development theory and need some guidance from someone in higher education. I explained my research and that I was having difficulty finding connections between “a-ha moments” and higher education. Quite unprompted, Sue exclaimed: “The goal of the liberal arts education is to have a-ha moments!”<sup>43</sup> DeWine believes that a good college education should change the way in which students live their lives and in the process, they become better world citizens who

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<sup>43</sup>This conversation took place in Sue DeWine’s office at Hanover College August 5, 2010.

can help solve the world's problems. If this is true – that the goal of college is to have a-ha moments – then the essays should be of interest to those in higher education, particularly liberal arts colleges. Like my conversation with Parks, it helped fortify my hunches: the essays were important not only for other students, but for anyone interested in college students: parents, administrators, faculty, chaplains, and anyone in higher education.

Finally, I had an important conversation with Dorothy Bass that encouraged me to look at these essays in terms of their formation.<sup>44</sup> I remarked that I didn't necessarily want to examine the essays' theological statements or beliefs about vocation. Bass encouraged me that looking at the essays in terms of formation *was* theological. Practical theology is inherently interested in formation. According to both Bass and Craig Dykstra, practical theology attends to the following question: How might a way of life that is life-giving in and for the sake of the world be best understood and described, and how might contemporary people come to live it more fully?<sup>45</sup> For both, practical theology

seeks not only to clarify the contours of a way of life but also to guide and strengthen persons and communities to embody this way of life, attention to the education and formation of people of faith and their leader is integral to practical theology.<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, practical theology has an inherent interest in the formation of people and is interested in how to form a life-giving way of life be lived more fully. In order strengthen and form persons and communities, for Bass, practical theology requires a particular kind of vision: “Thus practical theology requires stereoscopic attention to both the specific

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<sup>44</sup>This conversation with Dorothy Bass took place in 2007 at a PTEV Final Plenary Conference during lunch.

<sup>45</sup>Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, “Introduction,” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 14.

<sup>46</sup>Bass and Dykstra, *For Life Abundant*, 14.

moves of personal and communal living and the all-encompassing horizon of faith.”<sup>47</sup>

“Stereoscopic” refers to seeing space three-dimensionally from two-dimensional images (made famous by the ViewMaster). Practical theology views situations from a wider perspective which requires a special kind of vision that sees depth and profundity, beyond normal two-dimensional reality.

### Lenses

A guiding image for this dissertation is located in Bass’ claim that practical theology requires stereoscopic vision. Following this image, I suggest another metaphor for a special kind of enhanced vision: the microscope. An optical microscope uses light and refractive glass to see objects too small for the human eye; different magnifications are available by changing lenses for different fields of vision. For four years, throughout much of my graduate career, I worked as a lab technician in a developmental biology lab that studied diabetes. My job was to cryogenically section paraffin encased mouse pancreases and mount them with coverslips for the microscope. By applying particular antibodies and immunofluorescence, I could determine how the genetically altered pancreas functioned.<sup>48</sup> Using one lens, islets were transformed into amazing colors and patterns: blue represented glucagon and orange was insulin. Using another lens and a black light, fluorescent greens and reds appeared, and together with the pink tissue, beautiful batik like patterns formed. My job was to examine these slides closely and

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<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> My results were published in the journal *Development* and one of my photographs was considered for the cover of the issue: Maureen Gannon, Mike Gibson, Karla Van Zee, and Chris Wright, “Persistent expression of HNF6 in islet endocrine cells causes disrupted islet architecture and loss of beta cell function.” *Development*. 127: 2883-2895.



submit for review those with particular characteristics and patterning. In the meantime, I became very adept at operating a microscope and would sit for hours using different lenses at different magnifications, looking for patterns and taking photographs. Although a “scientific” approach, this experience ultimately guides this project. My hope is to construct lenses through which to examine these essays because by using different lenses, different patterns become clear.

Practical theology also uses different lenses to look at situations. Pamela Couture uses a camera and its lenses as a metaphorical approach to pastoral care. She uses different camera lenses to analyze “the dysfunctional areas of society.” Couture states:

The camera creates a frame so that I can focus more clearly on a part of the whole, seeing details I would otherwise miss. The adjectives feminist, Wesleyan, and practical are like lenses I attach to the camera through which I observe individuals, families and society. These lenses create overlapping and yet distinct angles of vision.<sup>49</sup>

Couture uses lenses to see more clearly particular details from a distinct angle of vision, while acknowledging that the lenses also overlap. The camera and the lenses create a frame for focused viewing.

Because lenses offer a particular point of view, James Nieman uses the term “frame” to discuss his approach to practices in practical theology. For Nieman, five basic features compose the concept of practice: the what (actions), who (common), why (meaningful), how (strategic), and where (purposive).<sup>50</sup> These five “features,” for Nieman, might be better described as “frames.” Nieman states:

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<sup>49</sup>Pamela Couture, “Feminist, Wesleyan, practical theology and the practice of care” in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, ed. Denise Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm (Leuven: Peeters Publishing, 1998), 28.

<sup>50</sup>James Nieman, “Why the Idea of Practice Matters,” in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice*, eds. Thomas Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 19-20.

A frame is simply a way of adopting one perspective on group work in order to notice it more deeply. Each frame foregrounds a special aspect of such work than others might diminish or ignore. At the same time, no frame is utterly discrete from the rest, so that all are required in order to provide an ensemble account.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, Joyce Ann Mercer constructs and uses different interpretive lenses to examine the subject matter of children. Mercer's "lens comes from the vantage point of feminist practical theology and takes on its critical principle the liberation, thriving, and well-being of all children."<sup>52</sup> In this way, practical theology takes seriously its lenses and is explicit about how the subject matter is viewed.

Again, I wanted to listen to the voices embedded in the essays because I believe there are important lessons to be learned and passed on for others. I wanted to use different theories to analyze the essays, including theories from both religion and science, to elucidate the patterns I recognized. By using different lenses and frames of view, I could test the utility of the theory with actual lived experience. Practical theologians are encouraged to thoroughly describe the context by advocating for "thick description."

Browning states:

To describe situations thickly, it is useful to understand the formal pattern of practical thinking. To describe situations is to describe how people think and act practically in specific contexts. To describe situations is to describe the forms of *phronesis* that actors use in concrete situations.<sup>53</sup>

My conclusion focuses on this concept of *phronesis* and makes suggestions for higher education, as well as for all those interested in college students, based on the wisdom uncovered in the essays.

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<sup>51</sup> Nieman, "Why the Idea of Practice Matters," 20.

<sup>52</sup> Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 97.

## Overview of the Chapters

Chapter One begins with the field of student development theory. In Part One, several criticisms from within the field are highlighted, particularly that the field of student development theory operates within a positivistic paradigm. Overall, the majority of research and knowledge about college students has come from positivistic methodologies. Positivism as a mode of inquiry is often associated with the scientific method which assumes an objective, external, and singular reality that can be known and described by an objective outsider. As a counterpoint, I introduce an unlikely conversation partner: practical theology. In Part Two, I argue that practical theology answers the call of student development theory in its search for new methods and approaches to college students. Drawing upon the current literature in practical theology, I construct a definition of practical theology that is grounded in hermeneutical theory.

Chapter Two begins with hermeneutic theory and expands this concept into critical hermeneutical theory, with the help of Don Browning. He is clear that the field of practical theology and critical hermeneutical theory are very similar; furthermore, he demands that practical theology can only maintain its identity and fulfill its potential by recognizing itself as an exercise in critical hermeneutics. Locating my methodology firmly in critical hermeneutical theory, I elaborate on two methods: Gadamer's concept of effective history and Ricoeur's concept of distanciation. These two methods allow me to construct four different lenses with which to view the essays.

Chapter Three is about the essays. I reveal how I came across the essays and what their purpose was in PTEV. I disclose information about the essayists and give an

account of their social location. I also reveal more about my situation as a researcher, which is an important methodological step for Browning, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. I use this chapter to describe an effective history of the essayists as well as of myself, the researcher.

Chapter Four focuses on psychosocial theory. Psychosocial theory is one of two fundamental theories in student development theory. Based on the work of Erik Erikson, psychosocial theory postulates development in a series of sequentially-linked stages influenced by biological and cultural forces. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett proposes a new life stage, what he calls “emerging adulthood,” that occurs in industrialized countries which bridges the gap between Erikson’s stage five (adolescence) and stage six (young adulthood). This chapter asks: are the essayists better described as emerging adults? Using Arnett’s five developmental markers, I examine the essays for evidence of emerging adulthood.

Chapter Five focuses on object relations theory (ORT). ORT postulates that the fundamental human drive is towards relationship and all development and formation takes place within the context of relationships. Using Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, I describe how one’s primary drive is towards relationships, not towards pleasure or power. Humans are fundamentally relational creatures driven to seek relationships with others and the primacy of relation-seeking drive occurs throughout life. Using an ORT theoretical lens, I test the utility of this theory with the experiences described in the essays. If relationships are so important, what kinds of relationships are present in the essays? Furthermore, what kinds of relationships are reported in relation to their formative moment?

Chapter Six focuses on pastoral theology and the concept of crisis. Pastoral theology, as a field under the general area of practical theology, is explored in-depth. Using Charles Gerkin, Evelyn Whitehead, and James Whitehead, a crisis is a boundary experience that confronts the unknown and brings change and awareness of contradiction, finitude, and vulnerability. Often unexpected and unpredictable, crisis disrupts life and reveals a fundamental contradiction between human aspirations and finite possibilities. Looking to the essays, I ask: Are these negative or inimical experiences of the essays better understood and described as a crisis? If so, are there particular crisis patterns that appear? Three basic crisis categories emerge from the essays: crisis as death, crisis as loss, and crisis as confrontation with the unknown.

Chapter Seven focuses on practices. Over ninety percent of the essays describe “doing something” within the context of their a-ha moment. By reviewing the literature on practices, I borrow from different practical theologians in order to construct my own definition of practice. A practice is a communal and contextual, purposeful activity strategically undertaken by embodied persons. I use this definition of practice as a lens with which to view the essays. From this practice lens, five basic categories (or congeries) of practice emerge: practices of service, practices of fellowship, practices of work, practices of reading and reflection, and practices of conversation. I argue that the essayists offer stories of the “person-forming power of practices;” furthermore, embedded in these essays are important lessons about practices that can be learned and taught.

Chapter Eight is my conclusion. I turn to the concept of *phronesis* and investigate its original use by Aristotle. *Phronesis* requires a deep knowledge of human beings in

order to enhance conditions for the possibility of individual and communal transformation; the end goal of *phronesis* is human flourishing. Gadamer makes important connections between *phronesis* and his model of understanding as conversation and dialogue. For Gadamer, there is a close association between hermeneutics and *phronesis*. Browning follows up on Gadamer's claims to state that *phronesis* suggests an entirely new structure for theology that is practical and guided from the start by a broad concern with application. Overall, significant associations are made between *phronesis*, hermeneutics, and practical theology. Drawing on the practical wisdom of the essayists, I end with seven recommendations for higher education.

## CHAPTER I

### STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

*“That is the situation that we face now: a changing set of student concerns and commitments, some ‘hunger’ and ‘thirst’ for better ways to approach those questions, but perplexity about how to find those ways. There’s a need – and opportunity – for liberal education to respond with imagination and fresh approaches.”<sup>54</sup>*

A central claim of this dissertation is that the voices in the essays have something significant to add to the growing interest in the lives of college students. My hypothesis is that a study of college student essays, as expressed in their own words, has some explanatory power for interpreting and understanding college student development and formation. As I read the essays, I wondered: what sort of theories might help me better understand and explain the patterns and dynamics I had begun to discover? This is the key question of the interpretive task.<sup>55</sup> I was interested in using theory to understand and examine the experiences of the essayists as they encountered a fundamental moment of change; I was also interested in testing the utility of theory against actual experience.

I initially turned to the field of student development theory for two reasons. First, the field of student development theory exclusively studies college students, usually 18-25 year olds, and aims to apply human development concepts in postsecondary settings. Second, I had some experience in student development research. Working for PTEV for five years, I was the person responsible for the content on our website, including a bibliography of over 300 texts on college students.<sup>56</sup> I reviewed and evaluated texts on

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<sup>54</sup>Robert Conner, “The Right Time and Place for Big Questions,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no., 40 (2006): B9.

<sup>55</sup>Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 6-10.

<sup>56</sup>The Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) website is [www.ptev.org](http://www.ptev.org) with links to my bibliography and interviews I conducted. More will be said about PTEV in Chapter Three. However, it should be noted that Dorothy Bass in *For Life Abundant* states that the PTEV bibliography is “an

developmental theory, higher education research, identity theory, student assessment, mentoring, and other areas in student development. I felt competent to engage with student development theory more fully as a viable resource for engaging the essays. Moreover, I could imagine that any suggestions or conclusions might be of interest to those in the wider arena of higher education.

One particular theory in student development that I dialogue with in Chapter Four is the psychosocial developmental theory of Jeffery Jensen Arnett. He bases his work on Erikson's life stage theory, but augments the theory to include a new stage which he calls "emerging adulthood." However, as I delved further into student development theory, I discovered the same criticism being repeated from within the field: criticism about its own positivistic perspective. For example, many in the field reference that positivism, as a mode of inquiry, has produced much of the knowledge to date about the development and formation of college students. They are critical of their own methods that rely on objective quantifiable measurements and find them too constraining, especially as a method of studying college students. Student development researcher Nancy Evans states: "Student differences are too vast and college experiences too varied to look at development phenomenon from the universal view of the positivist."<sup>57</sup> Overall, the typical research done in student development is largely positivistic and is based on particular epistemological assumptions about objectivity; consequently, many researchers are self-critical about the positivist paradigm under which most of the research has taken place.

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excellent bibliography." Dorothy Bass. *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 9, fn 15.  
<sup>57</sup>Nancy J. Evans, Deanna S. Forney, Florence M. Guido, Lori D. Patton, and Kristen A. Renn, *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 18.



Beyond this kind of “macro” criticism of the positivist paradigm which dominates the field, others are actively searching for ways to embrace postmodernity, or at the very least, resist positivism. Some researchers are struggling to find methodologies that can support multiple theoretical perspectives in order to analyze the same data. Student development researcher Elisa Abes asks: How can multiple theoretical perspectives be used in combination with one another? “More specifically, how can one apply competing assumptions of conflicting theoretical perspectives to the same data?”<sup>58</sup> Marylu McEwen affirms the importance of social location, but struggles to find a framework that can support the social location of the researcher alongside the subject of study.<sup>59</sup> Other researchers call for interdisciplinary experimentation, the importance of voice, eclectic approaches, discarding ideological allegiances, and in particular, the importance of “saying yes to the messiness, to that which interrupts and exceeds versus tidy categories...thinking difference differently.”<sup>60</sup>

### **Practical Theology and Student Development Theory**

I suggest that practical theology can answer the call of student development because practical theology has reflected on issues of social location, the importance of voice, issues with messiness, and how to use multiple theoretical approaches with competing claims. The work of Bonnie Miller-McLemore exemplifies a practical

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<sup>58</sup>Elisa S. Abes, “Theoretical Borderlands: Using Multiple Theoretical Perspectives to Challenge Inequitable Power Structures in Student Development Theory,” *Journal of College Student Development* 50, no. 2 (March/April 2009): 142.

<sup>59</sup>McEwen, Marylu K. “The Nature and Uses of Theory,” in *Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession*, ed. Susan Komives, Dudley Woodward and Associates, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

<sup>60</sup>Abes, “Theoretical Borderlands,” 142.

theological approach that gives an answer to some of the questions raised in student development theory. First, Miller-McLemore is decidedly postmodern when she states that one should “refuse the pretense of objectivity.”<sup>61</sup> She states: “Recognizing the pretense of objectivity and identifying one’s particular context and perspective characterizes the work of many current scholars in pastoral theology...”<sup>62</sup> Miller-McLemore has done considerable work with issues of social location and has pushed the field to recognize the political and ideological underpinnings in policies and practices.

Second, Miller-McLemore would say “yes” in response to Abes’ desire to embrace “saying yes to the messiness, to that which interrupts and exceeds tidy categories.”<sup>63</sup> Miller-McLemore perceives that theology is about the “messy particularity of everyday lives examined with excruciating care” as well as “understanding lived subjective experience.”<sup>64</sup> Understanding this lived subject experience of the other requires acknowledgement that “life lived in engagement with this world, is messy, conflicted, rough, dynamic, and weatherbeaten.”<sup>65</sup> For this reason, Miller-McLemore states: “Adequate theological method in practical theology must attend to the ‘messy, dirty, earthy side of life.’”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Miller-McLemore borrows this phrase from Mary K. DeShazer, *A Poetics of Resistance: Women Writing in El Salvador, South Africa, and the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) p. 271

<sup>62</sup> Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “The subject and practice of pastoral theology as a practical theological discipline: pushing past the nagging identity crisis to the ‘poetics of resistance’” in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, ed. Denise Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm (Leuven, 1998), 187.

<sup>63</sup> Abes, “Theoretical Borderlands,” 142.

<sup>64</sup> In the first quote, Miller-McLemore cites a student book report on church historian Roberta Bondi’s *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) who states that theology is about the “messy particularity of everyday lives examined with excruciating care and brought into conversation with the great doctrines of the Christian tradition.” See, Miller-McLemore, “The Subject and Practice of Pastoral Theology,” 180, 181.

<sup>65</sup> Miller-McLemore quotes Carol Hess, “Education as an Art of Getting Dirty,” in *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist-Womanist Approaches*, ed. Christie Cozad Neuger (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 75-76. See, Miller-McLemore, “The Subject and Practice of Pastoral Theology,” 191.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

Third, and finally, Miller-McLemore envisions and articulates the core concept of the “living human web.” This foundational metaphor represents the connectedness and the interconnections that link individuals, families, communities, and larger societies. Miller-McLemore contends that “the ‘living human *web*’ suggests itself as a better term for the appropriate subject for investigation, interpretation, and transformation.”<sup>67</sup> This image reinforces the view that understanding any situation goes beyond the individual interpsychic realm to include social location and cultural sensitivities. Important for this discussion is that the living human web offers one framework for understanding how multiple theoretical perspectives can be used to analyze the same data. Competing claims and differences are held in tension by the many different interconnections of the living human web. Richard Osmer reflects on this image of the living human web and concludes: “Practical theological interpretation, thus, is deeply contextual. It thinks in terms of interconnections, relationships, and systems.”<sup>68</sup>

Again, I claim that practical theology has resources that can help answer many of the questions posed in student development theory; moreover, practical theology is an important, and as of yet untapped, conversation partner with student development theory. Although these two disciplines appear to be unrelated, they do have some important areas of overlap. First, both are relatively “young” in that both secured their place in the academy with the rise in authority of the personality sciences. Second, both practical theology and student development theory share important theorists. For example, my qualifying exam bibliography included work done by Erik Erikson, Carol Gilligan,

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<sup>67</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “The Living Human Web: Pastoral Theology at the Turn of the Century,” in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed., Jeanne Stephenson Moessner (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 16.

<sup>68</sup>Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 17.

Thomas Kuhn, Mary Belenky, Blythe McVicker, Nancy Goldberger and Jull Tarule; these theorists are also used in the field of student development theory. However unlikely these conversation partners might appear at first glance, I assert that the resources of practical theology can inform and expand the field of student development; in addition, practical theology has yet to directly approach the topic of college students as a viable source of interest. This dissertation challenges this oversight and asks: how can practical theology address and describe the formative moments of college students?

Chapter One, Part One, begins with student development theory and a brief history of the field is given. Within this overview is a description of the field's reliance on and critique of positivistic modes of inquiry. The positivistic paradigm has produced most of the knowledge to date about the development and formation of college students. Other criticisms of the field are highlighted, as well as the need for imaginative and fresh approaches and methods towards understanding college students. In Part Two, I give a substantial overview of the field of practical theology in order to situate this perspective in its historical tradition. Next, I turn to contemporary approaches of practical theology to demonstrate the rich variety of perspectives within the field. Drawing from these approaches, I construct a definition of practical theology: an inherently interdisciplinary quest with postmodern sensibilities that uses "thick description" to examine the messy particularities of everyday lives with excruciating care in order to understand lived subjective experience by beginning with the situation and starting small. Ultimately, practical theology ultimately seeks to clarify and cultivate *phronesis*; in order to do so, practical theology should be grounded in critical hermeneutical theory.

## PART ONE: Student Development Theory

Student development theory, in general, refers to research on “late-adolescent and adult development.”<sup>69</sup> Student development is defined as “the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education.”<sup>70</sup> Student development theory is an attempt to use human, educational, and cultural development to predict behavior and offer insights into college life.<sup>71</sup> The purpose of student development theory is to encourage student learning and growth in higher education; for this reason, the field often guides student affairs practices at colleges and universities. The basic assumption behind the field is that students learn, develop, and grow in certain predictable ways and it’s the responsibility of colleges and universities to create environments that facilitate development.<sup>72</sup> The hope is that research done in student development will help to create intentional interventions designed to enhance student learning and development in higher education.

Student development theory is a contested term. Some refer to student development as a slippery term that reflects “an eclectic mélange of concepts without theory.”<sup>73</sup> Others state that the term is more of a depository that is used interchangeably to refer to the process of growth and change, the outcome of this process, intervention

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<sup>69</sup>Cunningham, Jack, review of *Student Development and College Teaching*, by Rhonda Beaman, *Book Reviews Review and Expositor*, 94 (1997): 153.

<sup>70</sup>Evans, *Student Development in College*, 4.

<sup>71</sup>Cunningham continues: “Current literature normally treats student development theory as a tool to be used to assist administration in planning student life and affairs, housing and other student groupings, and activities where cohort differences matter. The cohort group of most importance to most colleges is the young adults.” See, Cunningham, “Student Development and College Teaching,” 153.

<sup>72</sup>Maureen Wilson and Lisa Wolf-Wendel, *ASHE Reader on College Student Development Theory* (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2005), xv.

<sup>73</sup>Patricia M King, “Theories of College Student Development: Sequences and Consequences,” in *ASHE Reader on College Student Development Theory*, ed. Maureen E. Wilson and Lisa E. Wolf-Wendel (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2005), 43.

strategies designed to promote development, and student serviced administrative offices in higher education.<sup>74</sup> The field is highly individualistic, as “the focus of many student development theories and of many higher education mission statements is on individual development.”<sup>75</sup> Student developmental theorist Patricia King sees student development as an interesting concept: “it is complex and rich, has multiple meanings, is open to argument and disagreement, and connotes a variety of ideas and images to those who use (or avoid) the term.”<sup>76</sup> Although the direction and definition of the field is sometimes contested, there has been a “veritable explosion of research on college students in the past fifteen years.”<sup>77</sup>

I refer to area of student development theory, directly, and as “the field of student development theory.” I refer to it as a field because that is how those within student development refer to their area of study. I also borrow from Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman’s exposition of a “field:”

a field pertains to ‘an open space in which activities which have something in common take place’... this pertains to researchers, writers on popular subjects, and practitioners, all of whom are interested in a variety of activities that fall under this category.<sup>78</sup>

Further, no account I reviewed in student development ever referred to the area as a discipline or as a discourse.

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<sup>74</sup>King, “Theories of College Student Development,” 43-44.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>76</sup>King notes that the “term student development is used interchangeably to refer to the process of growth and change, the outcome of this process, intervention strategies designed to promote development, and student serviced administrative offices.” See, King, “Theories of College Student Development,” 43.

<sup>77</sup>Ernst T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terezini, *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2005), xi.

<sup>78</sup>Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman. “Mapping the Field of Practical Theology” 64. The authors borrow from Sanda Schneider’s discussion of spirituality as a discourse, a field, and a discipline. Sandra Schneiders, “The Study of Christian spirituality in the context of the academy.” In *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005) 6-7.

According to student development theorist Carney Strange, student development theory is a relatively young field and is a result of the development of the personality sciences.<sup>79</sup> A short history serves to situate the perspective of student development theory and briefly chart its own development as a field. Two different resources give mirroring histories of the field: 1) Nancy Evans' *Student Development in College: Theory, Research and Practice* and 2) an article by Carney Strange, "Student Development: The Evolution and Status of an Essential Idea." Evans and Strange independently give a similar historical account of the field of student development. Both begin with the 1920's Progressive Education Movement and cite the impact of two world wars that ultimately increased college enrollment. Both then skip to the 1960s, which saw the beginning of significant focusing of the field by the personality sciences that "continued to further shape this student development framework in higher education."<sup>80</sup> Both point to scholars like Nevitt Sanford (psychologist), Douglas Heath, Kenneth Feldman, and Theodore Newcomb (sociologists) as researchers who "began to methodically address questions about how the college experience influences personality development and student attitudes and beliefs."<sup>81</sup> According to Evans, two basic approaches typify the field of student development: psychosocial and cognitive-structural approaches.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, three foundational theorists comprise the basis of student development theory. This first is developmental psychologist Authur Chickering, who bases his theory on Erik

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<sup>79</sup>According to Strange, with the inception of personality and behavioral sciences "a vision of human development emerged that focused on complex, measurable traits and systems of thought, emotions, motivations, and capacities, presumed to culminate in an integrated state of maturity. The human personality was seen as a function of numerous underlying dimensions that manifested themselves in a variety of observable behaviors and actions." See, Carney Strange, "Student Development: The Evolution and Status of an Essential Idea," *Journal of College Student Development* 35 (November, 1994): 399.

<sup>80</sup>Strange, "Student Development," 400.

<sup>81</sup>Strange, "Student Development," 400.

<sup>82</sup>Evans, *Student Development in College*, 12.

Erikson's ideas on identity development.<sup>83</sup> The second is educational psychologist William Perry's theory on the intellectual development of college students. The third is psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, who built upon the work of Jean Piaget on moral development and moral reasoning.<sup>84</sup> Out of this, both Evans and Strange agree that the field emerged into four basic models: psychosocial, cognitive development, typological, and person-environment interaction models.

However, in the 1980s the field experienced some harsh criticism, particularly from feminist perspectives. Strange states:

The student development movement, though, was not without its critics during this period, with scholars such as Gilligan (1982), Josselson (1987), and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) identifying perceived biases of extant developmental models, especially as they pertained to patterns of women's growth and development.<sup>85</sup>

It became clear that these earlier models, foundational to the field and used as developmental frameworks "evolved largely from studies of Caucasian, middle and upper income men (Chickering 1969, Erikson, 1968, Kohlberg, 1971, Perry, 1970).<sup>86</sup> And although these models have been and continue to be challenged,

the major theories that have been (and still are) used as frameworks for designing most programs and services to enhance student development have evolved largely from studies of Caucasian, middle and upper income men.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Evans states, "his book, *Education and Identity* (1969), quickly became the mainstay for professionals interested in student development." Evans, *Student Development in College*, 12.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup>Strange, "Student Development," 27.

<sup>86</sup>Adrianna Kezar and Deb Moriarty, "Expanding our Understanding of Student Leadership Development: A Study Exploring Gender and Ethnic Identity," *Journal of College Student Development* 41, no.1 (Jan/Feb 2000): 56.

<sup>87</sup>Kezar is referencing directly the following texts and theorists: Chickering, 1969; Erikson, 1968; Kohlberg, 1971; Perry, 1970. See, Kezar, "Expanding our Understanding of Student Leadership Development," 56.



Carol Gilligan remarks that, “the so called objective position which Kohlberg and others espoused.....was blind to the particularities of voice and the inevitable constructions that constitute points of view.”<sup>88</sup> Marcia Baxter Magolda states that “student development scholars were raising questions about the relevance of existing theory for diverse student populations, suggesting that generalizing theory over-looked gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.”<sup>89</sup> Finally, researcher Adrianna Kezar adds that “evidence is mounting that earlier models developed using mostly Caucasian, male students cannot be generalized to other students.”<sup>90</sup>

Beyond criticizing foundational models, new criticisms have emerged from within the field that call into question not just the models of student development theory, but also its basic methodological principles. In short, the field of student development theory has operated under positivistic assumptions and worldviews. Often associated with science and the scientific method, positivism assumes an objective external reality that can be known and described by an objective outsider. Positivism assumes that the objective outsider is able to study a phenomenon without influencing the outcome or being influenced by the object of study. Evans, whose text provides an in-depth overview of the field and a comprehensive evaluation of its theories, states: “Much of the theory and research reviewed in this book has a positivist perspective.”<sup>91</sup> She highlights the work of Perry, Kohlberg, King and Kitchner and states that their “work is excellent

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<sup>88</sup>Gilligan states: “However well-intentioned and provisionally useful it may have been, it was based on an inerrant neutrality which concealed power and falsified knowledge.” Carol Gilligan, “Letter to Readers,” in *ASHE Reader on College Student Development Theory*, ed. Maureen E. Wilson and Lisa E. Wolf-Wendel (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2005), 581.

<sup>89</sup>Marcia Baxter Magolda, “Complex Lives,” in *ASHE Reader on College Student Development Theory*, ed. Maureen E. Wilson and Lisa E. Wolf-Wendel (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2005), 35.

<sup>90</sup>Kezar, “Expanding our Understanding of Student Leadership Development,” 55.

<sup>91</sup>Evans, *Student Development in College*, 18.

within the context of the positivist tradition.”<sup>92</sup> However, Evans echoes many researchers and theorists when she states that the positivist paradigm is too restrictive, especially as a method of analyzing college students. She writes:

Meaning in positivist research is often limited and generalizable findings difficult to apply to all categories (for example, all students in higher education). Student differences are too vast and college experiences too varied to look at development phenomenon from the universal view of a positivist.<sup>93</sup>

Evans is critical of her field’s reliance on the positivist tradition, particularly because of its one-reality-fits-all approach to development. She argues that the positivist paradigm is too constraining; in order to expand upon the limitations of positivism, she uses Thomas Kuhn and the work of Guba and Lincoln to highlight the limitations of the positivistic paradigm.

### **Positivistic Paradigm**

The term “paradigm” refers to a set of basic beliefs or worldview that guides theory and research. The term paradigm was elucidated by Kuhn as he dealt with competing modes of scientific activity and how they “provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research.”<sup>94</sup> In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn attacks empiricism by demonstrating how the scientific community is dominated by its paradigms, those “standard examples of scientific work which embody a

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<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup>Kuhn “maintained that observational data and criteria for assessing theories are paradigm-dependent.” See, Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 10.

set of conceptual, methodological, and metaphysical assumptions.”<sup>95</sup> Paradigms represent a cluster of conceptual and methodological presuppositions that transmit fundamental assumptions about reality; a paradigm consists of three components: epistemology, ontology, and methodology. Ian Barbour observes that a paradigm “implicitly defines for a given scientific community the types of questions that may legitimately be asked, the types of explanation that are to be sought, and the types of solutions that are acceptable.”<sup>96</sup> Guba and Lincoln use the concept of paradigm to define the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator. In turn, they analyze four competing paradigms that guide research, one of which is the positivistic paradigm.<sup>97</sup>

Using Guba and Lincoln’s rubric, the field of student development theory and research rests in a positivistic paradigm. Under this paradigm, logical positivism and empiricism are the standard methodological approaches used for the basis of theory. Evans articulates the positivist paradigm as the existence of “an objective reality” where the “researcher is assumed to be independent of the object investigated and able to study a phenomenon without influencing the outcome or being influenced by the object of study.”<sup>98</sup> Methods are experimental and quantifiable. “Hypotheses are formulated and subjected to empirical test for verification. Conditions that could interfere with the results are carefully controlled.”<sup>99</sup> The positivistic paradigm is characterized by an apprehendable and knowable singular reality that is both reductionistic and deterministic

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<sup>95</sup>Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 93.

<sup>96</sup>Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 103.

<sup>97</sup>Guba and Lincoln analyze four competing paradigms: positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, and constructivism. Each paradigm is outlined and they highlight each’s respective epistemology, ontology, and methodology, the three crucial dimensions of paradigmatic thinking. It also should be noted that Guba and Lincoln firmly express their commitment to a constructivist paradigm. See, Egon Guba, and Yvonna Lincoln, “Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 1994), 107-113.

<sup>98</sup>Evans, *Student Development in College*, 17.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

where “the aim of inquiry is *explanation*, ultimately enabling the *prediction* and *control* of phenomena, whether physical or human.”<sup>100</sup> Ultimately, research in student development, as well as most of the social sciences in general, has been guided by this “received view” of the positivist paradigm, which has dominated discourse for the past 400 years.<sup>101</sup>

This positivistic paradigm in student development theory is highlighted in another foundational text: Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini’s *How College Affects Students*.<sup>102</sup> This 800-page text looks specifically at the impact of college by examining an “expansive” body of research. Pascarella and Terenzini describe theories and models of student change in college and highlight specific college impact theories underlying much of the research on college effects. The authors pose six questions as a way to think about college effects.<sup>103</sup> However, the evidence presented is organized in terms of different types of outcomes rather than in terms of potential sources of influence on

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<sup>100</sup>Guba and Lincoln go on to describe the positivist perspective as Dualist and Objectivist. The investigator and the investigated ‘object’ are assumed to be independent entities, and the investigator to be capable of studying the object without influencing it or being influenced by it. When influence in either direction (threats to validity) is recognized, or even suspected, various strategies are followed to reduce or eliminate it. Inquiry takes place as through a one-way mirror. Values and biases are prevented from influencing outcomes, so long as the prescribed procedures are rigorously followed. Replicable findings are, in fact, ‘true.’” Guba and Lincoln, “Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research,” 110-113.

<sup>101</sup>Guba and Lincoln point out: “Positivist tend to control publication outlets, funding sources, promotion and tenure mechanisms, dissertation committees, and other sources of power and influence. They were, at least until about 1980, the ‘in’ group, and continue to represent the strongest voice in professional decision making.” Guba and Lincoln, “Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research,” 116.

<sup>102</sup> Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

<sup>103</sup>The six questions are as follows: 1) What evidence is there that individuals change during the time in which they are attending college? 2) What evidence is there that change or development during college is the result of college attendance? 3) What evidence is there that different kinds of postsecondary institutions have a differential influence on student change or development during college? 4) What evidence exists on effects of different experiences in the same institution? 5) What evidence is there that the collegiate experience produces conditional, as opposed to general, effect on student change or development? 6) What are the long-term effects of college? See, Pascarella and Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*, 8-9.

college outcomes.<sup>104</sup> Their measurements include net effects, direct effects, indirect effects, and total effects.<sup>105</sup> In other words, the authors do not focus on the influential factors that might cause students to change and develop, but instead focus solely on the outcomes. Other researchers lament that approaches like this focus on the structural characteristics of development while ignoring the questions of what experiences in college facilitate or impede development.<sup>106</sup>

By their own admission, Pascarella and Terenzini are clear: the scientific positivism reigns supremely as the methodological framework of choice throughout their research. The authors state:

To be sure the positivist, quantitative paradigm still dominates the total body of research we reviewed, with true experiments, quasi experiments, and correlational designs with statistical controls for salient confounding variables being the methodological tools of choice.<sup>107</sup>

They cite advantages in using quantitative techniques, such as meta-analysis, in order to synthesize a large body of research which as a result gives “an objective method for resolving conflicting findings in a body of evidence.”<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, other studies that might use more “naturalistic” inquiries were largely excluded because their results were simply not amenable to computation. However, the authors do suggest that there is warrant for “an expanded repertoire of methodological approaches for estimating and understanding the impact of college on students.”<sup>109</sup> Pascarella and Terenzini, two key researchers in the field of student development, clearly state that the positivistic paradigm

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<sup>104</sup>Pascarella and Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*, 6-7.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>106</sup>Krumrei E., Cindy Miller-Perrin, and Don Thompson, “Crisis and commitment: Applying concepts of identity development to faith maturity.” Submitted to *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (2006), 10.

<sup>107</sup>Pascarella and Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*, 4.

<sup>108</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

reigns supremely and “dominates the total body of research we reviewed.”<sup>110</sup> Because of this, the authors call for new methodological approaches towards understanding college students.

Marylu McEwen – not to be confused with the previously mentioned researcher Nancy Evans – also raises concerns about the positivism as the dominant mode of inquiry in student development theory. Positivism as a mode of inquiry has produced most of the knowledge to date about the development and formation of college students. In “The Nature and Uses of Theory,” McEwen states:

Part of the dominant, conventional paradigm, the mode of inquiry that has traditionally been used in both education and psychology is logical positivism, also known as the natural scientific method, which has provided important and significant contributions to the theory and research base of student affairs. It is this mode of inquiry that has produced most of our knowledge to date about the development of college students, how individuals and environments interact, and how organizations are function.<sup>111</sup>

McEwen echoes the same sentiment as Evans, Pascarella, and Terenzini: positivism as a mode of inquiry has dominated student development theory and has produced most of the models and theories about college students. Accordingly, McEwen raises questions about the nature and uses of theory in student development. Theory, she says, serves to simplify the complex and connect what appears to be random. But theory is:

developed through the lenses, or perspectives, of those who create or describe it. Thus theory is not objective as frequently claimed, but evolves from the subjectivity of the theorist or researchers.<sup>112</sup>

She reaffirms the observation that “all theory is autobiographical – that is, theory represents the knowledge, experience, and worldviews of the theorists who construct

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<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>111</sup>Marylu K. McEwen, “The Nature and Uses of Theory,” in *Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession*, ed. Susan Komives, Dudley Woodward and Associates, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 17-18.

<sup>112</sup>McEwen, “The Nature and Uses of Theory,” 15.

it.”<sup>113</sup> McEwen states that knowing and examining oneself is especially important in using and constructing theories in human development. She adds: “Who each of us is, including the experiences and history we carry within us, creates the filters and frameworks through which we interpret others’ experiences and perspectives and the theories we use in our work.”<sup>114</sup>

In order to take these claims seriously, McEwen looks for a framework that can support the social location of the researcher alongside the subject of study. McEwen puts out a call: researchers need to “adopt an ‘eclectic’ model. Eclectic use of theory means a professional draws on the useful and relevant aspects of multiple theories and combines those aspects into a meaningful whole.”<sup>115</sup> She calls for new methods and approaches that step outside of logical positivism and instead, embrace the social location of the researcher and the objects of study. Additionally, McEwen calls for the use of “eclectic” methods that can draw on aspects of multiple theories into a meaningful whole.

Elisa Abes resonates with McEwen’s call for new methods and approaches. Abes’ goal is to use multiple theoretical perspectives to analyze the same data in spite of inevitable competing assumptions. Her central question is: how can multiple theoretical perspectives, despite inevitable competing assumptions, be used in combination with one another?<sup>116</sup> This is a key question that this dissertation seeks to answer as well. Abes has no answer to this question, but instead advocates for a framework that can hold multiple theoretical perspectives which, thereby, directly challenge the positivist stance of the

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<sup>113</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>115</sup>McEwen, *Student Development in College*, 21.

<sup>116</sup>Abes, “Theoretical Borderlands,” 142.

existence of one reality.<sup>117</sup> Instead, she suggests that a kind of “methodolatry” has occurred “where the tail of the methodology wags the dog of inquiry.”<sup>118</sup> To counter this, she embraces the importance of “saying yes to the messiness, to that which interrupts and exceed versus tidy categories...thinking difference differently.”<sup>119</sup>

Instead of being “paralyzed by theoretical limitations or confined by rigid ideological allegiances,” Abes advocates for interdisciplinary experimentation. Her ultimate goal is to use multiple theoretical perspectives to analyze the same data in spite of inevitable competing assumptions. She calls for interdisciplinary experimentation which “has the potential to benefit the student affairs profession by revealing new possibilities for how student development theories can be more inclusive of marginalized student populations.”<sup>120</sup> Abes highlights other researchers in the field who are looking to “understanding students’ experiences and ways of making meaning more so than positivist approaches that assume one reality and boxed students into preexisting developmental categories.”<sup>121</sup> She continues that rather than submit to ideological allegiances, the field should be open to “interdisciplinary experimentation” which can lead to rich new research results and possibilities.

Greg Tanaka also raises important questions about the methods used in the field of student development and higher education research. He states that “there is growing empirical evidence that current approaches are no longer adequate to explain the

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<sup>117</sup>Abes asks: How then can multiple theoretical perspectives be used in combination, deviating from the typical paradigmatic categories into which studies are generally categorized, such as positivist, constructivist, critical, and poststructural? Abes, “Theoretical Borderlands,” 142.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>121</sup>*Ibid.*, 145.



increasingly complex experience of contemporary college students.”<sup>122</sup> He is critical of modern constructs and approaches with their interest in “measuring” and their tendency not to examine underlying ideologies and cultural attitudes. His intention is “not to bring an end to modernist efforts at assessing student development” but instead Tanaka believes that in our world’s growing diversity, new methods are needed to reflect on these issues which “are increasingly fecund.”<sup>123</sup> Adding, “this writing should be taken to heart as a call for higher education researchers to rearticulate the world of modern theorists and give fresh impetus to the field’s future practice.”<sup>124</sup> Tanaka is clear that current positivistic approaches are no longer adequate to explain the increasingly complex experiences of college students and he issues a literal call for new methods to examine these experiences.

### **Call for New Methods**

Overall, within the field of student development, there is a call for new methods and approaches towards college student populations. The dominant mode of inquiry is positivism and this positivistic paradigm has dominated research in student development theory. Maureen Wilson and Lisa Wolf-Wendell state:

Many of the policy and practice decisions made by professionals in the field are based on the belief that students learn, develop, and grow in certain predictable ways and that it is the responsibility of colleges and universities to create environments that facilitate that development.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup>Greg Tanaka, “Higher Education’s Self-Reflexive Turn: Toward an Intercultural Theory of Student Development,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 73, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 264.

<sup>123</sup>Tanaka, “Higher Education’s Self-Reflexive Turn,” 287.

<sup>124</sup>*Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>125</sup>Maureen E. Wilson and Lisa E. Wolf-Wendel, *ASHE Reader on College Student Development Theory* (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2005), xv.

Here, the emphasis is on the assumption that human behavior can be predicted and controlled, a particularly strong tenet of scientific positivism. Again, according to Guba and Lincoln, the aim of inquiry in the positivistic paradigm is explanation, prediction, and control.<sup>126</sup> Researchers base their generalizations on quantitative data in order to construct laws and theories that will predict human behavior.<sup>127</sup> As Schulze points out, “the aim of research is to collect evidence to formulate generalizations or laws that govern human behavior. Thus, human behavior can be predicted and controlled.”<sup>128</sup> Many are critical of their own field’s reliance on positivism because this kind of approach ultimately restricts the view of human beings to merely repetitive and predictable aspects of human behavior. According to Abes, “positivist approaches assume one reality and boxed students into pre-existing developmental categories.”<sup>129</sup> Human beings are more complicated than pre-formulated categories or well-formed formulas; furthermore, positivism assumes that human behavior can be controlled and predicted. Some insist that this positivistic approach overlooks critical features of human phenomena and, because of this oversight, it is ultimately characterized as de-humanizing in its restrictive approach. Despite the restrictive and constraining effects of this perspective, positivism as a mode of inquiry has produced much of the current knowledge on college students.

For many researchers, this criticism of current methods and assumptive worldviews – as well as the search for new methods and approaches – is problematized further by the growing diversity of college student populations. Student populations in

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<sup>126</sup>Guba and Lincoln, “Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research,” 113.

<sup>127</sup>Salome Schulze, “Views on the Combination of Quantitative and Qualitative Research Approaches,” *Progressio* 25, no. 2 (2003): 8-9.

<sup>128</sup>Schulze, “Views on the Combination of Quantitative and Qualitative Research Approaches,” 9.

<sup>129</sup>Abes, “Theoretical Borderlands,” 145.

college settings are more diverse and complex than ever before and that trend continues to increase each year.<sup>130</sup> Higher education is continually facing new challenges in an ever expanding and shifting tapestry of contemporary student demographics. Laura Rendon explains: “In stark contrast with yesterday’s uniform profile of college students as white males from privileged backgrounds, today’s student body represents a tapestry of differentiation in social background, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, lifestyle, and sexual orientation.”<sup>131</sup> This tapestry of many different colors and kinds is a growing trend in college student populations as more and more people from many different backgrounds go to college each year.

The National Center for Education Statistics offers some interesting numbers in regards to the growing number of college students and their diverse backgrounds. For example, enrollment in degree granting institutions increased 26% between 1997 and 2007, from 14.5 million to 18.2 million.<sup>132</sup> Since 2002, the rate of high school students directly entering college has fluctuated between 64 and 69 percent.<sup>133</sup> In 2006, 69% of whites, 55% of blacks, and 58% of Hispanics enter college directly after high school.<sup>134</sup> Of this group, 58% of students seeking a bachelor’s degree graduate within six years.<sup>135</sup> In total, there were 1.5 million bachelor’s degrees conferred in 2006-07.<sup>136</sup> Of the

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<sup>130</sup>Evans, *Student Development in College*, 19-21.

<sup>131</sup> Rendon continues, “This has resulted not only in the colorization of the academy, but in the proliferation of a constellation of students that challenge traditional values, assumptions, and conventions which have long been entrenched in the academy.” See, Laura Rendon, “Validating Culturally Diverse Students: Toward a New Model of Learning and Student Development,” *Innovative Higher Education* 19, no. 1 (Fall, 1994): 33.

<sup>132</sup>U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics* (2008) (NCES 2009-020), Chapter 3.

<sup>133</sup>Interestingly enough, the statistics are broken down by race in 2006: 69% of whites, 55% of blacks, and 58% Hispanics enter college directly after high school. See, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2009) *The Condition of Education 2009* (NCES 2009-081), Indicator 24.

<sup>134</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, (NCES 2009-081), Indicator 24.

<sup>135</sup>*Ibid.*, Indicator 22.

<sup>136</sup>Of the bachelor’s degrees conferred, 21.5% were in business, 10% in social sciences, 10% education, and

bachelor's degrees conferred, 21.5% were in business, 10% in social sciences, 10% education, and 7% health sciences. Females currently earn 62% of the bachelor's degrees.<sup>137</sup> From 2006-07, females of each racial/ethnic group generally earned more degrees than their male counterparts for each type of degree.<sup>138</sup> In another recent study, results demonstrate that "American universities are accepting more minorities than ever."<sup>139</sup> Robert Connor sums up the predicament of student development theory and the larger field of higher education:

That is the situation that we face now: a changing set of student concerns and commitments, some 'hunger' and 'thirst' for better ways to approach those questions, but perplexity about how to find those ways. There's a need – and opportunity – for liberal education to respond with imagination and fresh approaches.<sup>140</sup>

One new and imaginative way to approach college student population is practical theology.

## **PART TWO: Practical Theology**

*"True theology is practical.... Speculative theology belongs to the devil in hell."--  
Luther<sup>141</sup>*

Like the field of student development, practical theology is a contested term and has a "fuzzy identity."<sup>142</sup> I often stumble and struggle to explain what practical theology

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7% health sciences. *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup>The statistics go on to say that for "2006-07, females of each racial/ethnic group generally earned more degrees than their male counterparts for each type of degree." *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup>Thomas Evan and Pat Wingert. "Minority Report" *Newsweek* (March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010): 42.

<sup>140</sup>Conner, W. Robert. "The Right Time and Place for Big Questions" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 40 (2006), B9.

<sup>141</sup>Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (Concordia: St. Louis, 1972), 54.

is exactly, to those within theology and those outside, and particularly with people who have no notion of the disciplinary divisions of the academy. Quite simply, practical theology sounds like an oxymoron. Sometimes I get wisecrack reactions, like Serene Jones' conversation with her plumber: What about impractical theology?<sup>143</sup> Sometimes to break the awkward silence, I tell a joke from Joyce Ann Mercer's *Welcoming Children*: A pilot parachutes out into unknown territory and gets hung up in a tree. He asks a passer-by: Where am I? "You are in a tree." The pilot remarks: You must be a theologian. "Why, yes" remarks the passer-by, "how did you know?" The pilot responds: Because what you told me is true and absolutely useless."<sup>144</sup>

In the early 1990s, Alastair Campbell remarked that practical theology has an odd sound – perhaps seeming like a contradiction in terms – which leads him to ask: Is practical theology even possible?<sup>145</sup> In the end, Campbell concedes that practical theology is indeed possible, because "it seems that *some* branch of theology must be concerned with matters which directly affect human well-being in whatever future awaits us."<sup>146</sup> Because of its concerns, particularly with specific social situations and individual initiatives, says Campbell, "practical theology can be expected to be fragmentary and poorly systematized."<sup>147</sup> More recently, others agree that the field of practical theology is a diffuse and fragmented subject area in terms of basic understandings, concepts, and

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<sup>142</sup>Miller-McLemore states "As my own publication attest, I joined the chorus in complaining about the field's multiple personality disorder some years back (BMM, 1998, 176-179) and then later recanted (BMM2001, 185). I recanted because I became convinced that our discipline was no worse off than others. An overly self-critical posture did not serve us well. Many disciplines have fuzzy identities." Miller-McLemore, "Also a Pastoral Theologian," 2.

<sup>143</sup>Jones tells the following story: Al, a contractor working on her bathroom, asked "what are you writing?" Jones replied, "A piece on practical theology." Al then asks: "Do you also write about impractical theology?" See, Serene Jones, *For Life Abundant*, 195.

<sup>144</sup>Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children* (New York: Chalice Press, 2005), 10-11.

<sup>145</sup>Alastair Campbell, "The Nature of Practical Theology," in *Theology and Practice*, ed. Duncan B. Forrester (New York: Epworth Press, 1990.), 78.

<sup>146</sup>Cambell, "The Nature of Practical Theology," 87.

<sup>147</sup>*Ibid.*,. 85.

methods.<sup>148</sup> For example, Stephen Pattison refers to practical theology as existing on the margins of theology, a “marginalized minority discipline within the modern academy” and that “it needs to develop its own identity and purpose.”<sup>149</sup>

Ed Farley wondered if “practical theology” is even a salvageable term.<sup>150</sup> In the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Farley adamantly states that “the situation of practical theology in this last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is clearly one of turmoil, ambiguity, and explorations of new paths.”<sup>151</sup> Even historically, Farley points out that “practical theology too has a long history, but its status as an unwelcome and embarrassing adopted child in some schools and as the queen of the theological sciences in others suggests that all is not quiet on that front.”<sup>152</sup> Don Browning counters this position, and in the same book *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology*, he asks:

Wasn't it the case that practical theology appeared confused and soft-headed because it was indeed the most difficult branch of theology, requiring the widest range of theological skills and judgments, and because the challenging intellectual work needed to clarify its logic and methods had simply not been sufficiently attempted?<sup>153</sup>

It is not that practical theology itself is confused and ambiguous; instead, this is the most difficult branch of theology and requires a wide range of skills that most theologians lack.

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<sup>148</sup>Woodward, James and Stephen Pattison, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), xiv.

<sup>149</sup>Stephen Pattison, *The Challenge of Practical Theology* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), 283-287.

<sup>150</sup>Farley states that he is not ready to abandon the term of practical theology; however, its particular nature and its methods call for continued clarification. See, Edward Farley, “Interpreting Situations” in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, ed., Lewis Mudge and James Poling (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>151</sup>Edward Farley, “Practical Theology, Protestant” in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney Hunter (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 935.

<sup>152</sup>Edward Farley, “Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm” in *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World*, ed. Don Browning (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1983), 21.

<sup>153</sup>Don Browning, *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World*, ed. Don Browning (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1983), 1.

The challenging intellectual work that is needed to clarify the methods of practical theology is a task that Browning has dedicated substantial scholarly work in attempting to codify. Much of Chapter Two will address Browning's work.

In 2008, Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman unfolded a conceptual map of practical theology and elaborated on several connected claims in their essay in *Life Abundant*.<sup>154</sup> In short, practical theology claims the particularity of contexts in order to understand the realities and demands of life; its sustained attention embraces actual and concrete perspectives while holding a storehouse of critical perspectives available for contemporary situations.<sup>155</sup> Practical theological work is distinctive because it is interpretive and employs multiple approaches to discern from actual participants what is happening.<sup>156</sup> Because practical theology is a field where there are many different players spread across a variety of settings, contexts, and challenges, the field can be “persistently fascinating and occasionally frustrating.”<sup>157</sup> Miller-McLemore sums it up quite succinctly: “Practical theology has expansive borders.”<sup>158</sup>

Practical theology does have expansive and ever-expanding borders. Said in another way, practical theology has soluble boundaries, which I believe strengthens the field to dialogue with areas and subjects that appear to be outside of its purview. In order to construct my own definitional stance, I turned to several contemporary examples of work in practical theology. Borrowing words and nuances, my definition becomes a bit

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<sup>154</sup>Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman, “Mapping the Field of Practical Theology,” in *For Life Abundant*, ed. Dorthy Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008),

<sup>155</sup>Cahalan and Nieman, “Mapping the Field of Practical Theology,” 79-81.

<sup>156</sup>In other words, “a further act of interpretation is required in order to clarify what has been encountered and to convey the significant meaning evident in a particular situation.” See, Cahalan and Nieman, “Mapping the Field of Practical Theology,” 82. ”

<sup>157</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>158</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Practical Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, eds. Charles Lippy and Peter Williams (Congressional Quarterly Press, 2010).

lengthy but very descriptive of those contemporary approaches that I look to and admire. I define practical theology as an inherently interdisciplinary quest with postmodern sensibilities that uses “thick description” to examine the messy particularities of everyday lives with excruciating care in order to understand lived subjective experience by beginning with the situation and starting small. Practical theology ultimately seeks to clarify and cultivate *phronesis*; and in order to do this, practical theology should be grounded in critical hermeneutical theory which offers a framework to hold multiple theoretical perspectives from both religious and scientific sources.

Besides offering a contemporary definition of practical theology, it is also important to situate my perspective of practical theology and to acknowledge the history behind the term. In the next section, I trace back to the “first” use of the term practical theology and offer what Gadamer calls “an effective history.” For Gadamer, true understanding begins by first acknowledging the effective history of one’s perspective. Effective history includes the inherited ideals, images, texts, and presuppositions and making these visible and explicit deepens the understanding process. Gadamer’s key point is that “we must become aware of our own embeddedness or historical situatedness and constantly reflect on the ways in which this situatedness influences the way that we interpret our world.”<sup>159</sup>

This section also serves another purpose: In her article on “The Subject and Practice of Pastoral Theology as a Practical Theological Discipline,” Miller-McLemore states:

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<sup>159</sup>Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 111.



anyone who wants to write a comprehensive text in the general area of religion and personality must first address and in some fashion dispel the persistent identity crisis of the field or at least situate one's work in relation to this crisis.<sup>160</sup>

The following section addresses practical theology, including its identity crisis, and firmly situates my work in relation to its history.

### **Practical Theology: Effective History**

According to Ed Farley, the term practical theology was first used by the Dutch theologian Voetius in the sixteenth century to describe a group of studies in moral theology and church government.<sup>161</sup> However, most accounts trace the history of practical theology to Friedrich Schleiermacher in his posthumously published *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*.<sup>162</sup> In this text, Schleiermacher develops his foundational model of theology and his “understanding of theology entails a view of theology as a complex process across various theological fields and sub-disciplines which nevertheless implies the aim of theological unity as a complex process across fields.”<sup>163</sup> These fields are philosophical theology, historical theology and practical theology and the interplay between these three makes theology possible. Schleiermacher invoked the image of tree in order to visualize the process: philosophical theology constitutes the roots, historical theology (including biblical theology) composes the trunk, and practical theology

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<sup>160</sup>Miller-McLemore, “The subject and practice of pastoral theology as a practical theological discipline,” 179.

<sup>161</sup>Farley, “Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm,” 31.

<sup>162</sup>Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*, trans. William Farrer (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock), 1850.

<sup>163</sup>Friedrich Schweitzer, “Which Normativity and What Kind of Empirical Research?” in *Normativity and Empirical Research in Theology* ed. Johannes van der Ven and Michael Scherer-Rath. (The Netherlands: Brill, 2005), 89.

comprises the branches, leaves, and fruit (crown).<sup>164</sup> These three parts are interdependent, yet sequential and dissimilar from one another. This organic metaphor of a tree implied how these three disciplines might be understood to be different, yet interconnected into one grand flowering tree of theology. Here, practical theology is “the crown” of an interrelated process of inquiry. Schleiermacher states, “Practical Theology, therefore, is for those only in whom an *interest in the welfare of the Church*, and a *scientific spirit*, exist in *combination*.”<sup>165</sup>

Yet John Burkhart remarks that Schleiermacher’s text was meant to be an introductory guide for theological students where theology could be envisioned as “not a matter of seeing some special realities, but of seeing some ordinary realities differently.”<sup>166</sup> According to translator William Farrer, Schleiermacher had no intention of founding a school in the ordinary sense of the term.<sup>167</sup> In fact, Schleiermacher states in the preface that, “these few sheets contain the whole of my present views with regard to the study of theology, and that these views, whatever their specific character, may, perhaps, even by their deviation from those which are held by other men, operate in the way of stimulus, and generate something better.”<sup>168</sup> That something better, according to Burkhart, is Schleiermacher’s implicit vision of the imaginative, futurist discipline of practical theology that seeks to understand in both theory and practice, using both the resources of philosophical and historical theology, the ways to overcome the distance

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<sup>164</sup>Polk, John. “Practical Theology” in Donald Mussre and Joseph Price. *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 375.

<sup>165</sup>Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*, 187, original emphasis.

<sup>166</sup>John E. Burkhart, “Schleiermacher’s Vision for Theology,” in *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World*, ed. Don Browning (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1983), 51.

<sup>167</sup>William Farrer, “Translator’s Preface” in Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007), viii.

<sup>168</sup> Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*, 91.

between what human life is and what human life is meant to be.<sup>169</sup> Schleiermacher wanted to emphasize the essential quality among these three dimensions of the theological task, and according to John Polk, he worried he would be mistakenly accused of subordinating the lower two activities to their more lofty partner of practical theology.<sup>170</sup> As it turns out, just the opposite happened.

Regardless of Schleiermacher's aims, by the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century a shift occurred that would shape the future of practical theology: the development of theological studies in the German university of the Enlightenment into the four-fold structure of biblical, dogmatic, church historical, and practical theology.<sup>171</sup> Schleiermacher is responsible for the definitive categorization of theological studies in the academy and for the past 150 years, his legacy has dominated.<sup>172</sup> For example, Thomas Long condemns Schleiermacher as a "villain" who isolated the practical from the philosophical and the historical and who located practical theology in the functionings of clergy only.<sup>173</sup> Others like Friedrich Schweitzer defend Schleiermacher because he was simply trying to publically claim a new place for religion and his real critical thrust was against the dehumanizing influence of rationalist culture.<sup>174</sup> Practical theology comes into existence, says Schweitzer, as an "attempt of overcoming the narrowness of rationalist anthropologies in science and ethics."<sup>175</sup> However, even Burkhart admits that

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<sup>169</sup>Burkhart, "Schleiermacher's Vision for Theology," 56.

<sup>170</sup>John Polk, "Practical Theology," in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, ed. Donald Mussre and Joseph Price (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 375.

<sup>171</sup>Farley, "Practical Theology, Protestant," 935.

<sup>172</sup>Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996), 59, 61.

<sup>173</sup>Thomas G. Long, "Moses, Aaron, and Practical Theology," *Theology Today* 42, no. 1 (April 1985), 2-3.

<sup>174</sup>Friedrich Schweitzer, "Creativity, Imagination and Criticism: The Expressive Dimensions of Practical Theology," in *Creativity, Imagination and Criticism: The Expressive Dimensions of Practical Theology*, ed. Paul and Pamela Couture Ballard (Cardiff Academic Press, 2001), 7-13.

<sup>175</sup>Schweitzer, "Creativity, Imagination and Criticism: The Expressive Dimensions of Practical Theology,"

Schleiermacher's actual discussion of practical theology is not only sketchy, but comes "something of an anticlimax."<sup>176</sup>

Nonetheless, according to Kathleen Cahalan, North American theological schools inherited Schleiermacher's notion that practical theology is an applied discipline that brought knowledge from philosophy and history to practical theology, but not the reverse; in this sense, traffic was decidedly one-way.<sup>177</sup> In this sense, practical theology as a discipline has its roots within the academic settings of universities, seminaries, and colleges.<sup>178</sup> However, for Alastair Campbell, practical theology "far from being the 'crown' of divinity it became its poor relation."<sup>179</sup> Practical theology became the practical application of theological understandings obtained by the other two areas. For Farley, after Schleiermacher's suggested theological system, the field of practical theology was increasingly narrowed: first to a discipline devoted to churchly and ministerial activities and second, to that of a clergy science where the focus was exclusively on the individuality, career and office of the minister.<sup>180</sup> According to Randy Maddox, "that is, practical theology became pastoral theology, a discipline aimed at preparing ministers to handle the technical aspects of their profession."<sup>181</sup> This emphasis on practical theology as the discipline that trains pastoral leadership with the technical skills they might need in

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<sup>176</sup>Burkhart, "Brief Outline of the Study of Theology," 47.

<sup>177</sup>Kathleen Cahalan, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church's Ministry." *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9 (2005): 64.

<sup>178</sup>Woodward and Pattison. *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, 11.

<sup>179</sup>Campbell, "The Nature of Practical Theology," 79.

<sup>180</sup>Farley, "Interpreting Situations," 31-32.

<sup>181</sup>Randy Maddox, "The Recovery of Theology as a Practical Discipline." *Theological Studies* 51 (1990), 659.

parish ministry inevitably led to what Ed Farley has called “the triumph of the clerical paradigm.”<sup>182</sup>

### Clerical Paradigm

For Farley, the influential character of Schleiermacher’s contribution to theology from his seminal work *Brief Outline* is the proposal of a teleological solution to the unity of theology, what Farley calls the “clerical paradigm.”<sup>183</sup> Again, Schleiermacher argued that theology was a legitimate science, like medicine and law, designed for the promotion of social goods.<sup>184</sup> Educating clergy in scholarly work and in theories of preaching is similar to the work done in educating those in law and medicine. In this sense, practical theology became a “culminating cluster of courses directed toward the tasks and functions of ordained ministry.”<sup>185</sup> In a footnote, Farley clarifies that “this expression, *clerical paradigm*, will be used to refer to the prevailing (post-Schleiermacher) Protestant way of understanding the unity of theological education.”<sup>186</sup> In this way, says Cahalan, the discipline of practical theology “and hence theological education, had become consumed by the narrow interest of professional preparation for ordained ministers.”<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>182</sup>Edward Farley, *Theologia: the Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 85-90.

<sup>183</sup>Farley gives two insights, the first is mentioned. The second insight is a proposal of a substantial solution to the unity of theology due to the destructive effect of the collapse of the traditional bases of theology.” See: Farley, *Theologia*, 85.

<sup>184</sup>Farley, *Theologia*, 88 and Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “The ‘Clerical Paradigm:’ A Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness?” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 11, no.1 (2007): 23

<sup>185</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “The ‘Clerical Paradigm:,’ A Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness? *International Journal of Practical Theology* 11, no, 1 (2007), 23.

<sup>186</sup>Farley, *Theologia*, 98, original emphasis.

<sup>187</sup>Kathleen Cahalan, “Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church's Ministry.” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9 (2005): 64.

It becomes clear that although Schleiermacher is hailed as “the father” of practical theology, he also set up the field for a narrow focus that would be played out later in the academy and perhaps, ultimately could have led to its demise. Most scholars “almost universally agreed that previous eras, dating back to Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century, had defined the field too narrowly.”<sup>188</sup> Although Schleiermacher’s intent was for practical theology to be the crowning discipline organizing theology, it instead ends in the “unhappy captivity of practical theology” into a rather narrow vision of clerical education.<sup>189</sup> Farley adds:

This clerical narrowing – or exclusive focus on the individuality, career, and office of the minister – is not simply the ‘clerical paradigm.’ The clerical paradigm is a way of interpreting theology itself as located in theological (seminary) studies, and a way of understanding those studies as united and directed toward clergy tasks and activities.”<sup>190</sup>

Farley proposes the phrase “clerical paradigm” as a way to represent the troubling preoccupation with the learning and teaching of ministerial skills to individual pastors in seminaries. Soon, “the clerical paradigm” became the code word for everything that was wrong with previous understandings of theological education and practical theology.<sup>191</sup> In short, the clerical paradigm defines theological education as simply clergy education.<sup>192</sup>

Others resist and critique the classification of “clerical paradigm.” In particular, Miller-McLemore questions the adequacy of the term and wonders: does it adequately comprehend the problems faced by practical theology and pastoral practitioners?<sup>193</sup>

Instead, she argues that “clerical paradigm” offers a distorted perspective while

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<sup>188</sup>Miller-McLemore, “The ‘Clerical Paradigm,’” 21.

<sup>189</sup>Browning, *Practical Theology*, 4.

<sup>190</sup>Farley, “Interpreting Situations,” 32.

<sup>191</sup>Miller-McLemore, “The ‘Clerical Paradigm,’” 22.

<sup>192</sup>Edward Farley, “Toward Theological Understanding: An Interview with Ed Farley.” *Christian Century* (February 4-11, 1998), 115.

<sup>193</sup>Miller-McLemore, “The ‘Clerical Paradigm,’” 20.

misappropriating blame, leaving many other problems unattended.<sup>194</sup> The term has so heavily dominated the discourse that heavy reliance by scholars using “clerical paradigm” has denigrated the term to simply “pastoral know-how.” Ultimately, for Miller-McLemore, the move to embrace the clerical paradigm is move away from “the messiness of human suffering, the ambiguities and subjectivity of faith claims and spiritual experiences” and instead, “the complaints of Edward Farley and others about the clerical paradigm reflect an elitist academic failure to appreciate and to grapple with the world of ministry and the practice of Christian discipline.”<sup>195</sup>

Nonetheless, practical theology is much more than just simple clergy education and the teaching of ministerial skills to individual pastors in seminaries.<sup>196</sup> In the 1980s, thanks to professional interest and institutional support, scholars began to significantly reposition the field of practical theology as a “respectable academic enterprise.”<sup>197</sup> Calls for recovering an understanding of theology as a practical discipline have been increasingly common in the past twenty years.<sup>198</sup> Miller-McLemore states:

Practical theology has attracted wide attention in recent years through fresh publications, renewed academic societies, new graduate programs, and interest in lived theology among those outside the academy.<sup>199</sup>

For Eileen Campbell-Reed the field of practical theology has undergone revitalization and gained clarity in purpose during the last couple of decades. This renewed clarity has

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<sup>194</sup>*Ibid.*, 20. Clerical paradigm bmm

<sup>195</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Feminist Theory in Pastoral Theology,” in *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 93.

<sup>196</sup>Miller-McLemore, “Feminist Theory in Pastoral Theology,” 93.

<sup>197</sup>Miller-McLemore specifically reference a prime example of a text that sought to re-position the field is Don Browning’s *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1983.) This volume includes essays by Edward Farley, James Fowler, and David Tracy to name a few. See, Miller-McLemore “The ‘Clerical Paradigm,’” 21.

<sup>198</sup>Randy Maddox, “The Recovery of Theology as a Practical Discipline.” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 650.

<sup>199</sup>Miller-McLemore, “Practical Theology,” 2.

come, in part, due the need to understand situations, problems, and practices in church and society.<sup>200</sup> It is to this renewed focus on practical theology that I now turn. In many respects, I see these contemporary perspectives as attempts towards “shaking the tree” of practical theology in order to reap more of its fruit.

### **Shaking the Tree: Practical Theology 1980s-2010**

In the 1980s a wave of re-conceptualization occurred regarding the nature of practical theology, initiated primarily by discussions at the University of Chicago.<sup>201</sup> Part of the intellectual heritage of the field of practical theology is due, in part, to the “Chicago school.”<sup>202</sup> Miller-McLemore points out that Tillich had a fundamental impact on the field as early as the 1950s and 60s; Tillich was also influential on his colleague Seward Hiltner. Hiltner had Browning as a student; Browning had both Miller-McLemore, Kathleen Cahalan, and Pamela Couture as students.<sup>203</sup> Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra point out that the academic discipline of practical theology has blossomed over the past thirty years.<sup>204</sup> They cite a generation of path-breaking work in the 1980s in the practical theology beginning with Don Browning, Ed Farley, Lewis Mudge, James

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<sup>200</sup>Campbell-Reed, “Anatomy of a Schism,” 30.

<sup>201</sup>Polk, “Practical Theology,” 376.

<sup>202</sup>Miller-McLemore is not referencing the University of Chicago’s mid-century emphasis on process philosophy or its earlier 1890’s concentration on pragmatism. It simply refers to the field’s influence by several Chicago scholars: Tillich, Tracy, Ricoeur, Browning, James Gustafson, Couture, Gay, for example. See, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Pastoral Theology and Public Theology: Developments in the U.S.” in *Pathways to the Public Square: Practical Theology in the Age of Pluralism, Volume One*, eds. Elaine Graham and Anna Rowlands (London: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 99.

<sup>203</sup>Miller-McLemore, “Pastoral Theology and Public Theology,” 99.

<sup>204</sup>Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, *For Life Abundant* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 4.



Poling, and Barbara Wheeler.<sup>205</sup> These “path breakers” have led to the present time which is a time of great creativity within the theological movement of practical theology. Also notable was the formation of The Association of Practical Theology (APT) in 1984, partially under the influence of Don Browning. The self-stated purpose of the APT is to promote critical discourse that integrates theological reflection and practice. More specifically, the APT “was sparked by the investigation of practical theology as an integrative hermeneutical endeavor at the heart of theological education, characterizing not only the ministerial sub-disciplines but also a manner and method of engaged reflection.”<sup>206</sup> The APT website currently claims the leadership of Dorothy Bass, Kathleen Cahalan, and Joyce Ann Mercer in their executive committee.

Because of the renewed interest in practical theology, the focus and nature of practical theology has changed dramatically.<sup>207</sup> Practical theology is no longer simply the discipline concerned with applying doctrine or the implementation of congregational polity and ministry. Instead, according to Miller-McLemore, the term practical theology gets used in at least four different ways:

It refers to an *activity* of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday, a *curricular area* in theological education focused on ministerial practice, an *approach* to theology used by religious leaders and by teachers and

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<sup>205</sup> Specifically, the authors refer to the following works: Browning, Don S. *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983; Farley, Edward. *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983; Mudge, Lewis S. and James N Poling, eds., *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987; Wheeler, Barbara G and Edward Farley, eds., *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.

<sup>206</sup> Association of Practical Theology website, accessed July 2010, [www.practicaltheology.org](http://www.practicaltheology.org)

<sup>207</sup> Kathleen Cahalan points out that “The decline in mainline Protestantism has been a major impetus for the revitalization of the field of practical theology in North American theological education since the 1980s.” This decline is both internal (in terms of size of congregations and denominations) and external (in terms of the church’s influence on social issues). These concerns and others have helped to renew interest in practical theology to help with this decline and as a way to answer the call for change in mainline Protestant denominations. See: Cahalan, Kathleen. “Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church’s Ministry.” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9 (2005): 63-64.

students across the curriculum, and an *academic discipline* pursued by a smaller subset of scholars to sustain these three enterprises.<sup>208</sup>

As an academic discipline, practical theologians assume a number of tasks. They explore through descriptive study “using secular sources, such as the social sciences and literature, in addition to scripture, history, and doctrine” and seek methods “such as ethnography, narrative theory, case study, or the hermeneutical circle of description, interpretation, and response.”<sup>209</sup> Miller-McLemore states: “They study patterns of integration, formation, and transformation in theological education and vocational development.”<sup>210</sup> “They often devote more attention to concrete topics (important to the teleological practical theology discussed above) such as mental illness, children, poverty, and social policy, than to disciplinary issues in practical theology.”<sup>211</sup>

This devotion to concrete topics is evident in the next practical theologians I cover. For example, Joyce Ann Mercer’s book *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*, takes on the topic of children and childhood. Mercer conceptualizes practical theology as a constructive and imaginary activity that takes place in critical relationship to available resources and out of which emancipatory practices can come.<sup>212</sup> Mercer contends that doing this kind of theology is a bit like putting together a wooden puzzle that is missing some pieces – sometimes new pieces might have to be constructed in order to complete the puzzle; therefore, practical theology is necessarily constructive. Mercer admits that she is “starting small” in her construction of feminist

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<sup>208</sup>Miller-McLemore, “Practical Theology,” 6.

<sup>209</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>210</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>212</sup>Miller-McLemore, in her foreword to Mercer’s book, comments that one of Mercer’s many contributions is a demonstration of an “exposition of good practical theology.” Miller-McLemore comments that Mercer brings immense resources to the task which compels her orientation as a practical theologian to “start small.” See, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Foreword,” in Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (New York: Chalice Press, 2005), vii-viii and 6.

practical theology of childhood and develops it in two ways. First, to “start small” means to begin with the lives and situations of actual human beings. Mercer states: “‘starting small’ means starting with the lives and stories of some of the particular children who inform my thinking and action and with whom this theology is ultimately concerned.”<sup>213</sup> Second, to “start small” also refers to her own particular writing perspective, which is not a “God’s eye view,” but rather a very small, contextual view that is distinctly shaped by Mercer’s own social location and her own choice of lenses with which to view the lives and stories of children.

Mercer’s construction and use of an interpretive lens is significant because this dissertation also seeks to construct lenses with which to view the subject matter.<sup>214</sup> Mercer’s “lens comes from the vantage point of feminist practical theology and takes on its critical principle from the liberation, thriving, and well-being of all children.”<sup>215</sup> In this way, practical theology takes seriously contextual views and is explicit about how the subject matter is viewed. Although Mercer jokes that “practical theology” might be understood as an oxymoron, its real work is to offer descriptions of particular contexts of human experience in relation to actual encounters with people and communities.<sup>216</sup> Practical theology is “highly interdisciplinary” and offers the mutual engagement of theory and practice for the sake of emancipatory action in the world through strategies and tactics of transformation; it is “a way of doing theology that takes seriously local

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<sup>213</sup>Mercer states that her work on the “Children in Congregations Project” was an important connection for learning about the lives and hearing the stories of particular children. See, Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 6.

<sup>214</sup>Mercer lays out the basic framework of her practical theological method which she describes as a movement between three primary activities: 1) engagement with and description of a particular context; 2) engagement with multiple and interdisciplinary resources; and 3) the construction and engagement of strategies and tactics of action that can participate in God’s transforming work. See, Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 36-7.

<sup>215</sup>Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 5.

<sup>216</sup>*Ibid.*, 10-11.

contexts and practices and the everyday lives of persons in those contexts.”<sup>217</sup> In fact, Mercer states: “Practical theology is not hostile to theoretical complexity. Rather, it is a way of doing theology that takes seriously local contexts and practices and the everyday lives of persons in those context.”<sup>218</sup> In sum, Mercer states that practical theology is a constructive and imaginary activity that is highly interdisciplinary and “starts small;” furthermore, in its aim of offering descriptions of particular contexts of human experience, practical theology isn’t afraid or hostile towards theoretical complexity.

Another example is Pamela Couture’s *Blessed Are the Poor? Women’s Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology*. Couture begins her exposition into practical theology by stating that most practical theology begins with a “thick description” of the situation.<sup>219</sup> She states: “Formally, a ‘thick description’ refers to multi-layered ways of thinking about practices, situations, or habits.”<sup>220</sup> Because situations are multifaceted and complicated, it is important to incorporate a variety of perspectives – sociological, psychological, economic and cultural analysis – in order to explicate the problem and give eventual suggestions for its renewal.<sup>221</sup> Couture contends that because of the multifaceted dimension of situations, practical theological methods are necessarily fluid and dependent upon the situation being analyzed.<sup>222</sup> Practical theology has “developed a dialogue between theology and the sciences, especially psychology, sociology,

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<sup>217</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>218</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>219</sup>Pamela Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor? Women’s Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 23.

<sup>220</sup>Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor?*, 23.

<sup>221</sup>The specific problem that Couture addresses is the dynamics of poverty of women and children.

<sup>222</sup>Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor?*, 185.

anthropology, biology, and economics.”<sup>223</sup> Because situations are multi-faceted and complicated, other disciplines must be called into the conversation for Couture.

Rebecca Chopp says the practical theological work of Couture contributes methodologically to the field of practical theology by “daring to cross disciplinary lines” and offering a model that blends reflection on popular culture together with theoretical analysis.<sup>224</sup> This daring to cross disciplinary lines also reflects a subtle critique of the rigidity of scientific paradigms as being objective and the “only” way to analyze particular situations. Couture states that “scientific authority has become scientific tyranny.”<sup>225</sup> To guard against such tyranny, Couture suggests “‘practical knowing,’ which sifts social scientific data through the sieve of our religious, political, and philosophic cultural traditions and vice versa, helps the average citizen make informed decisions.”<sup>226</sup>

Couture continues:

Practical theology is informed by practical knowing. As a theological discipline, practical theology represents a more formalized version of the thinking process through which an average person attempts to bring social science, cultural traditions, and religious convictions into dialogue with one another.<sup>227</sup>

According to Miller McLemore, *Blessed Are the Poor?* “reaps the benefits of placing this kind of policy deliberation within the context of solid practical theological reflection.”<sup>228</sup>

Again, Couture’s approach is noted for crossing disciplinary lines and by offering a model based on methods that are fluid and flexible. Furthermore, Couture adds: “I was struck how often practical theologians agreed that no one method would fit all times, all

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<sup>223</sup>Pamela Couture, “Practical Theology at Saint Paul School of Theology.” *Religious Studies News* RSN, ii.

<sup>224</sup>Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor?*, 15.

<sup>225</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>226</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>227</sup>Couture adds that, in this sense, theology “refers to claims about the divine-human and human-human relationships which express our ultimate commitments; as such, theology can be understood as explicit theological reflection.” Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor?*, 23.

<sup>228</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, review of *Blessed Are the Poor?* by Pamela Couture, *The Journal of Religion* (1993), 110.

places, and all situations.”<sup>229</sup> In the end, Couture states that “practical theology aims to produce recommendations for transformative practice.”<sup>230</sup> And, in order to do this, practical theology must be both critical and creative.<sup>231</sup>

This careful attention to the methods and conversation partners of practical theology is echoed by Rebecca Chopp in *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education*. For Chopp, we need methods and ideas that will investigate the concrete data of our experiences in order to identify the struggles and desires for transformation that exist.<sup>232</sup> She pushes for new approaches of practical methods that can investigate contemporary reality – “methods that can anticipate possibilities for transformation in our midst.”<sup>233</sup> Chopp looks to critical theories for an answer, those theories that are historically and socially contextual. Critical theory does not attempt to make universal arguments or constructs to hold for all times and places; instead, a critical theory “arises in a specific situation and, using the symbols, images, and concepts involved in that situation, attempts to move against distortion and dysfunction and to shape new forms of flourishing.”<sup>234</sup> In order to develop a “contextual critical method,” Chopp states that investigation must move from the abstract and instead, begin with the practical reality of the situation. For Chopp, all knowledge has a praxis orientation because knowledge begins in concrete human situations and drives toward transformation of concrete realities.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>229</sup>Couture, “Practical Theology at Saint Paul School of Theology,” ii.

<sup>230</sup>Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor?*, 24.

<sup>231</sup>Paul Ballard and Pamela Couture, *Creativity, Imagination and Criticism: The Expressive Dimension in Practical Theology* (Cardiff Academic Press, 2001), x.

<sup>232</sup>Rebecca S. Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>233</sup>Chopp, *Saving Work*, 11.

<sup>234</sup>Chopp, *Saving Work*, 12.

<sup>235</sup>Cahalan, “Three Approaches to Practical Theology,” 84.

Kathleen Cahalan echoes this sentiment by advocating that practical theology concentrate on the complex task of interpreting the living texts of human lives that are embodied, community-creating beings.<sup>236</sup> What has been so exciting about current work in practical theology for Cahalan is the way in which “text” has been re-defined: text is now “the living texts of human lives and faith communities.”<sup>237</sup> In this way, the description of human beings is no longer static or essentialist, but instead humans are treated as living, fully-embodied, community-creating beings. But this is no easy task as Cahalan points out, and because of this, practical theology is challenging and difficult work since it takes risks by listening to the critical concerns and practical realities of people living in particular contexts.<sup>238</sup> Furthermore, the field of practical theology can be strengthened by further attention to the philosophical assumptions that informs the particular perspective being used.<sup>239</sup>

Another important point for Cahalan is that practical theology, particularly in the past two decades, is decidedly postmodern.<sup>240</sup> Cahalan defines postmodernity as “the critical engagement with the modern project.”<sup>241</sup> In this postmodern sense, Cahalan defines “practical” as “the everyday realities that are part of constructing lives of

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<sup>236</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>237</sup>Or, another way to phrase this is how Bonnie Miller-McLemore has defined the focus of pastoral and practical theology: towards living human documents and the living human web. Miller McLemore has expanded the metaphor of the “living human web” and is referenced by others, see: Graham, L. 1992, Patton, 1993, Gill-Austern, 1995, Couture, 1996 and see also, Miller-McLemore (1993, 1996, 1999).

<sup>238</sup>Cahalan, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology," 93.

<sup>239</sup>*Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>240</sup>Since Farley’s inception of the “clerical paradigm” in the 1980s, Cahalan notes in her article three distinct postmodern approaches to practical theology that have emerged in the past twenty years. These three approaches are Don Browning (characterized as a late modern position), Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra (characterized as a countermodern position), and Rebecca Chopp as an example of liberation, feminist, and contextual theologies (characterized as a radical postmodern position) See: Cahalan, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology," 63-94.

<sup>241</sup>Most simply, postmodernity takes seriously the critiques of the positivistic paradigm. It offers an explicit critique of the modernity and its assumptions. See, Cahalan, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology," 86.

meaning and purpose, what is actually possible given the situation, not what the ideal might be if all contingencies were removed.”<sup>242</sup> For Cahalan, practical theology is a constructive and future-orientated task that is an inherently interdisciplinary quest with postmodern sensibilities.<sup>243</sup> Postmodernity offers an explicit critique of modernity and the positivistic paradigm, including notions of the autonomous self, empiricism, rationality, objectivity, and overall rejects any notions of universal truths.<sup>244</sup> Cahalan adds that the postmodern project is ultimately concerned with constructing new understandings using the insights of gender, race, and class.<sup>245</sup>

In an interview in 1998, Ed Farley comments on practical theology’s postmodern sensibilities. For Farley, part of the postmodern epoch is that certain deep cultural values that used to be assumed have now eroded and are not operational in the postmodern environment.<sup>246</sup> He refers to his earlier work and comments that in this continuing climate, he still believes that practical theology should be understood as “the interpretation of situations.”<sup>247</sup> Following Albert North Whitehead, Farley concedes that every living thing exists in situations. Situations are never static and are ever-changing and ever-forming. They can be brief or static, local or global, and can involve individuals, groups, and communities. In brief, “a situation is the way various items,

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<sup>242</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>243</sup>*Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>244</sup>Cahalan adds that the postmodern project is ultimately concerned with constructing new understandings using the insights of gender, race, and class. Cahalan, “Three Approaches to Practical Theology,” 86.

<sup>245</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup>Edward Farley, “Toward Theological Understanding: An Interview with Ed Farley.” *Christian Century*, February 4-11, 1998. P. 113

<sup>247</sup> Farley has written widely and influentially on the nature of theology. For Farley, “Most would agree that theology is an undertaking of interpretation, a hermeneutic of sorts.” (30). See “Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology” in *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church’s Ministry*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003. Reprinted from its original publication in Lewis Mudge and James Poling, eds., *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, 1-26. Also printed in Woodward, James and Stephen Pattison. *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000.



powers, and events in the environment gather together to evoke responses from participants.”<sup>248</sup>

Farley takes an ontological stance toward practical theology by insisting on centering it on the interpretation of situations because “all human beings exist in, act in, and interpret situations.”<sup>249</sup> This interpretive dimension of human existence creates a special hermeneutical task for Farley and “is why interpreting situations can and should be part of a deliberate and self-conscious educational undertaking, part of the church’s lay and clergy education.”<sup>250</sup> However, the field has not been “methodologically self-conscious” about the interpretation of situations.<sup>251</sup> Hence, his self-stated thesis is that “the interpretation of situations should be self-conscious, self-critical, and disciplined.”<sup>252</sup> Farley refers to this as the theological hermeneutic of situations; furthermore, Farley outlines four features or tasks that constitute an example of a theological hermeneutic of situations.<sup>253</sup> In the end, one of Farley’s theses is that “in practical theological hermeneutics the object of interpretation is the situation itself.”<sup>254</sup> Practical theology is a dimension of theology where reflection is directed toward a living situation and requires

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<sup>248</sup> Later, Farley defines a situation as “an aggregate of events in the environment that evokes responses from the participants.” Farley, “Interpreting Situations,” 38, 40.

<sup>249</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>250</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>251</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>252</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>253</sup> First, one must identify the situation and describe its distinctive and constitutive features. Farley refers to this as “reading a situation” where one probes different layers by identifying the genres of things that constitute the situation. Second, because the present is comprised of and structured by “disguised suppressions of the past,” the situations of the past, including tradition, must be explored in order to “bring awareness of what is going on in the present.” Third, one must explore the broader and more enduring situations of context and elucidate on the “the impingement of other situations on the local situation.” The fourth and final aspect of a hermeneutics of situations involves a theological element and theological analysis; Farley highlights the centrality of this step and also describes it as the most complex of all the steps because it tends to highlight the elements of corruption and redemption. Farley sums up this by stating, “The task of a hermeneutic of situations are to uncover the distinctive contents of the situation, probe its repressed past, explore its relation to other situations with which it is intertwined, and confront the situation’s challenge through consideration of corruption and redemption.” Farley, “Interpreting Situations,” 39-43.

<sup>254</sup>*Ibid.*, 43.

involvement, and attention to, the lives and concerns of everyday people. For Farley, theology is a creative and interpretive act that calls for wisdom to assess what is going on and to appraise new possibilities in order to engage everyday existential responses to the world.<sup>255</sup> According to Woodward and Pattison, Farley adheres to the fundamental premise that the “everyday contemporary experience of ordinary people has theological meaning and significance.”<sup>256</sup>

This emphasis on practical theology and the importance of examining particular situations is central to John Swinton and Harriet Mowat. Practical theology seeks to critically examine and explore particular situations, and although it might not be a systematic discipline, it is a rich and diverse discipline that takes human experience seriously.<sup>257</sup> Situations are complex multi-faceted entities which need to be examined with care, rigor and discernment if they are to be effectively understood.<sup>258</sup> And because of the complexity of situations, some researchers in practical theology call for eclectic approaches that are fluid and flexible and not bound by one particular model.<sup>259</sup> Swinton and Mowat sum up their position by stating that practical theology “seeks to explore the complex dynamics of particular situations in order to enable the complex dynamics of particular situations in order to enable the development of a transformative and illuminating understanding of what is going on within these situations.”<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>255</sup>Farley, “Toward Theological Understanding: An Interview with Ed Farley,” 113.

<sup>256</sup> Woodward, James and Stephen Pattison. “Introduction” to Farley’s “Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology. *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000).

<sup>257</sup>John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 13.

<sup>258</sup>Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 15.

<sup>259</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>260</sup>*Ibid.*, v.

Woodward and Pattison describe practical theology as a transformational activity that takes experience seriously and can incorporate artistic and imaginative ways of thinking about situations. It is to be confessional and honest, in that “it is committed to looking at the world through the ‘lenses’ of a particular perspective or inhabited worldview.”<sup>261</sup> Practical theology is unsystematic, truthful, committed, contextual and situationally related; it is interdisciplinary, dialectical, reflectively based, and constructive. Practical theological activity is in itself transformative and the process itself often offers unexpectedly different ways of thinking about and understanding phenomena and situations. Although contributions in practical theology are modest and limited, the hope is that new understandings can ultimately be transformative for individuals and communities, both in theory and practice.<sup>262</sup>

To summarize all these authors, practical theology is a creative and critical approach that seeks to use multiple resources and thick description to start small with the interpretation of the situation. Practical theology crosses disciplinary lines and its postmodern sensibilities call for it to be situationally conscious and contextually informed. Careful attention is made to the issues of methodology, and eclectic approaches are encouraged and expected. All the theologians discussed would agree that practical theology begins with the interpretation of the situation. Experience, social location, and context are taken seriously in the attempt to offer a thick description of the situation. Practical theology is a constructive and imaginary activity that “starts small” and is highly interdisciplinary, drawing from a variety of disciplines and delving into theoretical complexity. Methods must be fluid and flexible as well as critical; furthermore, the field

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<sup>261</sup> Woodward Pattison, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, 13.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

could be strengthened by further attention to the philosophical assumptions of particular methods. All would also agree that practical theology is decidedly postmodern.

From these approaches, I tried to narrow down and distill a definition, which I stated earlier as:

Practical theology is an inherently interdisciplinary quest with postmodern sensibilities that uses “thick description” to examine the messy particularities of everyday lives with excruciating care in order to understand lived subjective experience by beginning with the situation and starting small. Practical theology ultimately seeks to clarify and cultivate *phronesis*; and in order to do this, practical theology should be grounded in critical hermeneutical theory which offers a framework to hold multiple theoretical perspectives from both religious and scientific sources.

The remaining chapter focuses specifically on the second part of my definition, when I mention critical hermeneutical theory and practical theology. Chapter Two expands on critical hermeneutical theory as a method and a methodology.

### **Hermeneutical Approaches**

Again, Farley calls for the field of practical theology to become “methodologically self-conscious” in terms of interpreting situations and “the interpretation of situations should be self-conscious, self-critical, and disciplined.”<sup>263</sup> Because practical theology focuses its reflection toward the living situation and requires involvement, and attention to, the lives and concerns of everyday people, one must be clear about methodology; for Farley, this is the theological hermeneutic of situations. However, Don Browning resonates this hermeneutic perspective and offers an expanded and very thorough methodological account of what he calls critical hermeneutical theory.

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<sup>263</sup>Farley, “Interpreting Situations,” 37.

Browning both defines and argues for the epistemological grounds of a critical practical theology which he bases on the hermeneutical theories of Gadamer and Ricoeur. For Browning, a critical practical theology and critical hermeneutics are nearly identical. And, Browning argues, the field of practical theology can maintain its identity and fulfill its potential only by recognizing itself as an exercise in critical hermeneutics; in fact, its success is dependent on grounding itself in critical hermeneutical theory.<sup>264</sup> In order to do this, practical theology as a discipline “should both describe their effective histories and use scientific distancing” to identify and describe situations; these are the basic movements of critical hermeneutical theory which will be expanded upon in the following chapter.<sup>265</sup>

Farley and Browning are not alone in their insistence that the field of practical theology ground itself in hermeneutical theory. First, for David Tracy, theology is best understood as reflection upon the meanings present in common human experience and the meanings present in the Christian traditions.<sup>266</sup> He affirms two sources of theology – common human experience and Christian texts – that should be investigated using hermeneutical approaches. Tracy argues that theology must use a hermeneutic of both retrieval and suspicion since the modern situation is ambiguous and never pure.<sup>267</sup> Tracy presents a hermeneutical understanding of theology, centered on the notion of the classic, which emphasizes interpretation and the necessarily public character of systematic theology. Interpretation is unavoidable for Tracy, because to experience anything is to interpret. Next, Johannes van der Ven insists on the “hermeneutic-communicative

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<sup>264</sup>Browning, *Mapping the Terrain*, 168 and 177.

<sup>265</sup>Browning, *Equality and the Family*, 35.

<sup>266</sup>Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 34.

<sup>267</sup>Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*.

character” of practical theology that begins with situational analysis as the starting point for theological inquiry.<sup>268</sup> One of his basic suppositions is that the hermeneutic-communicative praxis occupies a top position within practical theology and should be envisaged as its basis. Hermeneutic-communicative refers to “the verbal and nonverbal interpretation of written and spoken texts and their verbal and nonverbal communication.”<sup>269</sup> Additionally, Charles Gerkin uses the tools of hermeneutic theory to incorporate both theological and psychological perspectives because both share a common mystery in trying to understand human experience and behavior.<sup>270</sup> For Gerkin, the most basic tools of pastoral counseling are hermeneutical tools – the tools of interpretation. In this way, hermeneutics is “a way of seeing and interpreting the phenomena at hand, and thereby each illuminates or brings forth something that remains hidden when seen from the other perspective.”<sup>271</sup> Finally, Schweitzer argues that practical theology should be seen as a “critical hermeneutics of culture.”<sup>272</sup> He outlines four submovements: the first is a “hermeneutic of openness” in order to deal with plurality of religious expression; the second is a “hermeneutics of suspicion” for critical distinction.

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<sup>268</sup>Van der Ven, Johannes, Hermeneutic-communicative refers to “the verbal and nonverbal interpretation of written and spoken texts and their verbal and nonverbal communication” He spends significant time discussing the limits, aspects, and conflict involved in communication and the normative principles of the hermeneutic-communicative praxis. Van der Ven, Johannes, *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach*, (Peeters Publisher, 1998), 41.

<sup>269</sup>Van der Ven, *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach*, 41.

<sup>270</sup>For Gerkin, a hermeneutical perspective “sees all human language systems, including both theology and psychology, as efforts to penetrate the mystery of what is beyond human understanding and make sense of it.” See Charles Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-visioning Pastoral Care in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 19

<sup>271</sup>Gerkin, *Living Human Document*, 21.

<sup>272</sup> Under this heading, he briefly outlines four submovements that he describes by loosely referring to the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. The first is a “hermeneutic of openness” in order to deal with plurality of religious expression; the second is a “hermeneutics of suspicion” for critical distinction. Third comes a “hermeneutic of creativity and imagination” and the fourth is a “hermeneutic of renewal and completion.” However, very brief descriptions are given of each hermeneutic and he also ends his essays without any explanation of how these hermeneutics might be used or the methodology involved. Schweitzer, Frederick. “Creativity, Imagination and Criticism: The Expressive Dimensions of Practical Theology.” In *Creativity, Imagination and Criticism: The Expressive Dimensions of Practical Theology*, by Paul and Pamela Couture Ballard, 3-23. Cardiff Academic Press, 2001, pps. 13-14

Third comes a “hermeneutic of creativity and imagination” and the fourth is a “hermeneutic of renewal and completion.”<sup>273</sup> Overall, it is clear that for Schweitzer, Tracy, Van der Ven, Gerkin, Farley, and Browning, the field of practical theology is best ordered if seen as an expression of critical hermeneutics. Chapter Two concentrates on how critical hermeneutical theory offers both a method and methodology for interpreting data using multiple theoretical perspectives.

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<sup>273</sup> Schweitzer, Frederick. “Creativity, Imagination and Criticism,” 13-14.

## CHAPTER II

### CRITICAL HERMENEUTICAL METHODOLOGY

*Hermeneutics is the attempt to find a coherent pattern, post facto.* – Volney Gay

A principle source of method in practical theology and in the wider arena of religion and psychological studies is the critical correlational methodology. Bonnie Miller-McLemore says, “Correlation, as understood as a fluid dialectic between human situation and religious message, emerged as an influential method in support of this claim and became a staple in the growth of practical theology.”<sup>274</sup> It should be noted that although the method of correlation is often cited as a principle methodology within practical theology, not all within practical theology embrace it.<sup>275</sup> Rebecca Chopp states

that the method of correlation as the route for practical theology is nothing more than a new ‘play’ on the old tag game of liberal, progressive theology that posits an underlying unity between individuals and tradition, and believes that it can reconcile, through understanding, human experience to reality.<sup>276</sup>

Further, Chopp argues that the method of correlation must be questioned and held up for critical reflection. She contends that the “revised method of correlation” has certain possibilities, but also has certain limits. Instead, Chopp looks to liberation perspectives to critique the “liberal-revisionist theologians” for preferencing bourgeois society and the nonbeliever over and against the large majority of the global population who live in

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<sup>274</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Practical Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, eds. Charles Lippy and Peter Williams (Congressional Quarterly Press, 2010).

<sup>275</sup> Rebecca Chopp, “Practical Theology and Liberation,” in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, ed. Lewis Mudge and James Poling (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 120-136.

<sup>276</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.



poverty.<sup>277</sup> Because of this and other reasons, Chopp suggests “that given our own historical situation of global crisis, the method of correlation may prove too limited to address the religious, human, practical needs of our age.”<sup>278</sup>

Regardless of this foundational criticism, the correlational method was principally developed by Paul Tillich. Tillich’s method of correlation starts with the questions generated by human interpretations of the problems of existence with answers supplied by the Christian message. Human culture is the medium of questions and theology is the source of answers. David Tracy critiques and expands upon Tillich’s correlational method. Tracy critiques it because Tillich’s model prioritizes revelation as the source of answers, not of questions, and fails to take the human situation seriously. Tracy states: “The fact is that Tillich’s method does not call for a critical correlation of the results of one’s investigations of the situation and the message.”<sup>279</sup> The result is one-way traffic, where all answers come from the Christian tradition. Instead Tracy expands upon Tillich by suggesting a *revised* correlational method where questions and answers from both sources of human experience and Christian tradition are correlated in a way that is both mutually illuminating and mutually critical. The method of revised correlation takes the contemporary situation seriously, not just as the source of questions to be answered by theology, but also as potential generators of alternative answers for the Christian

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<sup>277</sup>Chopp looks to liberation perspectives that suggest that “liberal-revisionist theology and the modern church are manifestations of their culture, twin manifestations that disclose the constitution of Christianity in bourgeois society as individualistic, existentialistic, and private.” She adds: “While liberal-revisionist theologians respond to the theoretical challenges of the nonbelievers among the small minority of the world’s population who control the wealth and resources in history, liberation theologians respond to the practical challenge of the large majority of global residents who control neither their victimization nor their survival.” *Ibid.*, 125, 128.

<sup>278</sup>Chopp argues that one of the problems of a liberal-revisionist approach of a revised critical correlational method “lie in the dominance, and even the hegemony, of theory over praxis. Liberation theology argues for a practical correlation, which uses theories only as ways to solve problems; in this model theories can be adopted, argued, discarded in relation to the material and not vice versa.” *Ibid.*, 131, 136.

<sup>279</sup>David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 46.

tradition. Theology is best understood as the reflection upon both the meanings disclosed in common human experience and the meanings disclosed in the primary texts of the Christian tradition.

Don Browning also suggests that practical theology adopt the revised correlational method for doing practical theology. A revised correlational method in practical theology:

attempts to correlate critically those questions and answers that are derived from various interpretations of the central Christian witness with those questions and answers that are implicit in various interpretations of ordinary human experience.<sup>280</sup>

In *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, Browning states that the revised correlational approach is “the approach I will champion in the rest of this book.”<sup>281</sup> Despite the “clumsiness of the phrase” Browning advocates for “a critical correlational approach to fundamental practical theology.”<sup>282</sup> He builds on Tracy’s approach and suggests a revised correlational fundamental practical theology: “the critical reflection on the church’s dialogue with Christian sources and other communities with the aim of guiding its action towards social and individual transformation.”<sup>283</sup> This revised correlational fundamental practical theology, as an inclusive term for the theological task, has within it the subspecialties of descriptive theology, historical theology, systematic theology and strategic practical theology.<sup>284</sup> For Browning, these four steps make up a full hermeneutic circle.

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<sup>280</sup>Don Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 50.

<sup>281</sup>Browning actually states it as “a critical hermeneutical or revised correlational approach.” *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 33.

<sup>282</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 44.

<sup>283</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>284</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

## Step One: Descriptive Theology

As I stated in my introduction, of these four steps I will attempt only one: descriptive theology. For Browning, descriptive theology is interested in all situations that are part of life.<sup>285</sup> Descriptive theology helps grasp the contextual richness of the situation and makes a place for the special foci of the human sciences.<sup>286</sup> “These sciences are treated as moments within a larger structure of understanding conceived as dialogue and understanding.”<sup>287</sup> For Browning, description within a hermeneutical model of understanding is never neutral or objective: “Total descriptive objectivity is a myth. Honesty rather than objectivity should be the major goal, and self-awareness on the part of the person doing the description is the only objectivity achievable.”<sup>288</sup> Browning states: “Descriptive theology is interested in primarily describing the potential dialogue between the narrative tradition of the researcher and the narrative tradition of the person or group being studied.”<sup>289</sup>

Descriptive theology should advance multidimensional descriptions of situations. The purpose of “descriptive theology’s job of describing situations” is to help understand how communities and persons exercise *phronesis* through discerning the thickness of meaning within a situation. “Descriptive theology attempts this deep understanding of others, their situations, and their identities.”<sup>290</sup> Furthermore, the primary task of

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<sup>285</sup>Don Browning, “Congregational Studies as Practical Theology,” in *American Congregations: Volume 2 New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James Wind and James Lewis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 198.

<sup>286</sup>Browning, *American Congregations*, 199-200.

<sup>287</sup>*Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>288</sup>*Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>289</sup>*Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>290</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 84.

descriptive theology is to render the “thick description” of situations.<sup>291</sup> Browning sums it up: “Descriptive theology aims for thick description of situations.”<sup>292</sup>

### **Practical Theology and Thick Description**

The phrase “thick description” is often attributed to the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz. In his text *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz credits the phrase to Gilbert Ryle.<sup>293</sup> According to Geertz, Ryle makes a distinction between “thin” and “thick” description in reference to ethnographic work.<sup>294</sup> Impressed by Ryle’s pursuit of multiple layers of meaning, Geertz saw this as a breakthrough in anthropology. Quite simply, for Geertz, “the point for now is only that ethnography is thick description.”<sup>295</sup> Later in his chapter “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” Geertz outlines three characteristics of ethnographic “thick” description: “it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the ‘said’ of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix in perusable terms.”<sup>296</sup> According to Keith Windschuttle, a writer on Geertz, the purpose of thick description was twofold: “to make his readers aware there

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<sup>291</sup>Browning, *American Congregations*, 206.

<sup>292</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 94.

<sup>293</sup>Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, ed. Clifford Geertz (Basic Books: New York, 1973), 6.

<sup>294</sup>According to Windschuttle, Ryle argued that human gestures often had multiple layers of meaning that could be described only by using different symbols from within the culture. Keith Windschuttle, “The ethnocentrism of Clifford Geertz.” *The New Criterion Observer* (October 2002), 7.

<sup>295</sup>Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 10-11.

<sup>296</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

were other ways of thinking besides their own, and to make them more aware of the exact quality of their own mentalities.”<sup>297</sup> For anthropologist Jason Springs:

Thick description describes and re-describes. The results have their value on the basis of a pragmatic criterion – how they push the discussion forward, widen possibilities of communication, open new ways of seeing and thinking, and draw previously unknown (and ostensibly excluded) voices and interlocutors into a widening, proliferating, and (ideally) increasingly self-critical and self-reflective range of conversations.”<sup>298</sup>

In sum, thick description – as articulated by scholars in anthropology – recognizes the existence of multiple layers of interpretive meaning; furthermore, doing “thick description” expands and widens the perspective of the researcher.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore contends that the methods of practical and pastoral theology have demonstrated the value of “thick description” as a powerful starting point for all fields of theological study as well. Miller-McLemore states, “‘Thick description’ means seeking a multilayered analysis of human strife, including detailed, intricately woven, ‘experience-near’ rather than ‘experience-distant’ readings of the ‘living human document.’”<sup>299</sup> Pamela Couture states that most practical theology begins with a “thick description” of the situation.<sup>300</sup> She states: “Formally, a ‘thick description’ refers to multi-layered ways of thinking about practices, situations, or habits.”<sup>301</sup> Because situations are multifaceted and complicated, it is important for Couture to incorporate a variety of perspectives – sociological, psychological, economic and cultural analysis – in

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<sup>297</sup>Windschuttle, “The ethnocentrism of Clifford Geertz,” 7.

<sup>298</sup> Springs, Jason A. “What Cultural Theorists of Religion Have to Learn from Wittgenstein; Or, How to Read Geertz as a Practice Theorist” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. December 2008, Vol. 76, No. 4, p 952.

<sup>299</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “The Living Human Web: Pastoral Theology at the Turn of the Century,” in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed., Jeanne Stephenson Moessner (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 24.

<sup>300</sup>Pamela Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor? Women's Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 23.

<sup>301</sup> Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor?*, 23.

order to explicate the problem and give eventual suggestions for its renewal.<sup>302</sup> Thick description is an approach used in practical theology and in this dissertation. The focus of the next section is on the particular issues surrounding methodology and methods, particularly in regards to critical hermeneutical theory.

## Methodology

John Swinton and Harriet Mowat state that there is a common tendency to use the terms “methods” and “methodology” as if they were synonymous and interchangeable, when in fact, they are not. “Methodology” has to do with the overall approach to the field and encompasses a variety of methods that have in common particular ontological and epistemological assumptions.<sup>303</sup> On the other hand, “methods” refers to the specific techniques and systematic procedures that are used for data collection and analysis. Methods are the specific routes taken to accomplish a particular task. Method, according to Evelyn Whitehead and James Whitehead, describes the dynamic movement of reflection.<sup>304</sup> In this sense, a method is a procedure chosen and carried out within a particular set of methodological assumptions about reality and truth.<sup>305</sup> Said in another way, a methodology is comprised of set of methods, all of which share underlying principles, rules, and commitments.

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<sup>302</sup> The specific problem that Couture addresses is the dynamics of poverty of women and children.

<sup>303</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 74-5.

<sup>304</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead claim that Christians today need a method that is portable, performable, and communal; it must also be based on the tenets of genuine conversation. James D. Whitehead and Evelyn E. Whitehead, *Method In Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 3.

<sup>305</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 74.

However, for Swinton and Mowat, hermeneutic theory is unique in that it offers the philosophical foundations of a methodology, while also existing as a method for researchers. Hermeneutic theory is distinctive because it is *both* a methodology *and* a method of textual interpretation.<sup>306</sup> As a methodology, hermeneutic theory is based on a particular epistemological and ontological framework within which the process of this research takes place. But also, hermeneutical theory, and more specifically critical hermeneutical theory, can operate as a method by providing concepts to use as tools for engagement. In this way, hermeneutic theory “sits on an interesting borderline between method and methodology.”<sup>307</sup>

### **Hermeneutics: Interpreting Interpretive Theory**

Hermeneutics refers to theories of interpretation; whereas, a hermeneutic is a particular theory of interpretation used to uncover meaning. The etymology of the word originates with Hermes, the messenger of the Greek gods, who relayed messages between the gods and mortals and translated between different parties what appeared unintelligible.<sup>308</sup> Hermeneutics, although noted for its “definitional vagueness,” has its origins in the careful textual analysis of sacred texts.<sup>309</sup> Hermeneutics often refers to

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<sup>306</sup>*Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>307</sup>Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 105.

<sup>308</sup>Palmer states, “Significantly, Hermes is associated with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence can grasp. The various forms of the word suggest the process of bringing a thing or situation from unintelligibility to understanding. The Greeks credited Hermes with the discovery of language and writing – the tools which human understanding employs to grasp meaning and convey it to others.” Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 13-14. See also Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids (MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 25-6, 87-88, 118-21.

<sup>309</sup>Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy*

biblical interpretation and the interpretation of texts with the help of rhetorical principles.<sup>310</sup> Under the purview of scholars like Schleiermacher, hermeneutics developed into an encompassing theory of textual interpretation which included methodological rules for good interpretive practice.<sup>311</sup> Browning states: “This movement was concerned with questions about the appropriate interpretation of texts.”<sup>312</sup> Browning charts the hermeneutical movement that began with Schleiermacher and further developed philosophically by Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur. According to Browning their writings responded to the growing hegemony and popularity of positivistic perspectives as a discipline in the humanities.<sup>313</sup> Richard Bernstein observes that contemporary hermeneutic theory blossomed during a time of increasing doubts about logical positivism; therefore, hermeneutic theory directly challenges the claim that the natural sciences alone can provide genuine knowledge.<sup>314</sup> As a corrective, hermeneutic theory offers both a method and methodology of careful textual analysis that rejects positivistic approaches and instead, offers a vision of reality based on a plurality of viable interpretations.

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(New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), 22.

<sup>310</sup>Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 1985), 1.

<sup>311</sup>Bernstein states that Schleiermacher is generally understood to be the first to argue for the general significance of hermeneutics and drew upon these resources as a way to meet the challenge of skepticism about religious understanding, those “cultured despisers.” Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 112.

<sup>312</sup>Don Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism: The New Conversation on Spirituality, Theology, and Psychology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>313</sup>Don Browning, “The past and possible future of religion and psychological studies,” in *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, eds. Diane Jonte-Pace and William B. Parson (New York: Routledge, 2001), 168.

<sup>314</sup>Bernstein goes on to claim: “Every defender of hermeneutics, and more generally the humanistic tradition, has had to confront the persistent claim that it is science and science alone that is the measure of reality, knowledge, and truth”(46). Furthermore, he adds: “There are still many, perhaps the majority of thinkers.... who view hermeneutics as some sort of woolly foreign intrusion to be approached with suspicion”(112). Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 40, 107, 110-114.



## Methodology: Epistemology and Ontological Claims

Hermeneutic theory as a methodology has particular epistemological and ontological claims that must be examined. Epistemology refers to the branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge. In essence, epistemology asks the questions: 1) how do we know what we know? 2) how can we know at all?<sup>315</sup> Browning and other hermeneutic thinkers answer these questions by underscoring the process of understanding as dialogue or conversation. Understanding is always from a particular perspective and is always a matter of interpretation. To answer the question – how do we know what we know – hermeneutic theory posits that we know through our own pre-understandings and prejudices that contextually locate our perspective and guide our interpretive process. Interpretation, bias, and prejudice are crucial to the ways in which human beings encounter the world and the process of understanding and knowing.<sup>316</sup>

Epistemological claims naturally give rise to the question of ontology: what is the nature of existence and the nature of being? For Gadamer, hermeneutics as an act of interpretation goes beyond epistemology and how people can know; hermeneutic theory also represents who people are and their basic nature of being.<sup>317</sup> Most simply, human beings are interpretive creatures. Gadamer advocates for the ontological nature of interpretation, and by clarifying the conditions of understanding, he makes a strong case

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<sup>315</sup>Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 32.

<sup>316</sup>*Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>317</sup>According to Palmer, Gadamer's philosophical effort is to account for understanding as an ontological process of human beings. His central question is: how is understanding possible, not only in the humanities but in the whole of man's experience of the world? Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 164.

for the fundamental nature of human beings as finite and limited creatures who view the world through their prior understandings. Swinton and Mowat add: “In other words, hermeneutics is an ontological rather than merely an epistemological position. We cannot be anything other than interpretive beings.”<sup>318</sup> Bernstein expresses a similar sentiment when he states that hermeneutics is more than just method, but ontological and universal.<sup>319</sup>

For Gadamer, hermeneutics is a fundamental human act and a significant way of being in the world. Through his model of understanding as dialogue or conversation, Gadamer claimed to be uncovering an ontology of understanding fundamental to all disciplines.<sup>320</sup> By stating that all attempts to understand resemble a conversation or dialogue, Gadamer was highlighting the human conditions that make understanding possible – one that takes into consideration human limits, finitude, prior commitments, and prejudices. For Gadamer, these human conditions do not hinder understanding, but instead, help in engendering understanding. Understanding always occurs against the background of prior involvements and commitments; therefore, all interpretation is necessarily “prejudiced” because each individual is embedded within a cultural framework and a particular context. Gadamer refers to interpretation as not just a possible behavior, but as “the mode of being.”<sup>321</sup> For Gadamer and other hermeneutic theorist, humans are ontologically interpretive beings.

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<sup>318</sup>Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 107-8.

<sup>319</sup>Bernstein continues, “We are ‘thrown’ into the world as beings who understand and interpret – so if we are to understand what it is to be human beings, we must seek to understand understanding itself, in its rich, full, and complex dimensions. Furthermore, understanding is not one type of activity to be contrasted with other human activities”(113). Bernstein is interested in the ways in which philosophical hermeneutics contributes to overcoming the Cartesian Anxiety and helps us to move beyond objectivism and relativism. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 112-114.

<sup>320</sup>Browning, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 170.

<sup>321</sup>Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1981), xviii, quoted in Swinton and

## Browning's Four Core Ideas of Hermeneutic Theory

For Browning, hermeneutics is a particular form of postmodernism that refers to the historical and linguistic embeddedness of all human thought where no one begins theorizing from a neutral place and pure objectivity is impossible.<sup>322</sup> Hermeneutics as a methodology focuses on uncovering and rediscovering meaning. Admittedly, it is a “troublesome” word for Browning, but his use of the term hermeneutics relies heavily on Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. However, Browning is instructive in understanding hermeneutical theory because he lays out four core ideas that comprise hermeneutical theory.

Browning states: “The first core idea is Gadamer’s important theory of ‘effective history,’ a concept Ricoeur freely appropriates. This idea points to the situated character of all thinking and investigation.”<sup>323</sup> By using the term effective history, Gadamer is drawing awareness towards the historically effected character of all understanding. In this model, true understanding begins by first acknowledging one’s effective history. Effective history is made up of ideals, images, text, and history that influence and shape experience; in essence, effective history is comprised of the inherited ideals and presuppositions about life and human nature that are implicit in every person. By acknowledging one’s effective history, one is trying to make those ideals and prejudices

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Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 110.

<sup>322</sup>Don S. Browning and Terry D. Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>323</sup>Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 20.

explicit and visible in order to deepen the understanding process. Browning and the authors of *Culture Wars* state:

The question that we bring to any dialogue comes out of our own history, and all the histories before us, that have shaped who we are. The history that has shaped us also *affects* the very way that we ask our questions; this history, including its implicit *ideals*, shapes how we interpret the world before us and evaluate its tensions and conflicts. To even understand our own questions and our initial interpretation of what is happening in the situations surrounding us, we must deepen our understanding of the ideals that have colored what Gadamer called our ‘effective history.’ To describe something responsibly, we must also do history.<sup>324</sup>

For Gadamer, history is always effective history. This is not a deficiency but instead offers a unique possibility for understanding. For Browning, “Gadamer’s important theory of effective history” is grounded in acknowledging the situated character of all thinking where history “is not simply something that lingers in the past – something that is over and done with and hence has no effect on us today.”<sup>325</sup> Effective history determines in advance both what seems worth enquiring about and what will appear as the object of investigation.<sup>326</sup> Gadamer states,

“We are not saying, then, that effective history must be developed as a new independent discipline ancillary to the human sciences, but that we should learn to understand ourselves better and recognize that in all understanding, whether we are expressly aware of it or not, the power of this effective history is at work.”<sup>327</sup>

Effective history is about understanding “ourselves better” by acknowledging our roots and the traditions that inform our perspective.

The second core idea is that this effective history shapes “the inherited interpretative frameworks we rely on when attempting to understand our experiences of

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<sup>324</sup>Don S. Browning, Bonnie J Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon, and Robert M. Franklin, *Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 336.

<sup>325</sup>Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 8.

<sup>326</sup>Mueller-Vollmer, *The Hermeneutics Reader*, 268.

<sup>327</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 300.

the world.”<sup>328</sup> These “inherited interpretive frameworks” should not be denied because these are comparative references against which measurements are made. Gadamer refers to these as prejudices and writes, “Actually, ‘prejudice’ means a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined.”<sup>329</sup> These prejudices inevitably affect the process of interpretation and because of this, Gadamer defends prejudice as necessary for understanding anything. Prejudices are the ideals and pre-understandings that every individual holds; they are the inherited frameworks that are relied upon in order to understand anything.<sup>330</sup> Browning states, “Without our pre-conceptions, we would be lost.”<sup>331</sup> As Robert Holub states, “Prejudice, because it belongs to historical reality itself, is not a hindrance to understanding, but rather a condition for the possibility of understanding.”<sup>332</sup> And, instead of trying to eliminate these biases and prejudices, Gadamer’s solution is to simply acknowledge them. Prior involvement and partiality are not barriers to understanding, but instead offer fertile opportunity for true understanding. Instead of ignoring these prejudices or preconceptions and relying on a false sense of empiricism, the persuasive effect of history should be recognized.

The third core idea is that all understanding is like a dialogue or conversation. Browning states, “understanding is a dialogue and conversation. The structure of dialogue is an ontological feature of human consciousness.”<sup>333</sup> One of Gadamer’s fundamental theses in *Truth and Method* is that understanding occurs as a dialogue or

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<sup>328</sup>Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 8.

<sup>329</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 273.

<sup>330</sup>Gadamer sometimes refers to prejudice as “fore-concepts,” “fore-understandings,” or “pre-conceptions” as a way to demonstrate that these prejudices are formed before engagement with a situation.

<sup>331</sup>Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 9.

<sup>332</sup>Robert Holub, “Hermeneutics,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticisms: Volume 8, From Formalism to Poststructuralism*, ed. Raman Selden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 212.

<sup>333</sup>Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 21.

conversation. Dialogue, or conversation, requires an exchange between partners of differing contexts about a common issue. Gadamer defines conversation as the attempt by two partners to come to an agreement about an object under consideration by means of a common language.<sup>334</sup> Conversation is linguistically mediated and requires that participants be open to the viewpoint of the other through exchange. For Browning, “Gadamer saw the purpose of the conversation as practical; its goal is to produce a working understanding between parties, to resolve conflicts, and to discover orientations to action.”<sup>335</sup> And, by all accounts conversation is an activity at which Gadamer excelled. Bernstein claims, “Gadamer is the best listener and conversational partner that I have ever met.”<sup>336</sup> In an interview with Carsten Dutt, Gadamer remarks that “conversation is the essence of what I have working on over the past thirty years.”<sup>337</sup> Dutt claims that most personal accounts relate that Gadamer was always ready to learn something from another person and “he almost always seemed to be able to find common ground.”<sup>338</sup> Conversation, or dialogue, is the fundamental metaphor upon which Gadamer builds his life and his model of human understanding.

What might sound obvious, trivial or simplistic as a metaphor, Browning counters is actually a very profound point about the nature and process of understanding. Two counter-examples highlight the radical nature of Gadamer’s position. Wilhelm Dilthey thought that humans understand through an act of empathy, where “historians empty themselves and attempt an imaginative identification with the experience of the historical

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<sup>334</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 347-50.

<sup>335</sup> Don S. Browning, “The Relation of Practical Theology to Theological Ethics,” in *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Society*, ed. Don Browning (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 395.

<sup>336</sup>Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, xvi.

<sup>337</sup>Carsten Dutt, Glenn Most, Alfons Grieder, and Dorte Westernhagen, *Gadamer in Conversation: Reflections and Commentary*, trans. Richard Palmer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 10-12.

<sup>338</sup>Dutt, *Gadamer in Conversation*, 10.

actors they are trying to understand.”<sup>339</sup> Edmund Husserl thought that humans understand meanings through an objective act of description that “involves pushing aside, neutralizing, or bracketing all our personal prejudices and commitments.”<sup>340</sup> Gadamer, because of his model of understanding, firmly refutes the existence of objectivity and certainly contested that self-emptying was even possible. Browning adds:

Gadamer, following the lead of Heidegger, developed the view that the kind of objectivity and self-emptying required by Dilthey and Husserl was not only impossible to achieve but unfruitful in promoting good understanding and adequate praxis.<sup>341</sup>

Contemporary theologian Francis Schussler Fiorenza echoes this position when she states that “understanding does not consist in placing oneself in the shoes of another. Instead it consists in recognizing the claim of the tradition in its otherness as having a claim upon one’s own life practice.”<sup>342</sup> For Gadamer, in order to understand anything at all, prejudices and commitments should be recognized, uplifted, and scrutinized. Furthermore, understanding anything is not an objective process, but instead should be understood as a dialogue or conversation.

The fourth and final core idea is that all interpretation involves application. Understanding, interpretation, and application are a continuous fluid process, not three distinct endeavors. Interests in application guide the understanding process from the beginning. “This means that we do not first determine the objective nature of experience and the world and then determine how to apply this objective knowledge to concrete

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<sup>339</sup>Don S. Browning. *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 38.

<sup>340</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 39.

<sup>341</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>342</sup>Francis Schussler Fiorenza, “Theory and Practice: Theological Education as a Reconstructive, Hermeneutical, and Practical Task.” *Theological Supplement* (1987), 113.

situations.”<sup>343</sup> For Gadamer, application is not an act that follows understanding; instead, application guides the interpretive process from the beginning. Richard Bernstein explains it as follows:

According to an earlier tradition of hermeneutics, three elements were distinguished: understanding, interpretation, and application. But Gadamer argues – and this is one of his central theses of *Truth and Method* – that these are not three distinct moments or elements of hermeneutics. They are internally related; every act of understanding involves interpretation, and all interpretation involves application.<sup>344</sup>

Gadamer insists that every interpretation is simultaneously an application. When a text is encountered, one enters into an open conversation led by questions and answers that are inevitably tied to prejudice but also to application and how new knowledge might be applied. By being explicit about the ideals and suppositions that guide the interpretive process, Gadamer tells us that “the meaning of the text can really be made to speak for us.”<sup>345</sup> As interviewer Carsten Dutt states: “The general thesis of his hermeneutical philosophy, that effective history and the structure of application radically condition the hermeneutic process, makes us more aware of the reflective dimension in all undertakings in the humanities and social sciences.”<sup>346</sup> Gadamer explains:

How do we come to pose our questions? When we pose them, how do we go about answering them? No problem just falls from heaven. Something awakens our interest – that is really what comes first! At the beginning of every effort to understand is a concern about something: confronted by a question one is to answer, one’s knowledge of what one is interpreting is thrown into uncertainty, and this causes one to search for an answer. In order to come up with an answer, the person then begins asking questions.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>343</sup>Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 22.

<sup>344</sup>Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 38.

<sup>345</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 358.

<sup>346</sup>Dutt, *Gadamer in Conversation*, 33.

<sup>347</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.



Following Gadamer, Browning concedes that application is important from the start and cannot be separated from the process of understanding.<sup>348</sup> Browning calls Gadamer's argument "brilliant" that understanding "should not add application at the end but should be driven by an interest in application from the very beginning."<sup>349</sup> Understanding and interpretation are shaped through and through by practical concerns about application to current situations from the very beginning.<sup>350</sup> Browning cites Gadamer, "Application is neither a subsequent nor a merely occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning."<sup>351</sup> In this way, Gadamer refutes the theory to practice model of humanistic learning and replaces it with a radical practice-theory-practice model of humanistic learning.<sup>352</sup> Miller-McLemore states:

Rather than concern with practice as an act that follows understanding or the application of theory to the specifics of praxis, 'concern with practice, in subtle ways we often overlook' guides the hermeneutic process from the beginning.<sup>353</sup>

In this way, Miller-McLemore suggests that one moves from "theory-laden practice to practice-laden theory back to theory-laden practice."<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>348</sup>Browning states, "Human understanding in its basic form is a dialogue or conversation in which practical questions are brought to the object of conversation from the beginning and not just added at the end. Crises in our present theory-laden practices generate questions. These questions are brought to our historically situated dialogues. Out of these dialogues are generated practical hypotheses which may (or may not) prove helpful in the reconstruction of our practices." Browning, *American Congregations*, 194.

<sup>349</sup>Browning, *Equality and the Family*, 34.

<sup>350</sup>Miller-McLemore offers an incisive critique of Browning's insistence on application: that practical theologians like Browning and Farley have immense interest in understanding and interpretation, but the third facet, application has received scant attention. She states: "Concern about application shapes understanding from the beginning. Yet they seldom ask how understanding actually informs action" in Bonnie Miller McLemore, "The 'Clerical Paradigm': A Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness?" *International Journal of Practical Theology*, Vol. 11, Issue 1 (2007), 28.

<sup>351</sup>Browning quotes this as his favorite passage from Gadamer because it demonstrates that understanding "can never be totally neutral nor objective; our practical interests and pre-understandings will always enter into the picture, shaping understanding from the very beginning." Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 22.

<sup>352</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 39.

<sup>353</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 7-8, cited by Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "The Subject and Practice of Pastoral Theology" in Ackerman and Storm (eds.) *Liberating Faith Practices* (1998), 187.

<sup>354</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "The subject and practice of pastoral theology as a practical theological discipline: pushing past the nagging identity crisis to the 'poetics of resistance'" in *Liberating Faith*

By outlining these four core ideas of hermeneutic theory, Browning proposes a postmodern approach that focuses on uncovering and rediscovering meaning. His first core idea is Gadamer's concept of effective history that highlights the situated character of all thinking. The second is that this effective history shapes "the inherited interpretative frameworks we rely on when attempting to understand our experiences of the world."<sup>355</sup> These "inherited interpretive frameworks" should not be denied because these are comparative references against which measurements are made. Browning states, "Without our pre-conceptions, we would be lost."<sup>356</sup> The third core idea in Browning's understanding of hermeneutics is about the process of understanding. Understanding is not an objective process, but instead should be understood as a conversation or dialogue. Finally, fourth, there is an "unshakable" link between understanding and application. Browning states, "Understanding something is never just a neutral or objective act; no matter how hard we try to be objective, our practical interests and pre-understandings will always enter into the picture and enter so early as to be directing understanding from the very beginning."<sup>357</sup> By outlining these four core ideas of hermeneutic theory, Browning sets the stage for expanding this perspective into what he calls critical hermeneutical theory. It is critical hermeneutical theory that Browning insists must drive the field and ground practical theology. In short, critical hermeneutical theory goes one step beyond hermeneutical theory in that it incorporates Ricoeur's concept of distanciation.

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*Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, ed. Denise Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm (Leuven, 1998), 193.

<sup>355</sup>Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 8.

<sup>356</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>357</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

## Critical Hermeneutical Theory

By outlining these four core ideas, Browning proposes not just a hermeneutical theory but a critical hermeneutic theory “that takes effective history and the classics that shape it more seriously.”<sup>358</sup> However, Browning makes it clear that for his theory of critical hermeneutics, “methodologically, Gadamer gives us only part of what is needed.”<sup>359</sup> For the other part, Browning turns to Paul Ricoeur and his concept of “distanciation” that he develops in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*.<sup>360</sup> Ricoeur proposes substituting the concept of “distanciation” for the positivistic idea of objectivity by focusing on the human capacity for reflection. “The capacity for distanciation is grounded in the human capacity to reflect – the self’s capacity to look back on and gain some distance from the very biological, material, historical, and cultural forces that have shaped it.”<sup>361</sup> By incorporating distanciation as a methodological attitude, Ricoeur allows for a particular distance that the inquirer can gain and he believes this distance is sufficient to appropriate the meaning of a text. Browning relies heavily on Ricoeur’s enrichment of Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy that “emphasizes the priority of understanding and the subordinate yet essential role for scientific distanciation and explanation.”<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>358</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>359</sup>Don Browning, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 170.

<sup>360</sup>Browning highlights that Ricoeur chided Gadamer for the title of his book, *Truth and Method*. Ricoeur believes it should have been called *Truth OR Method*. This subtle jab highlights the oft-mentioned critique that Gadamer pits science’s drive to be objective against hermeneutic subject-object engagement; it must be one or the other. See Browning, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 171, and Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 82.

<sup>361</sup>Browning, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 171.

<sup>362</sup>Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 117.

This second step of using Ricoeur's concept of distanciation is what Browning believes separates him from other hermeneutic thinkers and makes his approach distinctly critical.<sup>363</sup> "Critical hermeneutics finds a place for explanation and the kind of epistemological distance that we mistakenly call objectivity."<sup>364</sup> He cites important and powerful proposals, like Frank Richardson and Philip Cushman, who use hermeneutical perspectives to uncover hidden perspectives.<sup>365</sup> Browning asserts:

But from my perspective, these proposals move too far in the direction of making psychology a thoroughly interpretive discipline, nearly losing the element of objectivity, or what I will, following Ricoeur, the moments of distanciation and explanation that psychology as a science also must always include.<sup>366</sup>

For Browning, critical hermeneutics goes beyond most hermeneutic perspectives because "we aspire to compare and contrast implicit images of the human with an eye toward discovering those perspectives that more adequately describe the human condition. This is what makes our view a form of critical hermeneutics."<sup>367</sup> Furthermore, Browning proposes that these resources of Paul Ricoeur and hermeneutic theory, what he calls critical hermeneutical theory, provide epistemological and ontological frameworks that should guide all research.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>363</sup>Here, Browning refers directly to Philip Cushman and Frank Richardson. See, Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 11, 62.

<sup>364</sup>Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 22.

<sup>365</sup>Although Browning criticizes both Cushman and Richardson for not making enough of this concept of distanciation, he admits that both are "more thoroughly and uncomplicatedly hermeneutic than we are." Browning is clear that by using the concept of distanciation, his approach is different and thus becomes critical. See, Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 9-11.

<sup>366</sup>Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 18.

<sup>367</sup>Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, x.

<sup>368</sup>Browning notes that Ricoeur also calls it hermeneutic phenomenology (17). He says that "I can imagine that the very sound of these technical terms sends icy chills down the spines of some readers." Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 18.

## Critical Hermeneutical Theory and Practical Theology

Here, Browning makes an important third and final step. He states that: “To me, a critical practical theology and a critical hermeneutics are nearly identical.”<sup>369</sup> Browning argues that the field of practical theology can only maintain its identity and fulfill its potential by recognizing itself as an exercise in critical hermeneutics.<sup>370</sup> Browning makes a strong claim: the continued success of the field is dependent upon grounding itself in critical hermenutical theory.<sup>371</sup> He posits that his own work in practical theology, specifically texts like *From Culture Wars* and *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, are both simply “exercises in critical hermeneutics.”<sup>372</sup> Therefore, a critical practical theology and a critical hermeneutics are very similar, if not identical. Browning states:

Both start their reflection out of the context of situations facing challenge, conflict, and disruption. Both first of all interpret situations from the perspective of the horizons of their effective histories even though, in a secondary way, they may also use the explanatory insights of the modern social sciences. Hence, both inquiries *must take history very seriously*. To clarify their goals in facing concrete problematic, they both return to the ideals or classics that have shaped their effective histories. This brings them to the task of the retrieval and critique of these ideals. Since practical concerns – concerns with application, as Gadamer called it – shape both inquiries from the beginning, their concluding interest in the actual task of concretely and strategically addressing situations is simply a completion of the *praxis*-oriented character of the entire understanding process.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>369</sup>Browning, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 176.

<sup>370</sup>*Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>371</sup>Although Browning seems to use the term practical theology with ease, he speaks directly to “those who are reluctant to incorporate the word ‘theology’ or ‘practical’ into their academic self-understanding, I am quite happy to settle for my central point: the field of religion and psychological studies can be best ordered if seen as an expression of critical hermeneutics.” Browning, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 177.

<sup>372</sup>*Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>373</sup>Don Browning, “The past and possible future of religion and psychological studies,” in *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, eds. Diane Jonte-Pace and William B. Parson (New York: Routledge, 2001), 176-177, original emphasis.

For Browning, critical hermeneutics and a critical practical theology are the same. Both start with a particular situation and context. Both look to interpret these situations and by using effective history, ideals and classics of a particular perspective can be held up and clarified. Both use the explanatory insights of the social sciences and both are shaped by practical concerns. Both critical hermeneutical theory and a critical practical theology are concerned with application from the beginning and have a praxis-oriented character towards the entire understanding process.

Browning acknowledges that some critics might say that his perspective on critical hermeneutics as critical practical theology is nothing but a waste of time. Some postmodern perspectives are quick to point out that all perspectives are historically given, socially located, and situated; many will contend that it is impossible to step out of our own perspectives, much less evaluate another alternative view. For these postmoderns, critical dialogue is not possible. Browning acknowledges this and states, “We only have two options open to us. One is to point to the multiplicity of interpretations and describe them the best that we can. The other is to describe our own perspective and assert its truth and authority as an act of faith.”<sup>374</sup> This dissertation aligns itself firmly with the first option and will attempt to describe a multiplicity of interpretations regarding the formative moments of college students.

In the end, Browning is adamant that practical theology as a discipline should both describe its effective history and use distancing as a way to identify social and cultural forces.<sup>375</sup> Therefore, the methodology that I will use is that of critical

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<sup>374</sup>Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, x.

<sup>375</sup>Don S. Browning, “Empirical Considerations in Religious Praxis and Reflection,” in *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Society*, ed. Don Browning (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 35.

hermeneutical theory as elucidated by Don Browning and based on the insights of Gadamer and Ricoeur. Following their lead, I will use two different methods for analyzing the essays: effective history and distancing. Both of these concepts will be used primarily as methods to construct the lenses through which the essays will be viewed.

## Methods

Methods are specific techniques used in data analysis. A method is a procedure carried out within a particular set of methodological commitments about reality and truth.<sup>376</sup> Methods are concepts that provide tools for engagement and guide reflection. Two methods are used in this dissertation to construct a set of interpretive lenses through which the essays are viewed. The first method is based on the concept of effective history. Effective history, for Browning, is made up of the prejudices and pre-understandings that are “the inherited interpretive frameworks we rely on when attempting to understand our experiences of the world.”<sup>377</sup> Each lens is constructed by first examining the effective history of the theory or perspective being used. By highlighting particular “classic” texts and influential thinkers, basic ideals and pre-understandings are uncovered and made visible as a way to deepen the understanding process. My hope is that by constructing an effective history of each theoretical lens, a historically effective consciousness develops and situates the perspective in its particular tradition. Once these ideals and presuppositions are made explicit, I will use this

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<sup>376</sup>Swinton and Mowat, 74.

<sup>377</sup>Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 8.

interpretive lens to view the essays. By being explicit about the ideals and suppositions that guide the interpretive process, Gadamer tells us that “the meaning of the text can really be made to speak for us.”<sup>378</sup> Because all reflection, even the most critical, has an effective history, I begin with a history of each lenses’ theoretical perspective.

Ricoeur identifies truth with the hermeneutic understanding of the effective history that has formed one’s perspective. “An epistemology that prioritizes understanding over explanation leads one to take the effective history of the past with the utmost seriousness.”<sup>379</sup> However, Ricoeur pushes a step further and states that a kind of critical distance is possible, through reflection, from the researcher’s own situatedness as well as from the text. Distanciation, as a method of textual analysis, relativizes objectivity by placing it within a larger framework of historically embedded and conditioned understanding. Furthermore, distanciation allows for an enlarged notion of text where authorial intent is removed and instead, the existence of multiple interpretations is possible.

### **Gadamer’s Effective History**

Taking effective history seriously and acknowledging its persuasive influence is an important part of Browning’s critical hermeneutical theory and will inform one of my methods. Gadamer used the term of “effective history” to highlight the situated character of thinking and the prejudicial character of all understanding. Effective history, or rather the construction of an effective history, uncovers the inherited interpretive frameworks

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<sup>378</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 358, quoted in Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 113.

<sup>379</sup>Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 25.



being used by making explicit the hidden ideals and presuppositions of the researcher's perspective. From Gadamer's perspective, acknowledging one's effective history enhances the process of understanding: ideals, prejudice, and presuppositions exist no matter how hard one tried in acknowledging them. Gadamer states:

We stand in traditions, whether we know these traditions or not; that is, whether we are conscious of these or are so arrogant as to think we can begin without presuppositions – none of this changes the way traditions are working on us and in our understanding.<sup>380</sup>

Gadamer believed that we must recognize that interpretive efforts are constantly co-determined by an effective-historical factor. In this sense, we should reject false pretenses of objectivity and empiricism. Instead, researchers should be conscious of their own traditions, including particular classics that frame their interpretive lens.

An understanding of Gadamer's concept of the classical, or the classic, is an important inclusion in the construction of an effective history. The Gadamerian term "classical" designates "that which has distinguished itself over the years, works that have persevered in the face of variable tastes and changing times."<sup>381</sup> This term describes influential and important texts and their influence on the understanding process. It also refers to the essentially limitless interpretability of a text. Researchers unconsciously draw on their past and particular classics that have shaped their perspective. All understanding is shaped by the continuing effects of particular cultural and religious texts and those classics contribute to the cultural traditions of the researchers.<sup>382</sup> Browning states: "Historical texts, events, and monuments are not simply things that linger in the

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<sup>380</sup>Dutt, *Gadamer in Conversation*, 45.

<sup>381</sup>Holub, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticisms*, 271.

<sup>382</sup>Browning states: "All members of a culture, including its social scientists, are shaped by its historical tradition; this tradition becomes part of the situated context from which their attempts to understand must necessarily begin." See Browning, *American Congregations*, 194.

past and have no effect on us today. The past is mediated to us today and shapes us in myriad ways that we often cannot name or easily bring to consciousness.”<sup>383</sup>

In *The Analogical Imagination*, Tracy develops Gadamer’s concept of the “classic.” For Tracy, a classic is a person, text, event, melody, or symbol encountered in some cultural experience that bears a certain excess of meaning as well as a certain timelessness.<sup>384</sup> A classic can confront and provoke us with the feeling that “something else might be the case.” For this reason, every classic contains its own plurality and encourages a pluralism of readings. Although classics contain a plurality of interpretations, they also contain authority and influence. As Fiorenza states, the classics have an authority and a claim on us. “Their authority in our cultural tradition influences the very horizons of our thought. The temporal distance separating them from ourselves is not negative, but has a positive function. Temporal distance allows time to separate the classics from the period-pieces. Consequently, in Gadamer’s opinion, temporal distance validates the authority of the classics and their claim upon us.”<sup>385</sup> Because of their authority and influence, each researcher should acknowledge the particular classics that inform her view.

Each researcher and each perspective has an effective history and making these inherited interpretive frameworks visible and explicit deepens the understanding process. Effective history shapes what Gadamer refers to as our prejudices, or preunderstandings: “From one perspective, these pre-understandings function like prejudices, but from another perspective they are comparative references that make sense of our

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<sup>383</sup>Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 20.

<sup>384</sup>David Tracey, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1998).

<sup>385</sup>Francis Schussler Fiorenza, “Theory and Practice: Theological Education as a Reconstructive, Hermeneutical, and Practical Task.” *Theological Supplement* (1987), 114.

experiences.”<sup>386</sup> For Gadamer, the Enlightenment championed positivistic attitudes and fundamentally discredited the notion of prejudice. One of his central theses is that the scientific method tried to eliminate the effective history that shapes the consciousness of the researcher. Gadamer states, “When a naïve faith in scientific method denies that existence of effective history, there can be an actual deformation of knowledge.”<sup>387</sup> For Gadamer, positivistic approaches tried to eliminate the inherited ideals and fore-understanding which are so important in his model of understanding. In this sense, the historically-situated nature (or effective history) of the interpreter must be established as an important part of the understanding process. To dismiss effective history is to deny an important part of the understanding process. Gadamer states, “No, people who believe they have freed themselves from their interwovenness into their effective history are simply mistaken.”<sup>388</sup>

Prejudices should not be eliminated, but instead Gadamer argued that they are crucial for developing our understanding of the world. Instead of ignoring these biases and feigning objectivity, we must utilize prejudice positively. Browning states, “Our prejudices in the sense of fore-concepts should not dominate our understanding totally but should be used positively for the contrasting light they can throw on what we study.”<sup>389</sup> Again, Gadamer believed in the constitutive character of prejudice in all understanding and interpretation. This “prejudicial character of understanding” as a pervasive influence is best identified through the construction, or consciousness, of effective history. In this sense, researchers should drop pretenses of objectivity and

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<sup>386</sup>Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 21.

<sup>387</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300.

<sup>388</sup>Mueller-Vollmer, *The Hermeneutics Reader*, 45.

<sup>389</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 38.

empiricism and instead, they should acknowledge that we unconsciously draw on our pasts, including particular classics, and thus, should become conscious about the use of frames of interpretation.

### **Effective Historical Consciousness or Historically Effected Consciousness?**

The purpose of constructing and reflecting on one's effective history has a specific objective: the development of what Gadamer refers to as "effective historical consciousness." Also translated as "historically effective consciousness," this term refers to a new kind of consciousness that occurs when effective history is taken seriously.<sup>390</sup> Although awkwardly phrased, this consciousness is the ultimate goal of the hermeneutic situation and represents awareness of the situation and context within which interpretation takes place.<sup>391</sup> In short, becoming aware of effective history results in a historically effective consciousness that is "primarily consciousness of the hermeneutic situation."<sup>392</sup> For Gadamer, the hermeneutical process is enhanced by acknowledging one's effective history where inherited ideals and presuppositions are uncovered and acknowledged in order to develop a historically effected consciousness. Gadamer states:

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<sup>390</sup>In particular, Heidegger was very critical of Gadamer's key term of effective history, *wirkungsfeschichtliches BewuBstsein* (consciousness in which history is at work) because *consciousness* was "a word Heidegger assiduously avoided because of its associations with a metaphysics that needed to be outgrown" (5). Gadamer's response to this criticism was that he, too, was uncomfortable with the wording, but since he could not find an alternative, he had to use it for his argument. See, Mueller-Vollmer, *The Hermeneutic Reader*, 3-6 and Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, "Translator's Preface," *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum), 1989.

<sup>391</sup>Translators Weinsheimer and Marshall comment that "historically effected consciousness" is from P. Christopher Smith's suggestion. Also, Ricoeur also used the term and translated it as "consciousness open to the effects of history." See, Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, "Translator's Preface," *Truth and Method*, xv.

<sup>392</sup>Hans-Helmuth Gander, "Between Strangeness and Familiarity: Towards Gadamer's Conception of Effective History," *Research in Phenomenology* 34 (2004): 127.

In every genuine effort at research one needs to work out a consciousness of one's hermeneutical situation. Only in this way can one shed light on the basis one's interests in it and on what supports one's standpoint of questioning. And, of course, one still must confess the endlessness of this task. Full enlightenment about one's own interests in questioning is not attainable. There is always something remaining that one does not realize. In any case, however, one needs to get away from objectivist naïveté and destroy the illusion of a truth that is separate from the standpoint of the one doing the understanding.<sup>393</sup>

Here, Gadamer emphasizes the importance of locating one's perspective and basic interest, including the "endlessness" of the task, which calls for the rejection of "objectivist naïveté." Gadamer argues for the conditionedness of all understanding, and he advocated for the development of a historically effective consciousness in the humanities and social sciences. Historically effective consciousness is consciousness in which history is at work and for Gadamer, this historically effected consciousness is the primary task of hermeneutics. Swinton and Mowat explain:

This *historically effective consciousness* is one which is truly open to experience, and which is aware of the influence and significance of their pre-understandings. Thus, for Gadamer, the image of the researcher as separate from the object of study is replaced by a dialectical understanding that suggests the need for dialogue and conversation between the text and the researcher; conversation that does not exclude the researcher's pre-understandings, but constructively draws them into the dialogical process.<sup>394</sup>

Historically effective consciousness allows for openness between the text and the researcher and the space for dialogue and conversation. Gadamer calls for a new type of consciousness; and even though the term "historically effective consciousness" is somewhat awkward, it recognizes what is occurring when we encounter documents from the past.<sup>395</sup> When looking at a text, like a set of essays, it is important to enter into a conversation with the text by at least acknowledging the particular tradition or biases

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<sup>393</sup>Dutt, *Gadamer in Conversation*, 46.

<sup>394</sup>Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 114.

<sup>395</sup>Holub, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticisms*, 269.

from which the researcher stands. In this sense, historically effective consciousness is understanding the situated nature of the interpreter and the interpretive lens. This consciousness is also developed by designating those texts that can be considered classical in the Gadamerian sense: those texts that have influenced and designated the field.

In a section titled “The Hermeneutic Approach” in his study *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, Jurgen Habermas discusses Gadamer’s perspective on effective history. Habermas “singles out Gadamer’s notion of ‘effective history’ which according to him had all the earmarks of a methodological principle applicable to textual interpretation in the human sciences.”<sup>396</sup> Gadamer never necessarily claimed such a functional status for his concept of effective history, although others have taken such steps. Kurt Meuller-Vollmer states:

Gadamer’s position – if developed to its extreme – would allow the meaning of a work or a text ultimately to appear only as embedded in its different explications, its specific receptions. Thus, there would no longer be textual meanings to be understood, only explications to be explicated.<sup>397</sup>

I discovered similar uses of the Gadamer’s position as a method in fields like archeology, education, law, and in literary criticism. One perspective argues that effective history may help to illustrate injustices that occur within the status quo created by congressional enactments.<sup>398</sup> Another perspective clarifies the concept of effective history by

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<sup>396</sup>Mueller-Vollmer, *The Hermeneutic Reader*, 42.

<sup>397</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>398</sup>The authors state “Through the lens of effective history, educator and policy makers can de-mystify the legislation by understanding the regulatory pitfalls that are embedded in the act” (103). See, John LaNear and Elise Frattura, “Getting the stories straight: allowing different voices to tell an ‘effective’ history of special education law in the United States,” *Education and the Law* 19, no. 2 (June 2007): 99.

developing an effective-historical consciousness of the performative aspects of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.<sup>399</sup>

Finally, one of Gadamer's key points in *Truth and Method* is that "we must become aware of our own embeddedness or historical situatedness and constantly reflect on the ways in which this situatedness influences the way that we interpret our world."<sup>400</sup> In this important statement, Gadamer says we must reflect upon our "embeddedness" or "situatedness" because that determines how we interpret our world. Effective historical consciousness, as awkward as it is to use, is also sometimes translated as "affinity," "embeddedness," or what Bernstein calls "belongingness." For the purpose of this dissertation, historical effective consciousness is most aptly summarized with the term "situatedness." Therefore, understanding situatedness becomes the primary task of critical hermeneutics. This situatedness is the goal of detailing the effective history of each interpretive lens. My hope is that being clear about each interpretive lenses' effective history, I also situate my perspective so that I might dialogue with the essays. As Gadamer states: "To interpret means precisely to use one's own preconceptions so that the meaning of the text can really be made to speak for us."<sup>401</sup> Another way of acknowledging this Gadamerian sense of situatedness is to refer to the concept of social location. Social location refers to one's class, gender, race, ethnicity, religious background, age, status, and social roles. I will expand more on the analogies between

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<sup>399</sup>Gander states, "effective history means the relation of past and present in which the past constitutively determines the present through an interplay by bringing its tradition to bear upon it." Hans-Helmuth Gander, "Between Strangeness and Familiarity: Towards Gadamer's Conception of Effective History," *Research in Phenomenology* 34 (2004): 125.

<sup>400</sup>Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 111.

<sup>401</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 358.

liberation perspectives on social location and Gadamer's situatedness in the next chapter, but for now, I note that both require revealing contextual details of the researcher.

Browning explains that researchers must “come to know the ideals within the narrative from the past (our effective history) that provide the values by which the present is judged.”<sup>402</sup> In each chapter I will concentrate on a particular theoretical perspective, including its classics, and construct an effective history acknowledging the inherited ideals and presuppositions of the particular perspective's lens. By asserting from the beginning particular values and ideals held by this perspectival lens, I hope to demonstrate how the essays are being judged. By becoming aware and working with your bias, Gadamer believes that the text will present itself “in all its newness” and be able to “assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings.”<sup>403</sup> Researchers have their own effective histories, and according to Browning:

their research would be enriched, more on course, less biased, and less culturally alienating, if they did not retreat into false objectivism but acknowledged the role of their own presuppositions (their own ‘prejudices’ in the sense of ‘prejudgments’) and the important role they play in the dialogue leading to understanding.<sup>404</sup>

Genuine understanding does not proceed through empiricism and objectivity; it proceeds through conversation and dialogue.

### **Ricoeur and Distanciation**

The second methodological step, or method, is Ricoeur's concept of “distanciation.” As stated before, Browning believes that distanciation is what makes his

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<sup>402</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 86.

<sup>403</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 38, referring to Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1982), 238.

<sup>404</sup>Browning, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 170.



approach step beyond hermeneutics and instead, become critical hermeneutics. Ricoeur grounds the concept of distanciation in the basic human capacity for reflection and allows for a kind of “distance” that the inquirer can gain. This distance is sufficient to appropriate the meaning of a text. Methodologically, distanciation objectifies the text by freeing it from the author’s intentions and giving it instead, a life of its own.<sup>405</sup> Rather than a search for the original research participant’s unique meaning, the focus shifts to the interpretation and the appropriation of the text’s meaning. A text becomes “autonomous” and gains independence from its intended meaning, so that a multiplicity of readings and an open horizon of interpretation takes place.<sup>406</sup> This concept of distanciation has three important aspects as it works as a method in a critical hermeneutical methodology. First, distanciation replaces the positivistic concept of objectivity in the hermeneutical process. Second, distanciation allows for a critical distance from the text being analyzed as a movement of reflection. Third, distanciation operates as a powerful tool of textual interpretation because it removes authorial intent and opens up the text for a plurality of interpretations.

But first, Ricoeur is one of the most challenging and enduring thinkers of the twentieth century. Ricoeur focused on uncovering meaning and specifically the question: how does new meaning come into existence and, in doing so, reconfigure the meanings of the past?<sup>407</sup> Kearney states: “This fundamental hermeneutic question is based on the thesis that existence is itself a mode of interpretation (*hermeneia*), or, as the hermeneutic

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<sup>405</sup>Rene Geanellos, “Exploring Ricoeur’s hermeneutic theory of interpretation as a method of analyzing research texts,” *Nursing Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (2000): 113.

<sup>406</sup>Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2004), 31.

<sup>407</sup>Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, 1.

maxim goes: *Life interprets itself.*”<sup>408</sup> Specifically, Ricoeur set himself to investigate what happens when discourse is fixed in writing and relatedly, what it means to read a text.<sup>409</sup> According to David Stewart, Ricoeur made enormous contributions to our understanding of hermeneutics and helped us to a better understanding of language, of metaphor, narrative, the function of symbols in both religion and psychoanalysis, as well as the connections and similarities between philosophers of language.<sup>410</sup> In *Interpretation Theory*, Ricoeur defines his overall goal as “step-by-step approximations of a solution to a single problem, that of understanding language at the level of such productions as poems, narratives, and essays, whether literary or philosophical.”<sup>411</sup>

A solution to the problem of understanding narratives and essays is Ricoeur’s concept of distanciation. Firstly, distanciation replaces the positivistic concept of objectivity in the hermeneutical process. Browning refers to distanciation as a “brilliant concept” from Ricoeur “which relativizes social-science objectivity by placing it within a larger framework of historically embedded and conditioned understanding.”<sup>412</sup> In another account, Browning refers to distanciation as “Ricoeur’s happy substitute” for the positivist concept of objectivity. “The idea of objectivity holds that understanding must begin with a cognitive self-emptying of one’s prejudices and, through controlled

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<sup>408</sup>*Ibid.*, 1, original emphasis.

<sup>409</sup>Barry D. Smith, “Distanciation and Textual Interpretation,” *Laval theologique et philosophique* 43, no. 2 (1987): 206.

<sup>410</sup>David Stewart, “Ricoeur on Religious Language” in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Lewis Edin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 438.

<sup>411</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), xi.

<sup>412</sup>In the beginning of this essay, Browning remarks, “The reader will be relieved to know that I will try to define the concepts of ‘distance’ and ‘distanciation’ in the chapter that follows. I hope that I succeed to your satisfaction.” It demonstrates that distanciation is a difficult concept as well as one that has had requests for clarification.” See, Don S. Browning, “Empirical Considerations in Religious Praxis and Reflection,” in *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Society*, ed. Don Browning (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 34.

experiment, conclude with objective propositions about states of affairs.”<sup>413</sup> Not only is this objectivity impossible, but for hermeneutic thinkers like Ricoeur and Gadamer, this kind of stance actually impedes the process of understanding. Again, Gadamer critiques and dismisses objectivity. Ricoeur goes one step further by replacing the positivist idea of objectivity and empiricism – that one must approach a text as a “clean slate” empty of all prejudice – with his critical concept of distanciation. Browning states: “Objectivity suggests absolute detachment; distanciation points to the simultaneous use of one’s historical horizon and yet partial detachment from it to examine and test that very horizon.”<sup>414</sup> In this way, explanation is possible when explanation is envisioned “as not pure objectivity without presuppositions but degrees of distanciation that make sense only in relation to describing a more basic foreground of social and historical experience, belonging, and embeddedness.”<sup>415</sup>

Second, not only does distanciation work as a “happy substitute” for objectivity, but it also allows for a critical distancing from the text based on the human capacity for reflection. For Browning, distanciation “refers to the human capacity for reflectivity that makes it possible to both be conscious of one’s historically conditioned beginning point but also partially distance or detach oneself from it, not in any absolute way but to some degree.”<sup>416</sup> In this way, distanciation allows for a critical distance that the inquirer can gain which is sufficient to appropriate the meaning of a text. For Ricoeur, “Distance is a fact; placing at a distance is a methodological attitude.”<sup>417</sup> He continues by stating, “that

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<sup>413</sup>Don Browning, “Feminism, Family, and Women’s Right: A Hermeneutic Realist Perspective” *Zygon* 38, no. 2 (June 2003): 319.

<sup>414</sup>Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 11.

<sup>415</sup>Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 24.

<sup>416</sup>Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 11.

<sup>417</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the human sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 74.

‘distance’ put an end to our collusion with the past and creates a situation comparable to the objectivity of the natural sciences, on the grounds that a loss of familiarity is a break with the contingent... Effective history is efficacy at a distance.”<sup>418</sup> Distanciation allows for reflection on the researcher’s pre-understandings and by doing so, barriers to understanding are partially eliminated and it becomes possible to approach the text from new and different perspectives. For Browning, distanciation allows distance that the inquirer can gain from one’s historically conditioned beginning point to at least allow for some glimpses of reality, “even though one can never grasp them completely unsullied by culturally and historically shaped prejudgments.”<sup>419</sup> Instead of emptying or alleviating one’s prejudices, distanciation presupposes that we can distance ourselves from our pre-understandings in order to approach the text and appropriate new understandings.

However, for Ricoeur, it is equally, if not perhaps more, important to focus on the researcher’s interpretation where truth is *not* dependent on the author’s original intent. This leads to the third and final point: Ricoeur believes that distanciation is sufficient to appropriate the meaning of a text; moreover, the meaning of the text is not dependent on the original meaning of the author. Ricoeur focused on the text “as text” and as an object separate, both figuratively and permanently, from the author.<sup>420</sup> Ricoeur acknowledged that interpretation was caught inside the circle formed by the conjunction of interpretation and interpreter.<sup>421</sup> One of Ricoeur’s most radical moves was to allow for the objectification of the text whereby he also removed authorial intent – the idea that the

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<sup>418</sup>Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the human sciences*, 74.

<sup>419</sup>Don Browning, “Feminism, Family, and Women’s Right: A Hermeneutic Realist Perspective,” 319.

<sup>420</sup>Darren Langdrige continues: “This essential feature of text opens up the possibility of a critical distance in interpretation, a critical distance between appropriation and distanciation of meaning.” Darren Langdrige, “The Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur: Problems and Possibilities for Existential-Phenomenological Psychotherapy,” *Existential Analysis* 15, no. 2 (July 2004): 247, original emphasis.

<sup>421</sup>Paul Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *Paul Ricoeur, the Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Kathleen McLaughlin (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004).

meaning of the text exclusively resides only in the author's original intention.<sup>422</sup>

Distanciation objectifies the text by freeing it from the author's intended meaning.

Methodologically, distanciation allows the researcher to move beyond a single interpretation as correct or as meaningful; instead, textual plurality and multiplicity is acknowledged.<sup>423</sup> For research purposes, the focus becomes the appropriation of a text's meanings rather than the search for the research participant's unique and original meaning. Ricoeur states, "Interpreting a text means moving beyond understanding what it says to understanding what it talks about."<sup>424</sup> Ricoeur states that the only way to access textual meanings is to guess.<sup>425</sup> Because Ricoeur believes we cannot really know the author's original intention, he wants to free the text from the restrictions of the author's intended meaning in order that the other interpretations might be considered. Ricoeur states, "Henceforth, to understand is *to understand oneself in front of the text*. It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self, which would be the proposed existence corresponding in the most suitable way to the world proposed."<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>422</sup>Some assert that distanciation exhibits four forms, according to Ricoeur: (i) fixation of the spoken into the written word, dialogue is recorded as writing and meaning becomes more important than the actual words; ii) eclipse of the author's intention, the written word makes the text autonomous and open to unlimited reading and interpretation; iii) emancipation of the text, the text is freed from the context of its creation and able to be read within different socio-political, historical and cultural traditions; and (iv) differences between spoken and written words, spoken dialogue is face to face, whereas the written word overcomes this limitation. These four forms of distanciation allow interpreters to approach the text without concern for authorial intent where the focus becomes appropriation of a text's meanings rather than a search for research participants' unique meanings. See, John B. Thompson, "Editor's Introduction," in *Hermeneutics and the human sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*, by Paul Ricoeur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 13-14, and Rene Geanellos, "Exploring Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory of interpretation as a method of analyzing research texts," *Nursing Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (2000): 112-119.

<sup>423</sup>Geanellos, "Exploring Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory of interpretation as a method of analyzing research texts," 113.

<sup>424</sup>Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 88.

<sup>425</sup>Paul Ricoeur, "The model of the text: meaningful action considered as text," *Social Research* 38 (1971): 547-548, and Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 75-76.

<sup>426</sup>Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the human sciences*, 143.

Again, Ricoeur adamantly argued that truth is not dependent on the author's original intent. This important point of removing the primacy of the author's unique meaning as "truth" has been used to analyze data. For researchers like Rene Geanellos, Ricoeur's method of distanciation allows for intersubjective knowledge "because his theory takes account of the relationship between ontology (interpreter) and epistemology (interpretation) and acknowledges the plural, changing and incomplete nature of interpretation."<sup>427</sup> For research purposes, the focus becomes the appropriation of a text's meanings rather than the search for the research participant's unique meanings. Another example is a study of patient narratives that uses distanciation in order to achieve a deeper and fuller understanding of the suffering human being.<sup>428</sup> Wilklund, Lindholm, and Lindstrom use Ricoeur's concept of distanciation by putting aside the context in order to deal with the text "as text" and thereby explaining its different meanings. The authors conceive that the most significant part of Ricoeur's theory is its ability to confront different interpretations; by confronting these different interpretations, a new, deeper understanding can arise. Barry Smith states: "Texts exist as bearer of possibilities of being-in-the-world."<sup>429</sup> By virtue of being written down into a fixed discourse, the text's meaning becomes distanced from its author's intended sense and becomes an autonomous entity open for a plethora of interpretations.

Paul Ricoeur focuses on what happens when discourse is fixed in writing and what it means to read a text. Truth is not fixed on the author's original intent, an enlarged

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<sup>427</sup> Geanellos, "Exploring Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory of interpretation as a method of analyzing research texts," 118.

<sup>428</sup> Lena Wilklund, Lisbet Lindholm, and Unni A. Lindstrom, "Hermeneutics and narration: a way to deal with qualitative data," *Nursing Inquiry* 9, no. 2 (2002): 114-115.

<sup>429</sup> Barry D. Smith, "Distanciation and Textual Interpretation," *Laval theologique et philosophique* 43, no. 2 (1987): 206.

notion of text is rendered with a plurality of interpretational truths. To access these interpretations, Ricoeur suggest distanciation as a methodological attitude for approaching the text. “By ‘distanciation’ Ricoeur means the semantic autonomy of the text, which stands removed from its unknown multiple readers.”<sup>430</sup> For Ricoeur, both belonging to a particular tradition in history and cultivating critical distance are possible. Browning uses this methodological attitude as a substitute for the scientific idea of objectivity which in turn, allows for reflection and critical distance. Distanciation, as a method of textual analysis, is important because it allowed me to cultivate some distance and reflect on the essays, without limiting my interpretations to the author’s original meaning. Distanciation allows for an enlarged notion of text where multiple interpretations are possible.

### **Examining the Essays**

Reading a text is both a very familiar activity but also quite opaque.<sup>431</sup> It is a familiar activity because it is done every day and is something you are doing right now. This activity is opaque in the sense that one can be hard pressed to articulate the activity of reading, what happens, how it happens, when interpretation begins, and so on. When one considers these kinds of questions, the process of reading and understanding are not very clear at all. Critical hermeneutical theory offers important resources for understanding the interpretative process and methods to help in textual analysis.

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<sup>430</sup>Valdes, Mario. “Introduction: Paul Ricoeur’s Post-Structuralist Hermeneutics” in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.

<sup>431</sup>Smith, “Distanciation and Textual Interpretation,” 205.

Chapter Three reveals more about the essays and me as a researcher. However, one important point should be recognized in my methods section. As I was reading the essays, I was aware I was also thinking of ways in which the information and lessons I was reading about could be applied in other situations. For example, it was clear that mentors are important conversation partners for the essayists and it seemed obvious that encouraging these kinds of relationships in higher education would be beneficial to other students. As I delved further into the essays, it became clear that my intent was to lift up the lessons learned and apply this wisdom to current educational practices. Gadamer defines this concern for application as the central problem of hermeneutics. He states:

We too determined that application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning... Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text – i.e. to understand what it says, what constitutes the text’s meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand it all.<sup>432</sup>

In order to understand the text’s meaning and significance, the interpreter must be aware of her social location and how she relates the text to her own situation, if she is “to understand at all.” Furthermore, Browning adds:

Understanding something is never just a neutral or objective act; no matter how hard we try to be objective, our practical interests and pre-understandings will always enter into the picture and enter so early as to be directing understanding from the very beginning.<sup>433</sup>

Because of my training, it became clear that both theological and psychological perspectives could be used to interpret the essays. Even more so, it seemed as if the text

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<sup>432</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 321 Gadamer T&M, 135-37 Browning quotes this as his favorite passage from Gadamer because it demonstrates that understanding “can never be totally neutral nor objective; our practical interests and pre-understandings will always enter into the picture, shaping understanding from the very beginning.” Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 22.

<sup>433</sup>Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 9.



was calling for the use of multiple theoretical perspectives. For Gadamer, to interpret a text is to enter into a conversation with it. The text becomes an imaginary partner, and although Gadamer considers text to be a “poorer” conversation partner than another human, conversation can still take place. Since the text cannot respond directly to questions put to it by an interpreter, the reader must assume the task of making it participate in the dialogue.<sup>434</sup> Gadamer writes, “Thus written texts present the real hermeneutical task. Writing involves self-alienation. Its overcoming, the reading of a text, is thus the highest task of understanding.”<sup>435</sup> In Gadamer’s thinking, the interpreter stands before the text and her task is to understand what the text is about through interplay and conversation with the text. Ricoeur’s concept of distanciation supplies the methodological attitude where I, the reader, can distance myself from my own prejudices and worldviews, reflect upon them, and use them to interpret a set of essays.

These two methods, effective history and distanciation, will be used in each chapter as a way to construct and operate the lenses. Each chapter contains one lens and has an effective history of the central concept, along with references to particular classics. Distanciation, as a method, is more of methodological attitude; however, distanciation also allows me to transcend the original authorial intent and instead, I can focus on multiple interpretations of the same data. Together these two methods help me to construct and use a lens with which to view the essays. Four lenses are constructed: a psychosocial lens, an object relations theory lens, a crisis lens, and a practice lens. These lenses help to uncover and unveil the hidden lessons and insights of the essayists. In my

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<sup>434</sup>Smith, “Distanciation and Textual Interpretation,” 208.

<sup>435</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 352.

conclusion, I also claim that critical hermeneutical theory offers a methodology for uncovering *phronesis*.

In conclusion, when I entered the Graduate Department of Religion, the area in which I enrolled was called “Religion and Personality” (R and P). According to the R and P handbook, courses require students to gain knowledge and competence in three areas: empirical or hermeneutical social-scientific study of religious experience; practical and pastoral theology, care, and counseling; and interdisciplinary studies in theology and the social sciences.<sup>436</sup> In this sense, personality represented the psychological area of the personality sciences; coursework was meant to prepare students for scholarship and teaching, as well as provide an introduction to clinical practice in therapy and spiritual direction. Miller-McLemore remarks that this area of religion and personality is strikingly young; for example, Vanderbilt added its first time faculty member in the area in 1959.<sup>437</sup> She goes on to state that if there is a comprehensive orientation that distinguishes the area of religion and personality “it is the focus on living, rather than dead persons and cultures, the focus on the psyche, whether understood as ego, soul, or self, and the focus on the clinical or therapeutic or healing dimension of psyche and living persons.”<sup>438</sup>

However, in 2007, the department changed its area title in to Religion, Psychology and Culture (RPC). According to the department website, the objective of RPC is to provide advance study of theories and dynamics of personality, the praxis and theory of pastoral theology and care, and critical and constructive reflection on the

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<sup>436</sup>“R and P Handbook,” Vanderbilt University, Graduate Department of Religion, May 2005, 2.

<sup>437</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “The subject and practice of pastoral theology as a practical theological discipline: pushing past the nagging identity crisis to the ‘poetics of resistance’” in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, ed. Denise Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm (Leuven, 1998), 176.

<sup>438</sup>Miller-McLemore, *Liberating Faith Practices*, 180.

methods and substance of both theology and the psychological sciences. In the area of RPC, “students are expected to develop competence in understandings of the human person in the social sciences and religion.”<sup>439</sup>

Yet another three-letter word has appeared in our area to describe these same areas of study: RPS (religion and psychological studies). In 2001, Diane Jonte-Pace and William Parsons published a literal map of the field, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain Contemporary Dialogues, Future Projects*. The purpose of the text is to encourage and provoke sustained debate over future directions for the field of religion and psychological studies (RPS). Jonte-Pace and Parsons refer to the multitude of perspectives that occur when one combines the fields of religion and psychology: psychology of religion, religion and culture, pastoral psychology, practical theology, religion and personality, and religion, personality and culture. Instead the authors make a broad designation and refer to the “field” as “religion and psychological studies” or RPS. In their text, they ask 17 different scholars in the field the same question: what they perceived to be the present status of the field and the probable paths for its future.<sup>440</sup> All agreed that the field of RPS is rich and vibrant, more sophisticated and varied than ever, and with no single map-able or predictable future. This text is significant for our department since it features essays from two of our most prominent professors: Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Volney Gay.<sup>441</sup> It also includes an essay from their professor at the University of Chicago, Don Browning.

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<sup>439</sup>Vanderbilt Graduate Department of Religion, “Religion , Psychology, and Culture,” accessed August 2010: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/gradschool/religion/study/RP.html>

<sup>440</sup>Diane Jonte-Pace and William B. Parsons, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain - Contemporary Dialogues, Future Prospects* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 7.

<sup>441</sup>Those chapters are Gays’ “Mapping religion psychologically: information theory as a corrective to modernism,” (94-109) and Miller-McLemore’s “Shaping the future of religion and psychology: feminist transformations in pastoral theology,” (181-201).

Don Browning's essay, "The past and possible future of religion and psychology studies," is significant for two reasons. First, Browning argues that the continued success of RPS is dependent on grounding itself in critical hermeneutical theory.<sup>442</sup> Although the field of RPS looks wildly divergent, and perhaps even unstable, poorly conceived, and drifting, the underlying questions and deep methodologies that holds the field together is found in their shared hermeneutic character.<sup>443</sup> An implicit critical hermeneutics is embedded in the multiple inquiries of the field of religion and psychological studies.<sup>444</sup> His central hypothesis of the article is that the field of RPS can only maintain its identity and fulfill its potential by recognizing itself as an exercise in critical hermeneutics.<sup>445</sup> Second, Browning sees a close association between practical theology and critical hermeneutics. In fact, he places "religion and psychological studies within the larger framework of practical theology. To me, a critical practical theology and a critical hermeneutics are nearly identical."<sup>446</sup> His book, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, was an attempt "to find a more comprehensive framework for holding together the various directions in which the field of RPS has gone."<sup>447</sup> Further, Browning cites his work on *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*:

exemplifies most of the methodological moves of *A Fundamental Practical Theology*. Both books are partial exercises in care, the dialogue between theology

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<sup>442</sup>Jonte-Pace and Parsons, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 8.

<sup>443</sup>Don Browning, "The past and possible future of religion and psychology studies," in *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, eds., Diane Jonte-Pace and William B. Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2001), 168.

<sup>444</sup>Browning, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 172.

<sup>445</sup>*Ibid.*, 168-9.

<sup>446</sup>*Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>447</sup>Browning goes on to state: "Because I see such a close association between practical theology and critical hermeneutics, it never occurred to me that I was necessarily leaving the field of religion and psychological studies when I wrote my book called *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (1991)." See, Browning, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 177.

and the social sciences, the psychology of religion, and cultural studies. Both books are submitted as exercises in critical hermeneutics.<sup>448</sup>

This dissertation is submitted as only one step in a very intense set of exercises of Browning's critical hermeneutical methodology.

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<sup>448</sup> Browning add, "But I would not want to leave the impression that every study in this general field should try to pursue the entire practical or critical hermeneutical task. Some should, but my main point is this: such frameworks are useful for helping to position the various more discrete enterprises and reminding us how they can complement one another and contribute to a larger whole." *Mapping the Terrain*, 177.

## CHAPTER III

### THE ESSAYS AND ME

*“You are making a huge mistake. Why would you want to just think about science when you could actually be doing science?” – my college advisor to me*

Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) was a grants initiative funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. to encourage college programs that 1) assist students in examining the relationship between faith and vocational choices; 2) provide opportunities for gifted young people to explore Christian ministry; and 3) enhance the capacity of a school's faculty and staff to teach and mentor students effectively in this arena.<sup>449</sup> Over a three year period, eighty-eight colleges and universities were selected to receive a two million dollar grant to design and implement programs related to the theological of exploration. This initiative was led by Craig Dykstra, Senior Vice President, Religion, and Chris Coble, program director, from Lilly Endowment, Inc.<sup>450</sup> A three person coordination team, along with an advisory panel, was implemented to carry out the aims of this initiative. In short, Lilly Endowment Inc. believes that:

vital religious communities are essential for a flourishing and humane society. Further, If such persons are carefully identified, educated broadly and well, and nurtured in strong faith commitments, they will be well equipped to enable churches and other institutions to contribute to the strengthening of American religious life and the common good of society.<sup>451</sup>

Overall, PTEV helped to sustain and coordinate eighty-eight college programs across the nation which reached thousands of students and impacted the scholarly conversation on the topic of vocation.

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<sup>449</sup>Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation website, accessed September 2010, See: <http://www.ptev.org/history.aspx?iid=48>

<sup>450</sup> Lilly Endowment website, accessed January 2011, see: <http://www.lillyendowment.org/contact.html>

<sup>451</sup>PTEV website, accessed September 2010, see: <http://www.ptev.org/history.aspx?iid=48>

In the fall of 2005, the coordination team for PTEV gathered students from eighty-six college programs across the country to convene in Indianapolis, IN, for a National Student Conference. Each school sent a team of five representatives, four of which were current college students. Each student was required to submit a “Price of Admission Essay” upon registration at the conference. These essays asked one of four questions submitted to the student before the conference began.<sup>452</sup> One question asked: what has been your biggest “a-ha moment” in college?

I read the essays a few months after the conference, during the time I was preparing for my qualifying exams. I gathered the forty-eight essays and was immediately captivated by their responses; I read the entire pile without stopping. I remember sitting on the floor of my PTEV office with my legs surrounded by the essays, having already put them into piles of common themes, looking around me thinking: *WOW!* The students were candid about a moment of fundamental change: they were honest, forthright, and sincere about their biggest “a-ha moment.” The stories captured in these essays were revealing the impact of a significant moment of change and important lessons learned along the way. Underlying these vivid accounts, I detected a complexity and particular patterns appeared immediately. For example, over two-thirds of the essays mentioned a crisis; many essays mentioned the importance of mentoring relationships, the transformative effect of serving others, and the joy of recognizing and using one’s talents. By being asked this question, the students responded by making statements about who they are, who they want to be, and what purpose there is for their lives. As a national

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<sup>452</sup> Every essay we received also included a permission form signed by the student giving permission to use the essay for public purposes and future distribution. Four months after the conference, the essays were made public and each student participant received a pdf file with every single essay response included in the document for their viewing. Finally, the entire set of essays was posted and included on the ptev website.

survey, the essays give a broad brushstroke of the experiences of college students and paint a very intimate picture of an important moment of personal change. In effect, these essays were discussing a moment of some kind of formation in which they emerged differently as a result of the experience.

In total, there are forty eight essays: seventeen are male and thirty-one are female. All respondents were between the age of 18 and 22, except one who was an older woman, married, with children. Other information about the essayists is a little less clear. For example, I do not know the racial make-up, class, or sexual orientation of each essayist. Only two pieces of information came with my copy of the essays: their name and their school. It should also be noted that each student signed a permission form to use the essays for public purposes. In fact, four months after the conference, each participant received a pdf file with every single essay response to all four questions. The same pdf document was also posted on the PTEV website ([www.ptev.org](http://www.ptev.org)).

Somewhere in the PTEV materials, which I was told were stored at the Endowment, are databases and more specific records on these students, including access to more personal information concerning their race, gender, region of the country, and so on. Currently, I do not have access to this material; although I could ask. Moreover, I can't help but wonder what it would be like to follow up with the essayists and inquire more into their a-ha moments, five years later. However, I should also add that when I worked with and analyzed the essays, it was a copy that removed their name and school affiliation. When I analyzed each essay, I had no idea if it was a woman or man or which school they attended. Furthermore, when I use a name in a description of the essays, I made up a name. I also tried remove any identifying characteristics involving college



names or locations. All the essayists were at the time enrolled in college; they also ranged from freshman to seniors. Some essays were two pages, most were one, and only one was three pages.

Many of the essays discussed the stress and anxiety of college life, telling stories about difficult decisions and pulling all nighters. The college experience is an extremely important time in the lives of many young people where many of their most important decisions are made.<sup>453</sup> These decisions range from choosing a major, an eventual career path, to more enduring decisions towards commitments in life. This age period is also important developmentally, as I will discuss in the next chapter. It is also a time of transition: the first time living away from home, in a new and constantly changing environment, and often independent. One student suggest: college “is the time to figure stuff out.” Other essayists respond:

- Many individuals utilize the years to enhance themselves in various aspects of their lives. Thus, emphasizing the importance of effectively participating in the ‘true’ college experience. The purpose of college incorporates many things, including the idea of discovering interests and future goals.
- The atmosphere that college engenders is exactly the atmosphere where ‘aha’ moments are born. For the first time, we are independent from our families, making decisions on our own, and away from everything familiar. Not only this, but we are asking questions about ourselves: who we are, who we want to be, and what the purpose is for our lives.”
- Many students want the unique college experience. I have observed that many college students meet with the challenges of ‘finding’ themselves. College students look to different identifiers instead of ‘discovering anything about themselves.’
- Ever since I was younger, I was always told that after high school came college because it was very important to continue my education... However, what I wasn’t informed of was that it is during this time that we make the decision of what exactly we want to do with our lives.
- College is a time where you do an incredible amount of growing in a short period of time. Sometimes huge discoveries are made and other times circumstances change so rapidly that you can barely keep up with yourself.

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<sup>453</sup> See [www.ptev.org](http://www.ptev.org), rationale.

- College seems to be a time full of ‘aha!’ moments for most young adults. In fact, sometimes I wonder if it’s not more that we’re young adults entering a new phase in life than that we’re college students. Whatever the case, almost all college students I know (specifically those who’ve gone away to school) have dealt with the same issues. The same feelings crop up at about the same time for thousands of students all over the country each year.
- College and University studies today have come to be seen almost as a rite of passage. Most people have gone through this ‘rite’ have experienced moments in their studies that have formed, shaped and ultimately changed them. In my own journey of studies, I too have had experiences that have left a lasting impression on me.

The past decade has brought a renewed interest into the lives of college students, particularly in their religious and spiritual lives.<sup>454</sup> One reason for this interest is because some theorists have “argued that spirituality has been ignored in theory and in student affairs and that this should change.”<sup>455</sup> PTEV, as mentioned earlier, is one such program that encouraged interest in the lives of faith of college students and commissioned books to encourage vocational reflection.<sup>456</sup> Another group, funded by the Teagle Foundation, studies the “Religious Engagement of American Undergraduates” as a way to explore the

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<sup>454</sup>Braskamp, L. A. 2008. “The Religious and Spiritual Journey of College Students.” In *The American University in a Postsecular Age: Religion and Higher Education*, edited by D. Jacobsen and R. H. Jacobsen (New York: Oxford University Press), Braskamp, L. A. and L. Trautvetter, et al. 2006. *Putting Students First: How to Develop Students Purposefully*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), Cherry, C. and B. A. DeBerg, et al. 2001. *Religion on Campus: What Religion Really Means to Today’s Undergraduates*. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press), Chickering, A. W. and J. C. Dalton, et al. 2005. *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), Flory, R. W. and D. E. Miller, eds. 2000. *Gen X Religion*. New York: Routledge, Jablonski, M., ed. 2001. *Implications of Student Spirituality for Student Affairs Practice: New Directions for Student Services, No. 95*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), Jacobsen, D. and R. H. Jacobsen, eds. 2008. *The American University in a Postsecular Age: Religion and Higher Education*. (New York, Oxford University Press), Riley, N. S. 2004. *God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation are Changing America*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press), Smith, C. 2009. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. (New York: Oxford University Press); Wilkins, A. C. 2008. *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: The Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

<sup>455</sup> Wilson, Maureen and Lisa Wolf-Wendel, *ASHE Reader on College Student Development Theory*. Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2005, xvii.

<sup>456</sup> William C. Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries Of Christian Wisdom On Vocation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005); Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass, *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do And Who We Should Be* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006); John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation And Social Conscience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006); Michael F. Duffy, *The Skeptical, Passionate Christian: Tools for Living Faithfully in an Uncertain World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.)

growing religious diversity in this group.<sup>457</sup> Further, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) released a report “The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose” whose focus is to bring to light the beliefs, behaviors and attitudes of American college students.<sup>458</sup> Finally, Christian Smith is the principal investigator of a longitudinal study, the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). Christian Smith adopts the language of emerging adulthood to describe his research participants in *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.<sup>459</sup>

I had intended to analyze the responses of the essayists in terms of their religious lives, and more particularly, discuss their images of God and idea of vocation. After all, many of the essays made reference to the term vocation because of the conference and organization’s title involving its exploration. However, a little over half of the essays mention God. And of these fifty-three percent that mention God, about eight mention God in passing – like a reference to God or an ending thought about God’s plan – but not enough to draw any conclusions. That leaves about thirty-six percent of the essays discussing God and vocation for me to analyze. I have an outline for a chapter that focuses on the essayists’ understanding of vocation, which uses Karl Barth’s notion of vocation and calling as an interpretive lens.<sup>460</sup> I was introduced to Barth’s exposition of

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<sup>457</sup> A web forum hosted by the Social Science Research Council’s Religion and the Public Sphere contains the website dedicated to the Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates and can be found at: <http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/>

<sup>458</sup> This multi-year study by HERI focused on over 112,000 students at 236 colleges and this database is housed in the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA and was made possible through a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. Rebecca Chopp is on their advisory board.

<sup>459</sup> Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adult*, (Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>460</sup> Although Barth’s analysis is relevant, he would actually be a part of step two, historical theology, or a part of step three, systematic theology, but not a part of descriptive theology, step one. See Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 7-8, 49-52.

vocation through Bill Placher during an interview for our website. He said that Barth had the best theological exploration of vocation that he had read.<sup>461</sup> And Placher should know: he had collected a resource book of primary source material on vocation for our initiative.<sup>462</sup> However, my investigation of the essayists' concept of vocation was stalled because I had over a third, maybe half if I stretched it, of the essays to really work with and analyze. I didn't really think that their numbers were conclusive of any real obvious patterns; further, this was a conference on vocation so many were perhaps mentioning the topic for that reason. But overall, their religious responses ended up being a weaker pattern and less prevalent than other patterns I follow in relation to their a-ha moment. I would like to look more into this lack of religious orientation in today's emerging adults, having just heard an analysis on NPR of the third wave of religious youth data which one analyst said "was simply depressing."

Regardless, my interest was not limited to the religious experiences of the essayists, but rather on how to describe and lift up the voices of these students as they reflect on a pivotal moment of change in their lives. Few studies have focused on understanding significant moments of change within the lives of college student. However, one particular research text looks specifically at the impact of college in *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*.<sup>463</sup> This aforementioned text in Chapter Two describes theories and models of student change in college that highlight specifically college impact theories underlying much of the research on college effects.

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<sup>461</sup>You can read the interview at [www.ptev.org](http://www.ptev.org)

<sup>462</sup>William C. Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries Of Christian Wisdom On Vocation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005).

<sup>463</sup>Pascarella, Ernest T. and Patrick T. Terezini. *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2005.

The authors pose six questions as a way to think about college effects.<sup>464</sup> But as stated previously, their approach, data analysis, and methodology rely on a positivistic foundation, which they freely admit. One immediate criticism of this resource on how college affects students is that they focus solely on outcomes and not on the influential factors that might cause student to change and develop. Other researchers lament that approaches like Pascarella and Terenzini focus on the structural characteristics of development while ignoring the questions of what experiences in college facilitate or impede development. Other than this resource on “college net effects,” I found very little about how college students change. Change seemed an important topic, especially when I remember that Professor Gay once said in class: every major psychological treatise is about change. Here, in the essays, were accounts of a kind of change that seemed forward growing and overall positive in nature.

The essayists’ stories about change seemed really important and I wondered how to extract and uncover the lessons and insights within them. The issue became problematized because I am not trained as a social scientific researcher. I am familiar with some qualitative methodologies from my coursework, but I was trained primarily in religious and psychological methodologies. Furthermore, unlike many research projects, I did not ask the question I analyze. I did not approach this project with a research question in mind, but only a kind of curiosity regarding a data set. Many research methodologies start with a particular topic of interest, move to a question of interest, find ways of

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<sup>464</sup>The six questions are as follows: 1) What evidence is there that individuals change during the time in which they are attending college?; 2) What evidence is there that change or development during college is the result of college attendance?; 3) What evidence is there that different kinds of postsecondary institutions have a differential influence on student change or development during college?; 4) What evidence exists on effects of different experiences in the same institution?; 5) What evidence is there that the collegiate experience produces conditional, as opposed to general, effect on student change or development?; 6) What are the long-term effects of college?

accumulating data to help answer that question, and which finally culminates into answering the research problem.<sup>465</sup> I came to this process somewhere in the middle as I came upon the essays and was taken by their sincerity and the depth of experience being expressed. There seemed to be important information and patterns that needed to be lifted up and shared with a wider community.

Gadamer is clear: in order to understand any text, the researcher must acknowledge her own embedded cultural framework, ideals, prior commitments, and prejudices in order to deepen her understanding process. These implicit ideals, presuppositions, and prejudices exist no matter how hard I might try to deny them. Instead, I should be conscious of them. For Gadamer, these human conditions do not hinder understanding, but instead, help in engendering understanding. Understanding always occurs against the background of prior involvements and commitments; therefore, all interpretation is necessarily “prejudiced” because each individual is embedded within a cultural framework and a particular context.

Overall, Gadamer lays out a foundational model of understanding. One key point is that:

we must become aware of our own embeddedness or historical situatedness and constantly reflect on the ways in which this situatedness influences the way that we interpret our world.<sup>466</sup>

Earlier, in Chapter Two, I stated that this embeddedness or situatedness equals the social location of the researcher. Social location reflects one’s class, gender, race, ethnicity, religious background, age, status, and social roles. Through the process of socialization, individuals internalize particular values, standards, and ideals. Such internalization,

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<sup>465</sup>Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb and Joseph Williams, *The Craft of Research*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 40-135.

<sup>466</sup> Swinton and Mowat, 111.

according to Jose Miguez Bonino, will inevitably condition the way in which people understand and express their views on religion, ethics, politics, or economics.<sup>467</sup> For Bonino, one's social location has to be taken into account in the interpretation of texts, ideologies, and attitudes.<sup>468</sup> In short, my own social location influences my construction of meaning.

Gadamer states: "To interpret means precisely to use one's own preconceptions so that the meaning of the text can really be made to speak for us."<sup>469</sup> So in order to read the essays in all their "richness," I need to reflect on my own preconceptions and ideals, and in order to do that, Gadamer directs me to reveal my own situatedness. Essentially: what's my story? In this endeavor, Gadamer urges for honesty and self-awareness. He states:

Total descriptive objectivity is a myth. Honesty rather than objectivity should be the major goal, and self-awareness on the part of the person doing the description is the only objectivity achievable.<sup>470</sup>

In many ways, this construction of my own effective history should have been my first step.

I was, and am, uncomfortable in revealing too many personal details in my *dissertation*, but if I really believe in the importance of effective history, attention to my own social location and experience matters. In short, I'd better practice what I preach.

Further, in her comments on my first draft, Bonnie Miller-McLemore asked me to "complete Chapter Three with some unpacking of your own effective history and why

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<sup>467</sup>Jose Miguez Bonino, "Social Location," in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. Virginia Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 280.

<sup>468</sup>Bonino, "Social Location," 280. It is interesting to think how both Gadamer (with his focus on situatedness) and liberation theology arrive at the same point, from radically different starting positions. Both stress the importance of the social location of the researcher on the topic of interest. One's social location has to be taken into account, not ignored like positivistic science tries to do.

<sup>469</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 358.

<sup>470</sup>Browning, *American Congregations*, 199.

you think these essays grabbed you so much. What has happened in your own life that made them so interesting to you?”

The short answer is: because I had a-ha moments that changed my life. But I’m not sure I ever realized that until I did this research. The experiences in the essays grabbed me because they were congruent with my own experience. I understood their stories because I had experienced similar situations. I knew the essays contained a kind of real-life wisdom (or *phronesis*) because I myself had experienced it. I, too, had been formed and shaped by particular pivotal moments; many of my own experiences mirrored those of the essayists.

If I had to answer the same question during college, I probably would have written about Sallie McFague and reading *Models of God*. I remember feeling slack-jawed and open-mouthed that you could even *do* that, imaginatively construct models of God in order to test out their implications and investigate their usefulness. McFague taught me that theology is “mostly fiction;” however, a multiplicity of images and metaphors can and should be used to enhance and enrich our models of God. It certainly expanded my own notions of God and broke theology out of a box for me. I was hooked.

But I need to do more than just reveal one of my own college a-ha moments if I am to take this concept of effective history seriously. This next section serves as an acknowledgement of my own social location and situatedness. Again, Gadamer urges for honesty and self-reflection. Gulp. So this is my own effective history, my (effective hi)story, my story. Or at least my story in regards to my interest in the essays. Like Bonino states, one’s social location has to be taken into account if the interpretation of



texts and reflects one's class, gender, race, ethnicity, religious background, generation, social status, and family role.<sup>471</sup>

I was raised in the mid-1970s in Evansville, Indiana. A town of 150,000, Evansville afforded my family a thoroughly middle-class living. My parents were both born to children of Dutch immigrants in South Dakota. Growing up, my dad worked for a garbage company; my mom worked at home. These are roles they still fill today. I have an older brother and a younger sister.

Both my parents were raised in the Christian Reformed Church in rural South Dakota in the 1940s. My mom was discouraged from attending dances, playing “devil cards,” and going to movies. My dad worked on the family farm that raised hogs, grew corn and lacked indoor plumbing; at eighteen, he left the farm and went to work for a garbage company. When I was young, dad read the Bible after dinner. Nowadays, we just pray before meals – shortened from the Lord's Prayer to: God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food. Amen.

I grew up in the Presbyterian Church because it was located at the top of our street; it housed my pre-school and was the closest Calvinist-based theology in town. The closest Christian Reformed Church was over 150 miles away. I grew up *always* having to go to church. I remember grudgingly pulling my loose tooth out with the hopes that the sight of blood would allow me to stay home. It didn't. I was given a Kleenex and hustled into the car.

In junior-high and high school, I belonged to the church's youth group “Reach Out.” Reach Out was a powerful and formative influence in my life. Each spring break,

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<sup>471</sup>Jose Miquez Bonino, “Social Location,” in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. Virginia Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah (New York: Orbis Books, 2000).

Reach Out organized a mission trip. Not a trip devoted to converting anyone, we worked in a community of need. We painted houses, rooms, and porches; we worked in shelters, cleaned houses, and activity rooms; we even dry-walled and put up simulated wood paneling. I remember an elderly woman on oxygen hobbling out to her porch, crying, because she couldn't believe that a bunch of high school students would scrape and paint her entire house for free. During their spring break! Reach Out offered me an outlet for community, fellowship, and friends, all doing common activities together as a group. It's no surprise that I was immediately grabbed by the essayists' description of the person forming power of fellowship groups. I discuss the impact of these cohort groups in Chapters Five and Seven. My own experience primed me to listen carefully and closely to the essayists' mention of fellowship and co-hort groups because it resonated strongly with my own experience.

During one spring break, Reach Out ventured to San Francisco where we worked at a battered woman's shelter in Chinatown. We also worked one day at the nation's largest soup kitchen, The Glide Memorial, which feeds around 3,000 people a day. And that's three meals a day. My partner all day was an African-American woman who was a recovering crack addict; she was working that "the Glide" as part of a program to get back custody of her children. That day, I remember serving people my *own* age food and wondering why they weren't in school. There were metal detectors everywhere and signs about weapons and guns. Some people coming through the lines smelled awful; it was like human deprivation.

I remember having a realization from that experience: I was very fortunate. But beyond that selfish thought, there was an even deeper realization about the nature of the

world and the reality of homelessness, poverty, destitution, and hopelessness. It was eye-opening. So, to respond again to Bonnie's question of what grabbed me: when the essayists wrote about their social service experiences. The essays grabbed me right away when they discussed the powerful formative and shaping effect of helping others and witnessing need, hunger, and alienation upfront, and then, doing something about it. I could understand the experience of being impacted by the midst of human suffering and how it changed their perspective. I reflect upon these and other social service practices of the essayists in Chapter Seven. In Chapter Eight, I make specific recommendations for college programs to implement required social service work and service learning classes into their curriculum.

I attended Hanover College, in Hanover, Indiana about 150 miles down the Ohio River from my hometown. I fell in love with Hanover during my dad and I's first drive down Scenic Drive. Hanover was rural, even smaller than my high school, and seemed far enough away from home. But not too far. No one I knew was going to Hanover. Hanover is also Presbyterian so I qualified as a National Presbyterian Scholar and received other financial assistance to make college possible. During my freshman year, my dad was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphatic cancer. I mention this because it was a huge crisis experience for my family and me. In the essays, one experience that grabbed me and really resonated with me was the description of a crisis experience, which occurred in almost two-thirds of the essays. My own experience may be part of the reason I devote an entire chapter, Chapter Six, to the crisis experiences of the essayists. Reading about other essays and my own experience might be why I make specific

recommendations in Chapter Eight for colleges and universities to have centers and offices of support for college students for times of crisis.

At Hanover, I majored in biology with a math minor. Although not pre-med as many other biology majors, I thought I would do research or study genetics. I liked science for its sense of investigation and curiosity with the possibility of generating and investigating answers. I balked at the required theology course for all Hanover students. I grew up in a very religious family and felt I had had enough of church and religion; I even consulted with my advisor how to opt out of the requirement. Feet dragging, I signed up for Dr. Barlowe's class "Theology and Human Suffering."

It's safe to say my mind was blown away in this course. Dr. Barlowe took on the subject of theodicy head-on and asked us to think hard about how suffering and God can both exist. I was captivated. After that, I took as many theology classes as I could, graduating one credit short of a double major.

It was my senior year, lots of stress as what "to do next." Some of my friends had ventured off on adventures after college, some were getting "real" jobs, others were getting married, but I wanted to spread my wings and fly! There was the possibility of moving to Indianapolis, where my parents and younger sister lived, and begin work at Eli Lilly Pharmaceuticals as an entry level lab technician. If I am to be honest and self-reflective, I have to admit that I was swayed by a dream.

In my dream I woke up in a bed, next to a sleeping man. I remember the room was large and spacious, fantastic drapes and the bed was luxurious. I had no idea who the man next to me was, although I felt I should know – he was my husband! I also knew I was 40. I tried to remember what had happened with my life, anything fun that had

happened, but all I could remember was my senior year and nothing after. It was like my whole life had gone by unnoticed and unremembered. I began to panic – surely I could remember something that had happened in my life! But it was blank, my whole life. I could feel my heart race as I realized I had wasted my life.

The panic of the dream hit me like a punch in the gut. I wanted to vomit. To me, it seemed like a premonition, a future self. It signified my fate if I moved to Indy and worked for a company that was noted for hiring from within. In twenty years, I would surely be successful. But my dream told me something else. It was literally gut-wrenching. I had the dream twice.

For help, I turned to a new gadget: the internet. I found an opening as a housekeeper at a dude ranch in Wyoming. A friend who was heading West two days after graduation offered to drop me off. I called my best friend, already in Idaho, about my new job prospect. Stef began to cry: the ranch was only 45 minutes from her, just the other side of the Grand Teton Mountains! It seemed confirmed in my mind. Head west young gal!

Telling my parents and other adults was another story. How much money would I make? Minimum wage. Where would I live? On a dude ranch. What would I do? Clean toilets. The conversation with my dad grew tense: You are making a big mistake. I cannot let you make this mistake. You cannot do this. Click. I had hung up on him.

My advisor: this is a *huge* mistake. I explained that I eventually wanted to do graduate work in theology in bio-medical ethics. He retorted: Why would you want to *think* about science when you could actually be *doing* science? At graduation, I received the distinguished student in theological studies award, a complete surprise. It was the first

time a non-major had won the award. It also was enough of a boost to help confirm that my plan to continue in theology was warranted and encouraged.

I reflect on this experience in college and my eventual hiatus from “the real world” – to what my mom still despairingly refers to as “going to Wyoming to find yourself” – because it has direct implications for Chapter Four and Arnett’s theory of emerging adulthood. Doing the research suddenly made me more aware of why I felt compelled to make a “huge mistake” in order to venture out and explore. It also caused me to have more empathy for the students as they described stress about “what to do next” and figure out how to navigate life in today’s culture.

Back at the ranch, I had to ferry a bunch of “dudes” to the Jackson Hole Rodeo. In the passenger seat of my 16 passenger van sat the president of a major company. He says to me: “You know, I would give both my eye-teeth to trade places with you right now.” I was shocked; I was making \$5.15 an hour and here was a multi-millionaire telling me he wanted my job. What? I told him to do it, take my job! I’ll trade you, I offered. He explained he couldn’t just walk away from the commitments of his life: family, job, responsibilities. This conversation made an impact on me; I guess I felt a bit vindicated. Looking at the essays, there are at least three specific descriptions of a-ha moments involving a seemingly random conversations with an adult. Ostensibly, this might explain why I highlight these descriptions and other experiences of the power of a random conversation in Chapters Five and Seven.

I worked at the ranch until it shut down for the season, before the snow and hunters came. I moved back in with my parents in Indy and I waitressed tables. My sister, in middle school, was thrilled. My parents were hopeful I would work for Lilly. Instead, I

got an offer to work in Hawaii for few months through a contact at the ranch. The tourist season in Maui started after the first of the year and a sporting clays range needed help for a few months. They would train me to be a shotgun shooting instructor. Was I interested? You betcha.

I should add that I come from a family that owns guns and hunts. I grew up camping, fishing, and hunting. My brother is an avid outdoorsman who hunts waterfowl and deer; my dad prefers ducks, geese, and pheasants. My thirteenth (yes, 13<sup>th</sup>) birthday present was a twenty-gauge Winchester Green Wing five shell pump-action shot-gun. I've hunted with it and taught all my shooting lessons using that gun.

Teaching people how to shoot a shotgun adds an entire new level to the pedagogical experience. Patience is a virtue but also a necessity. When teaching someone to shoot a shotgun, always use a side-by-side: you can easily tell if the gun is loaded or not. If you are teaching Japanese women how to shoot a shotgun, which was my job in Hawaii, always use a .410. It has the lightest kick, but still be sure to stand behind them with your hand on the stock. Later, using the same technique, I helped a five year old break targets. My friend in bio-ethics said she had an ethical *and* moral problem with me.

I did go on to do graduate work in theology and went to Vanderbilt Divinity School. I think I went there because McFague taught there; I ended up taking two courses from her before she retired. I had an a-ha moment during one of my classes "Hope and Despair" with Bruce Vaughn.<sup>472</sup> We read Ed Farley's description of primal evil: idolatry. Suddenly, I understood why human beings did such terrible things. I swear, I looked out the window and the big tree outside the Divinity school windows actually looked different. I enrolled in the MTS program and focused on bio-medical ethics in my

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<sup>472</sup> This was the first PhD level seminar that I took in R and P. Again, I was hooked.

coursework, even doing a series of internships in two locations in clinical ethics.<sup>473</sup> At the same, I was doing a work-study job in a lab in the developmental biology department. Because of these personal experiences, I specifically highlight the importance of jobs and internships for emerging adults in Chapter Seven. In my conclusion, I make specific recommendations for colleges' to provide internships and work study opportunities for their students to work in the community in "real" jobs.

I returned to Hanover after getting my MTS at Vanderbilt Divinity School under auspicious circumstances. My job for the year was to teach a flurry of introductory courses to cover for Mike Duffy as he was on leave to write a grant for Lilly. Hanover was one of a handful of religiously-affiliated schools asked by Lilly to write proposals for a two million dollar grant to study the theological concept of vocation. As an aside, I had to negotiate my contract to teach theology at Hanover with my old advisor, who was now the dean, about four years after he declared I was making a huge mistake. I admit, after signing my contract, I strutted a bit out of his office.

That first year at Hanover, I taught introductory theology courses titled: Theology and Science. Teaching a required course, I always had a great entry line: I know you don't want to be here. I didn't either. And now look at me, I'm teaching this stuff! A version of this course went on to win the International Competition for College Courses, sponsored by the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS).

The next year, with grant in hand, Hanover's program focused on mentoring. Lots of money was dumped into faculty salaries and new hires, like me, to incorporate intentional vocational mentoring for their students. For example, in each of my

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<sup>473</sup> I call these internships, but the actual language is "supervised ministry." With the help of the wonderful Viki Matson, I was able to construct a series of supervised ministry credits in my program that put me in the hospital actually *doing* clinical ethics, at both St. Thomas and Vanderbilt Medical Center.



introductory course, I had to spend three hours of individual mentoring time with each student to discuss vocational issues. It was a wonderful experience for me, and hopefully for the students. So, mentoring and its impact was another topic that grabbed me and I discuss mentoring in Chapters Five and Seven. Because I have been fortunate to have been mentored over the years, as well as extensive work as a mentor, might be why I make recommendation for intentional mentoring programs on college campuses.

Also, teaching theology at Hanover, I was also privy to some a-ha moments – or at least situations where perspectives seemed to be widen and expanded. In class, we discussed the historical Jesus (essentially what science had to say) and the Nicene Creed, including its construction in 325 A.D. As the most widely used liturgical prayer in the Christian tradition, the Nicene Creed affirms the divinity of Jesus, thereby rejecting Jesus’ humanity. Three girls who sat together, worshipped together, and belonged to the same sorority approached me after class; in my head, I had referred to them as “The Methodist Trio” and they asked: “Is this the prayer we say every week in church?” “You mean that prayer really is saying that Jesus isn’t a human being, but instead, like, God?” “I’ve been saying that prayer every week of my life and now I finally know what it means!” “I don’t even think I agree with it!”

I loved teaching. Loved it. And I was encouraged to enter PhD work. My conversation with the world of college students continued: I began work in Nashville for PTEV, the newly established coordination program for Hanover’s grant along with a new second round of grants. The first round of grants was so successful that Lilly was beginning a second round, which would ultimately lead to a third round and end with 88 schools in total. My work began with PTEV filing and answering phones; five years later,

it ended as the Technical Program Coordinator, in charge of the PTEV website and all things technology at conferences and meetings. I worked twenty hours a week for PTEV and balanced that with full time PhD work. I felt like I was getting two educations at once. It was intense, enlightening, and a real joy.

The descriptions in the essays of a-ha moments grabbed me because I had experience like those, too. It was an experience-near approach, like practical theology asserts. I see now, in retrospect, how many of my categories of analysis were also reflections of my own experience. Perhaps my research and approach would have been “better” had I done this kind of reflection as my first step, and not my last.

## CHAPTER IV

### PSYCHOSOCIAL LENS

*“In fact, sometimes I wonder if it’s not more that we’re young adults entering a new phase in life than that we’re college students.” – Ann, essayist*

Student development theory – and society at large – refers to college students in a myriad of different ways: young adults, young people, co-eds, extended adolescents, youthhood, aduolescents, the twixter years, twenty-somethings, Generation X, Y, and Z, transition to adulthood population, and quarter-lifers. Erik Erikson, the predecessor of psychosocial theory, refers directly to college students as adolescents who have postponed adult commitments and responsibilities; thereby, they have entered a period called “prolonged adolescence” which he describes as a “psychosocial moratorium.” Developmentally, according to Erikson’s life stage theory, these college essayists are situated in stage five, adolescents, and not yet quite to stage six, young adulthood. However, major biological and cultural changes have occurred since these terms were introduced; for example, the median age of marriage and first child have risen steeply now occur in the later twenties. Because of particular cultural and biological changes, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett proposes a new developmental life stage after adolescence, but before young adulthood, which he calls “emerging adulthood.” Jensen posits that “emerging adult” better depicts and describes Americans ages 18-25; moreover, emerging adulthood is “a period characterized for most people by change and exploration, as they examine the life possibilities open to them and gradually arrive at

more enduring choices in love, work, and worldviews.”<sup>474</sup> I argue that the essayists are better described as emerging adults. To support this argument, I look to the essays for evidence of the five distinct developmental markers Arnett proposes in his theory. The five developmental markers are:

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1. The age of identity exploration
  2. The age of instability
  3. The self-focused age
  4. The age of feeling in-between
  5. The age of possibilities

Within the essays, I find confirmation of these five developmental markers. Compelling accounts describe exploration, instability, and possibility – some excited by the abundance of possibilities ahead, others daunted by the future unknown. One essayist, Ann, describes its perfectly when she states: “In fact, sometimes I wonder if it’s not more that we’re young adults entering a new phase in life than that we’re college students.” If Arnett is correct, than Ann is right, too: she is literally entering into a new phase of life.

### **Effective History: Psychosocial Theory**

But first, I want to situate my perspective by giving a brief historical overview of psychosocial theory. Key texts and perspectives, or classics, are discussed in order to construct an “effective history” of psychosocial theory which is based largely on Erikson’s life stage theory. Terminology like adolescent and young adult were terms created by and expanded upon by psychosocial theory. Psychosocial theory is one of two

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<sup>474</sup>Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Readings on Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 28-29.

foundational approaches in student development theory.<sup>475</sup> Psychosocial theory examines the content of development in terms of biological, psychological and socio-cultural influences. Development takes place across the life span within a series of age-linked sequential stages.<sup>476</sup> Stages occur as “internal biological and psychological changes interact with environmental demands, such as social norms and roles expected of individuals at certain ages in particular cultures.”<sup>477</sup> Within each stage, developmental tasks arise and contain specific challenges that seek resolution. Psychosocial theory examines an individual’s personal and interpersonal life while acknowledging a basic structure in human development. For Nancy Evans, the common theme which unites all psychosocial theories is that human development continues over the life span and contains a basic underlying psychosocial structure guided by linked sequential stages.<sup>478</sup>

### **Erik Erikson**

Erik Erikson is hailed as the progenitor of psychosocial theory. According to Evans, Erikson was the first clinical psychologist to address the developmental journey from adolescence through adulthood.<sup>479</sup> Like Freud, Erikson believed the personality developed in a series of stages; however, Erikson expanded his theory to include the entire lifespan as well as socio-cultural influences. Also, contrary to Freud, Erikson did not rely entirely on universal drive theory but instead integrated examples from

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<sup>475</sup>The other approach, according to Nancy Evans, is cognitive structural. Nancy Evans, *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009) 42.

<sup>476</sup>Evans, *Student Development in College*, 42.

<sup>477</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>478</sup>*Ibid.*, 10

<sup>479</sup>*Ibid.*, 48.

anthropology and cultural studies. Erikson's language reflects this mixed methods approach when he uses terms like "psychosocial strength," "psychosocial creature," and "psychosocial moratorium."<sup>480</sup> This leads Erikson make effusive statements like: "For man's need for a psychosocial identity is anchored in nothing less than his sociogenetic evolution."<sup>481</sup>

For Erikson, development takes place across the life span in a series of eight age-linked sequential stages.<sup>482</sup> Each stage has particular developmental tasks which occur and present considerable questions that must be resolved. Development is considered ontologically epigenetic: unfolding growth by successive differentiation where development is genetically programmed and is determined by the interaction of biological (body), psychological (mind), and societal (cultural) influences. Each stage is characterized by a specific developmental task or "psychosocial crisis" which has biological, psychological, and cultural elements.

### **Erikson and Identity**

One of Erikson's most important contributions is the development of the concept of identity. Erikson developed the term "identity crisis" which became a central idea in his writings and painted as the most significant conflict a person must face.<sup>483</sup> In *Identity*,

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<sup>480</sup>Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1968) 141, 161-62, 156-158.

<sup>481</sup>Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 41.

<sup>482</sup>Erikson's wife, Joan, expanded the life stage theory to include a ninth and final stage. See, Erik Erikson and Joan Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997).

<sup>483</sup>Erikson states, "No doubt my best friends will insist that I needed to name this crisis and see it in everybody else in order to really come to terms with it myself." Erikson and Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*. Erikson struggled with his own identity, particularly as a growing boy, and even going so far as to change his name from Erik Homberger to Erik Erikson, a name he made up.

*Youth, and Crisis*, Erikson defines an identity crisis as “designating a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation.”<sup>484</sup> An identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. Identity crisis occurs during adolescence as a result of the central conflict between identity formation and identity confusion. Identity formation is the most prominent issue of adolescence and the most crucial for development: a clear identity is the foundation for the commitments found in the next stages of adult life.

For Erikson, the development of identity reaches its critical time with the advent of puberty and rapid body growth. Puberty is the beginning of adolescence and the fifth stage of his life cycle. The sixth stage is “young adulthood” beginning about age 18 and continuing until the age of 35. Young adulthood is characterized by personal commitments, generally to another person, where the central crisis is the choice between “intimacy versus isolation.”<sup>485</sup> Erikson is clear: “the reliability of young adult commitments largely depends on the outcome of the adolescent struggle for identity.”<sup>486</sup> A clear identity must be established in adolescence because it will serve as the foundation for commitments in adult life. Because of this concern, “the primary focus of Erikson’s work was on adolescence, and adolescent development is where he has had his greatest influence.”<sup>487</sup>

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<sup>484</sup>Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 16. A key influence on the concept of identity crisis was his study of the Oglala Lakota and their rituals governing the period between adolescence and adulthood. He also studied the Sioux of South Dakota. For these Native Americans, tradition prevailed that an adolescent boy would be sent off, weaponless and with no food, for a dream quest. On the fourth day, it was expected that the boy would experience a dream which would reveal his life’s path. The boy would return a man. See, Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1950), 133-156.

<sup>485</sup>Erikson and Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*, 57-56.

<sup>486</sup>Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 72.

<sup>487</sup>Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach* (Upper Saddle River,

But what if an identity is not secured by the end of adolescence at age 18? Erikson answers this by introducing the concept of a “psychosocial moratorium.” A psychosocial moratorium occurs in adolescence when commitments and identities are postponed and it is “a prolongation of the interval between youth and adulthood.”<sup>488</sup> Again, in *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, Erikson offers two biographical case studies of psychosocial moratorium: George Bernard Shaw and William James. He describes this period also as a “prolonged adolescence” and noting that industrialized societies allow for a prolonged period of identity formation. Key in this psychosocial moratorium is the ability to explore and “try out” different beliefs or ideologies in order to clarify one’s own beliefs. Erikson states:

A moratorium is a period of delay granted to somebody who is not ready to meet an obligation or forced on somebody who should give himself time. By psychosocial moratorium, then, we mean a delay of adult commitments, and yet it is not only a delay. It is a period characterized by a selective permissiveness on the part of society and of provocative playfulness on the part of youth, and yet it also often leads to deep, it often transitory, commitment on the part of youth, and ends in a more or less ceremonial confirmation of commitment on the part of society.<sup>489</sup>

A psychosocial moratorium is a period of delay in adult commitments allowed by a “selective permissiveness on the part of society.” Furthermore, college students, including the essayists, are in a psychosocial moratorium. Erikson states: “Adolescence and the ever more protracted apprenticeship of the later school and college years can, as we saw, be viewed as a psychosocial moratorium: a period of sexual and cognitive maturation and yet a sanctioned postponement of definitive commitment. It provides a

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NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007), 175.

<sup>488</sup>Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 143.

<sup>489</sup>*Ibid.*, 157.



relative leeway for role experimentation. . . .”<sup>490</sup> Therefore, according to Erikson, students who enroll in college participate in a psychosocial moratorium of prolonged adolescence which delays commitment and, instead, allows for experimentation and the continuation of identity formation. Thus, according to Erikson, college students are best described as adolescents?

### **Adolescence: A Cultural Construction**

Arnett argues that college students are NOT adolescents. To back up his argument, Arnett delves into the history of adolescence; ultimately, he rejects adolescence by finding it lacking as a description of contemporary Americans age 18-25. Arnett traces the term “adolescence” to its first usage by the Ancient Greeks who used the term to describe youth between the ages of 14-21. For the Greeks, adolescence was the third stage of life.<sup>491</sup> The term has spotty usage after that, but was solidified in 1904 with G. Stanley Hall’s textbook on adolescence: *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*.<sup>492</sup> Hall’s work marked a larger era known as the “Age of Adolescence” that took place from the 1890s-1920s. His work helped to reform child labor laws and set new education requirements for secondary school; it also marked the field of adolescence as an area of scholarly study.<sup>493</sup> In short, Hall defined adolescence as 14-24. The age fourteen is

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<sup>490</sup>Erikson and Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*, 75.

<sup>491</sup>Arnett cites that both Plato and his student Aristotle argued that serious education should begin at adolescence. Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 5.

<sup>492</sup>G. Stanley Hall obtained the first PhD in psychology in the United States and was the founder of the American Psychological Association.

<sup>493</sup>Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 10.

significant because it was the beginning of puberty. Ultimately, adolescence was characterized as a period in the life course between puberty and adult status. Consequently, this was also the inherited framework of understanding for Erikson when he used the word adolescence to describe the stage before adulthood.

However, since that time, important biological and cultural changes have taken place in the past century which widens the gap between adolescence and adulthood. For example, a major biological change has occurred since Hall began to study adolescents: the decline of the median age of menarche. During Hall's time, the median age of menarche was about 15; however, over one hundred years later, the typical age of menarche is 12.5.<sup>494</sup> Because puberty is understood to begin two years prior to menarche, this places today's age of puberty to be closer to ten. Puberty "begins for most people in industrialized countries at a much earlier age, due to advances in nutrition and health care."<sup>495</sup> Said in another way, "puberty moved about two years earlier in the life course of people in industrialized societies so that most young people now show the first physical changes of puberty at age 10 to 12."<sup>496</sup> Recently released evidence cites a growing trend in puberty rates: fifteen percent of American girls are entering puberty at seven years old. In the United States, second grade girls are showing marked signs of puberty.<sup>497</sup>

Combined with these significant biological changes, Arnett also believes a cultural revolution has occurred for young people. For example, in 1970, the typical 21

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<sup>494</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>495</sup>*Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>496</sup>*Ibid.*, ix-x.

<sup>497</sup>I accessed both of these articles by chance while I looked through the news headlines in August of 2010. See, [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38600414/ns/health-kids\\_and\\_parenting/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38600414/ns/health-kids_and_parenting/) and <http://www.cnn.com/2010/HEALTH/08/09/girls.starting.puberty.early/index.html?hpt=T2>

year old was married (or about to be married), caring for a newborn (or expecting one soon), and settled into a long term job, either as a parent or in the work force.<sup>498</sup> Serious and enduring decisions about life were made at a relatively early age; adulthood was easily attained and occurred in the early twenties. Contrast this image with the image of an average 21 year old today: marriage is at least six years off, parenthood more so, and education might continue so that the prospect of full time work is still years away.<sup>499</sup> Arnett states: “From age at first childbirth as well as for marriage, the variance has expanded as the median age has risen.”<sup>500</sup> After forty years, significant demographic changes have taken place in terms of puberty, marriage, and parenthood for young people in industrialized societies. The median ages of marriage and first birth in the United States have risen to unprecedented levels and now occur into the late twenties.<sup>501</sup> The late teens and early twenties are no longer about forming enduring adult roles; rather, they have become a period of exploring various life possibilities. Instead of making commitments, the late teens and early twenties are now characterized by frequent change and exploration. The typical markers of adulthood are now postponed, resulting in a rising age at marriage, first child, and entering the labor force.<sup>502</sup> Arnett states: “Postponing these transitions until at least the late twenties leaves the late teens and early twenties available for exploring various possible life directions.”<sup>503</sup>

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<sup>498</sup>Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>499</sup>In 1970, the median age of marriage was 21 (female) and 23 (male); 1996 median marriage age 25 (female) 27 (male). Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*.

<sup>500</sup>Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Jennifer Lynn Tanner, *Emerging Adults in America: Coming to Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 5.

<sup>501</sup>*Ibid.*, 3-5.

<sup>502</sup>Jens Asendorpf, Jaap Denissen, and Marcel van Aken, “Human Development from Early Childhood to Early Adulthood,” in *Human Development from Early Childhood to Early Adulthood*, eds. Wolfgang Schneider and Merry Bullock (New York: Psychology Press, 2009) 120. (119-143)

<sup>503</sup>Arnett, *Readings on Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 19.

## Emerging Adulthood: Bridging the Gap

Because of these biological and cultural changes, Arnett proposes a new period in the life cycle called emerging adulthood. The late teens and early twenties are now times of exploring various possibilities and different life directions. Emerging adulthood bridges the growing gap between adolescence and adulthood in industrialized societies. Just as adolescence and young adult were terms constructed in response to cultural changes, emerging adulthood refers to a new period in the life course of people in industrialized societies, bridging the gap between adolescence and young adulthood.<sup>504</sup> Arnett, like Erikson, takes a psychosocial approach to development and highlights the changing biological and cultural demographics of industrialized societies. Furthermore, Arnett cites Erikson's own observations concerning growing trends toward industrialization: "Even forty years ago, Erikson observed that identity formation was taking longer and longer for young people in industrialized societies."<sup>505</sup> Supplementing Erikson, Arnett suggest a new stage of development, between stage five of adolescence and stage six of young adulthood, called emerging adulthood.

Sharon Parks also proposes a new developmental period for people aged 18-25 in *The Critical Years* and in *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*. As stated previously, two foundational approaches support student development theory.<sup>506</sup> One is psychosocial theory, which has been described at length. The other approach, according to Nancy Evans, is cognitive structural theory. Cognitive structural theory is based on the work of

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<sup>504</sup> Arnett, *Readings on Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 85.

<sup>505</sup> Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 181.

<sup>506</sup> Evans, *Student Development in College*, 42.

Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and William Perry, but also expanded by James Fowler in faith development theory. Parks amends Fowler's five-stage faith development stages and hypothesizes a new stage – between stage three and stage four – based on her work with college students. Parks argues that this is a new and crucial development in the human life cycle. Recognizing this period is important society because young adulthood is “the birthplace of adult vision and the power of on-going cultural renewal.”<sup>507</sup> This birthplace of adult vision needs to be cultivated and tended, not only for the individual young adult, but “also for our future as a culture depends in no small measure upon our capacity to recognize the emerging competence of young adults, to initiate them into big questions, and give them access to worthy dreams.”<sup>508</sup>

Student development researchers agree that negotiating one's 20s has been described as one of the most complex and challenging developmental life stages; however, there is a dearth of research efforts on this group.<sup>509</sup> Arnett, like Parks, seeks to rectify this omission by suggesting a new developmental period that more accurately accounts for the ever-expanding biological and cultural changes for young adults in American society. New descriptions are needed to account for today's cultural and biological trends.

But why not just use the term young adult? That is the term Erikson chose and is also used by Parks and other key researchers. Why not describe the essayists as young adults? Arnett gives a number of reasons why the term of young adulthood does not work; in brief, it is a term that is used too widely in too many different contexts. For

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<sup>507</sup>Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), xii.

<sup>508</sup>Sharon Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dream: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), xi.

<sup>509</sup>Varda Konstam, *Emerging and Young Adulthood: Multiple Perspectives, Diverse Narratives* (New York: Springer, 2007), 1.

example, at a library, the “young adult” section is targeted to high school students. The same might be said for other terms like a young adult church group or young adult magazine. Furthermore, at least in Erikson’s theory, young adult implies that adulthood has been reached. Young adulthood, as stage six, is the first of “two adult stages.” Young adulthood is reached after identity formation is completed and where enduring commitments are made. An adult, for Erikson, is “someone who is able to take care of what he cares to be, whom he cares to be with, and whom and what he causes to do.”<sup>510</sup> Erikson contends: “Our two adult stages, adulthood and young adulthood, are not meant to preempt all the possible sub-stages of the period between adolescence and old age.”<sup>511</sup> Erikson holds his life theory open for expansion; moreover, Arnett capitalizes on this to suggest emerging adulthood as a possible stage. Arnett asserts that 18-25 year olds are *not* adults and to hold them to standards of adulthood is to do them a great disservice. Emerging adulthood suggests that they are actively being formed to become adults, but are still developing and growing.

In the end, adolescence and young adulthood are helpful and relevant categories; however, Arnett argues that these categories no longer apply to contemporary people age 18-25. Instead, the theory of emerging adulthood provides a paradigm that is useful in guiding thinking and research on this age period.<sup>512</sup> Adolescence, young adulthood, and even emerging adulthood are cultural constructions and as culture changes, so should our descriptive terms. Arnett states: “The term emerging adult is preferable because it distinguishes them from adolescents while recognizing that they are not yet fully

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<sup>510</sup>Erik Erikson, *Dimensions of a New Identity* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), bookjacket.

<sup>511</sup>Erikson and Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*, 66.

<sup>512</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood in America*, xviii.

adult.”<sup>513</sup> For most people, the late teens through the mid-twenties are the most volitional years of life; emerging adulthood is characterized by relative independence from social roles and normative expectations.<sup>514</sup>

### Other Researchers and Emerging Adulthood

Admittedly, Arnett’s research is in the nascent stages. One of his first texts, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*, was published in 2004. But emerging adulthood – as a concept useful in guiding thinking and research – is quickly catching on, particularly in academic circles. Christian Smith adopts the language of emerging adulthood to describe his research participants in *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*<sup>515</sup>. Continuing his analysis of the third wave of longitudinal data from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), Smith noticed that his population had “transitioned to a new phase of life.”<sup>516</sup> For Smith and his team: “We find persuasive the psychologist Jeffrey Arnett’s argument that of all these labels, ‘emerging adulthood’ is the most appropriate.”<sup>517</sup>

Smith comments that emerging adulthood is significant because as a cultural construction it includes biology and material concerns to produce a thoroughly 21<sup>st</sup> century category. Just as *teenager* and *adolescent* were descriptors of a distinct stage of life in the twentieth century, cultural changes have now produced “macro social changes

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<sup>513</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 18.

<sup>514</sup>Arnett, *Readings on Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 18.

<sup>515</sup>Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>516</sup>Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

<sup>517</sup>Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 6.

(that) have combined to create a new phase in the American life course.”<sup>518</sup> Smith highlights four distinct changes: the dramatic growth in higher education, the delay of marriage, globalization and industrialization, and the abundance of parental resources which “subsidizes the freedom that emerging adults enjoy.”<sup>519</sup> Like Arnett, Smith and his team use interview material to illustrate the contemporary cultural landscape in the United States. Smith states: “The purpose of this book is to investigate what happens, as youth enter and begin to move through emerging adulthood, to their religious and spiritual lives in particular.”<sup>520</sup>

Although the scholarship on emerging adulthood is young, “it has expanded quickly and already has begun to take shape as a distinct area of scholarship.”<sup>521</sup> Three other examples suffice. First, Asendorpf, Denissen, and van Aken also use the label of emerging adulthood because they concur that a distinct and enduring period of life has occurred. “It has been stated that the demographic shifts of the past half century in Western cultures (such as a higher age at the time of marriage, first childbirth, and entering the labor force) have considerably changed the period of the late teens and the early twenties.”<sup>522</sup> Next, *Emerging and Young Adulthood* by Varda Konstam focuses on negotiating one’s twenties as one of the “most complex and challenging developmental stages.”<sup>523</sup> Konstam contends: “Understanding the contextual landscape, as well as listening to the voices of individuals who have emerged from this period of their life

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<sup>518</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>519</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>520</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>521</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America*, xvi.

<sup>522</sup>Jens Asendorpf, Jaap Denissen, and Marcel van Aken, “Human Development from Early Childhood to Early Adulthood,” in *Human Development from Early Childhood to Early Adulthood*, eds. Wolfgang Schneider and Merry Bullock (New York: Psychology Press, 2009) 119. (119-143)

<sup>523</sup>Konstam, *Emerging and Young Adulthood*, 1.



enriches the discussion.”<sup>524</sup> Like Arnett and Smith, Konstam does in-depth interviews and finds the life stories of these emerging adults compelling: “Their rich and diverse narratives attempt to illustrate and capture the complexity as well as nuance of this developmental period.”<sup>525</sup>

Finally, and most recently, National Public Radio featured an *OnPoint* interview about emerging adults. Tom Ashbrook comments on Arnett’s theory and retorts: “Critics say, come off it. Get a job. Get going. But that’s tough in this economy. And the twenties are changing.”<sup>526</sup> Ashbrook discusses the theory of emerging adulthood with Robin Hennig, a contributing writer for the New York Times, whose August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010 cover story was titled: “What is it about 20-Somethings?”<sup>527</sup> Hennig cites lots of evidence and most compelling, she says, is data from neuroscience that proves that the brain is not fully developed or fully mature until the late twenties. Hennig adds that the age of first marriage in the US has increased five years in the past decade. The average person entering her twenties can expect to change jobs seven times within the decade. In the 1970s, of the five major milestones of adulthood – completing school, leaving home, becoming financially independent, marrying and having a child – most people had these markers completed by the age of thirty. However, today, more than half of all thirty year-olds have barely begun to even start the list. Hennig cites Arnett’s theory and supports his construction of a new life phase because her research demonstrates that 18-25 year old in

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<sup>524</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>525</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>526</sup> I heard this program by chance on National Public Radio (NPR) while working on this chapter. I listened to this program and then accessed the transcript in August 2010. See, <http://www.onpointradio.org/2010/08/redefining-20-something-life>

<sup>527</sup>The byline to this story is “Why are so many people in their 20s taking so long to grow up?” Accessed September 2010: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/magazine/22Adulthood-t.html>

America are still developing; therefore, the description of emerging adult is quite appropriate.

### **The Essays: Emerging Adults?**

In order to argue that the essayists are better described as emerging adults, I examine the essays for evidence of the five main feature of Arnett's theory. Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood is based on five developmental markers: 1) the age of identity exploration, 2) the age of instability, 3) the self focused age, 4) the age of feeling in-between, and 5) the age of possibilities. These five developmental markers are indicative of emerging adulthood as a distinct life stage and are based on Arnett's research over the past decade.<sup>528</sup> I explore each developmental marker and then look to the essays in order to determine if these characteristics are present. In the end, the essays provide plenty of evidence that emerging adulthood is a better description of their life stage and, just as Ann describes in her essay: "In fact, sometimes I wonder if it's not more that we're young adults entering a new phase in life than that we're college students." Technically, it is a new phase of life and it's called emerging adulthood.

Emerging adulthood is a new and separate period in the life course of 18-25 years old in industrialized countries. Theoretically and empirically distinct from adolescence and young adulthood, emerging adulthood is characterized by exploration, instability, and possibility. Arnett states:

Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it

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<sup>528</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America*, 7.

will be at any other period of the lifespan. For most people, the late teens through the mid-twenties are the most *volitional* years of life.<sup>529</sup>

Emerging adulthood is not a universal period of development and “would most likely to be found in countries that are highly industrialized or ‘postindustrial.’”<sup>530</sup> But because of key changes in human biology (puberty rates are dropping) and culture (marriage and first birth ages are rising), Arnett offers emerging adulthood as a bridge to cross the growing gap between adolescence and young adulthood.

### *One: The Age of Identity Exploration*

For Arnett, the “age of identity exploration” is the first and most central feature of emerging adulthood. Possibilities are explored and investigated, and in the process, identities are formed and clarified. Furthermore, this particular developmental marker of “identity exploration” refers to the crucial period of identity development: where explorations culminate into commitments that build on a foundation for life.<sup>531</sup> Arnett states:

Emerging adulthood is the age of identity explorations in the sense that it is the period when people are most likely to be exploring various possibilities for their lives in a variety of areas, especially love and work, as a prelude to making the enduring choices that will set the foundation for their adult lives.<sup>532</sup>

Identity is formed in the context of trying out new possibilities and exploring new directions. “During this interval of years, when they are neither beholden to their parents nor committed to a web of adult roles, they have an exceptional opportunity to try out different ways of living and different options for love and work.”<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> Arnett, *Readings on Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 18, original emphasis.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>531</sup> Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 175.

<sup>532</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America*, 8.

<sup>533</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 8.

The process of identity development is also referred to as identity formation. For Erikson, identity formation involves reflecting on your traits, abilities, and interests, trying out various possibilities, while sifting through the range of life choices available in your culture, and ultimately making commitments.<sup>534</sup> However, Erikson's framework places identity formation firmly in the life stage of adolescence: identity formation centers on an identity crisis which he postulated as the central crisis of the adolescent stage of life. The development of identity reaches its critical time, for Erikson, with the advent of puberty and rapid body growth, which marks the beginning of adolescence. For Erikson, issues of identity are part of the process of adolescence where an identity crisis results in identity formation; adolescence is over once an identity has been achieved.

However, Arnett's research "has shown that identity achievement has rarely been reached by the end of high school and that identity development continues through the late teen and the twenties."<sup>535</sup> Furthermore, most research done on issues of identity formation is primarily focused on adolescents.<sup>536</sup> Konstam adds: "There is a rich literature on identity development that primarily address the period of adolescence."<sup>537</sup> Erikson's framework is still in full force. Arnett admits that "like most psychologists I was used to thinking of identity formation as an issue pertinent mainly to development during adolescence. However, in my interviews with emerging adults, identity issues have come up over and over again in various forms."<sup>538</sup> Arnett's approach acknowledges that identity formation begins in adolescence, but "intensifies in emerging adulthood."<sup>539</sup>

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<sup>534</sup> Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 176.

<sup>535</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 9.

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>537</sup> Konstam, 10.

<sup>538</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America*, 8.

<sup>539</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 9.

Konstram states: “Although there is acknowledgment that the 20s is an important time for consolidation of identity formation, there is a dearth of research efforts, with most of the efforts primarily focused on the developmental period of adolescence.”<sup>540</sup> The developmental marker of identity exploration might also be characterized as the age of identity formation; rather, for emerging adults, exploration and formation go hand in hand.

The essays were filled with references to issues of identity and over three quarters scored themes of exploration and identity. To some degree, the nature of the question provokes issues of identity: What has been your biggest “a-ha moment” in college? Most the essays describe a fundamental change in how they perceive themselves and their identity. For example, Mike makes a direct connection between his “a-ha” moment and identity: “Moments that have made me think of who I am as a person, a student, and a future educator. ‘Aha’ moments,’ I believe have helped to shape me into who I am. They help me to learn and better myself so that I may make a difference in the world.” Some essays were explicit about issues of identity: Sara discusses that she has “begun exploring different options” at college while Erin remarks that “this past year has been a time of self-discovery.” However, this exploration of identity is not always a pleasant process, Frank states, “I struggled with my identity, about who I was to God, about who I was to others....” And sometimes it’s not about changing your identity, but maintaining a sense of self within different experiences. Regina discovers that: “I gained confidence in my abilities and myself; I discovered that I can maintain a sense of my identity regardless of my environment.” Sahar reflects on fasting during Ramadan that “Islam, ‘a way of life,’ is part of my identity and enriches my life daily. The more that I’ve gotten to share and

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<sup>540</sup>Konstram, 2.

talk about my experiences and of my faith and beliefs, the more I've learned about myself, my traditions, and my religion.”

But more than just discussing issues of identity, the essayists also explored: this sense of exploration is everywhere within the essays. On a side note scribbled on the margin, I wrote: explore, explore, explore!! Trying out different kinds of relationships, jobs, majors, and activities, is part of the process of identity formation because these explorations test likes and dislikes. Emerging adults clarify their identities through self-exploration as they learn more about whom they are and what they want out of life. Identity issues abound and although they do arise in response to the three pillars in Erikson's theory (love, work, and ideology), they also arise in response to many other issues as well. Arnett states: “Identity issues also commonly arise in responses to questions about relationships with parents, expectations for the future, characteristics desired in a romantic partner, and religious beliefs.”<sup>541</sup> Dealing with these identity issues is a salient part of development in emerging adulthood.

The essayists explore, explore, explore: they describe new groups they've joined, new friends they have made, and new experiences they have had. Tyrone explains: “As a freshman at college, one of the main things that I tried to do was make new friends, try new things and step out of my comfort zone.” A study abroad trip and venturing into a new culture for a semester heralded for Vivian a “great deal of personal discovery came last year while I was studying abroad.” She adds, “The experience proved to be one which greatly increased my confidence in dealing with others as well as in understanding my own actions and feelings.” One essayist, Krista speaks explicitly about exploring the issue of “my own racial identity and the concept of racial identity in general.” Learning

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<sup>541</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America*, 9.

more about racial identity development allowed Krista to “understand that white society considers itself the norm that we indicate through our language and actions.”

It is clear that essays hold many references to identity and exploration. Lindsay discusses what she describes as “the unique college experience... that many college students meet with the challenges of ‘finding themselves.’” In this sense, it seems to be expected that student go to college in order to develop a firmer identity and self knowledge. Tommy states: “The atmosphere that college engenders is exactly the atmosphere where ‘aha’ moments are born. For the first time, we are independent of our families, making decisions on our own, and away from everything familiar. Not only this, but we are asking questions about ourselves: who we are, who we want to be, and what the purpose is for our lives.” These kinds of questions are fundamentally important to ask as emerging adults explore issues regarding their identity. In this sense, exploration and identity formation go hand in hand.

### *Two: The Age of Instability*

Although the possibilities and explorations of emerging adults seem full and robust, it also presents a period of life that is exceptionally unstable. As Arnett posits, “exploration and instability go hand in hand.”<sup>542</sup> Instability is reflected in many aspects of life in emerging adulthood but in particular, Arnett highlights the residential status of emerging adults. Emerging adults have the highest rates of residential change for any age group.<sup>543</sup> Statistics on residential changes during the 20s is emblematic of the instability of emerging adults’ lives and the many profound changes that take place.<sup>544</sup> Most young Americans move out of their family home by 18 or 19. Over a third enter college full

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<sup>542</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 12.

<sup>543</sup> Arnett, *Readings on Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 20.

<sup>544</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America*, 9.

time and live year to year in dormitories and about 40% move away from home to live independently, taking on work and school, often part-time.<sup>545</sup> This instability is further enhanced: “For emerging adults, college education is often pursued in a non-linear way, frequently combined with work and punctuated by periods of non-attendance.”<sup>546</sup>

Emerging adults move away from home, move in with friends, move to a dorm, sometimes cohabitating, but often moving every year. For nearly half of emerging adults, at least one of these moves will be back in to live with their parents.<sup>547</sup> Arnett’s data “shows that emerging adults rarely know where they will be living from one year to the next.”<sup>548</sup> And, for Arnett: “Admire this diversity, perhaps the unifying feature of the residential status of emerging adults is the instability of it.”<sup>549</sup>

Another aspect of instability is what Arnett refers to as the “Plan.” Arnett states: “Emerging adults know they are supposed to have a Plan, with a capital P, that is, some kind of idea about the route they will be taking from adolescence to adulthood, and most of them come up with one. However, for almost all of them, their Plan is subject to numerous revisions during the emerging adult years.”<sup>550</sup> Plan revision and in some cases, outright Plan disintegration, proved to be some of the most endearing sections of the essays. One example is Marie:

I will get a four-year teaching degree while being very active on campus. I will find the love of my life and get married directly following college. I will teach for a few years and then have kids. I will then quit teaching and be a stay-at-home mom until my kids are all old enough to go to school. I will live a ‘happy’ life and will do many ‘good’ things. I will...I will... I will... this was the mentality I entered college with. I thought I had my life mapped out on a piece of

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<sup>545</sup>Of this group, 2/3rds cohabit with a romantic partner.

<sup>546</sup>Arnett, *Readings on Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 21.

<sup>547</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 11.

<sup>548</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>549</sup>Arnett, *Readings on Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 20.

<sup>550</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 10.



paper and I believed that there was no possible way I would become a college statistic and change my major at least one time. To make a long story short, I have contemplated at least ten different majors, have decided that I have no idea where I will end up, what I will be doing, or if I will even unite in marriage one day. My a-ha moment was a gradual epiphany that led me to discover that it is okay to say ‘I don’t know’, it is okay to not have a clear vision of the future, and that it’s okay to live here and now.

About twenty percent of the essays discuss a revision in their Plan. Arnett states, “These revisions are a natural consequence of their explorations. . . . With each revision in the Plan, they learn something about themselves and hopefully takes a step towards clarifying the kind of future they want.”<sup>551</sup> June writes:

I came into college with the idea that I had everything figured out. I was going to attend undergraduate for four years, obtain a degree in the sciences, and then go on to medical school. This was the vision I had imagined since I was a little girl and I was positive everything would go according to plan. My perfect, ideal image began to quickly unravel when I started my job at the medical center.

June’s a-ha moment occurred when her work study job allowed her to gain a clearer pictures of the life of a doctor. “Unfortunately, it did not match up with the pretty photo in my head. I then began to consider the question: ‘What is it that makes me want to be a doctor?’ I realized my answers to this question were very superficial and did not match up to what made me really happy and full of life. Since this experience, I have begun exploring different options.” Although June comments that this experience was difficult, even destabilizing, in the end it offered her the chance to explore different options. Bill reflects that upon entering college “as a freshman, I had plans of completing my four years and then attending law school. This was something I had been thinking about for some time; however, as I got into the routine of classes, I suddenly felt myself not so excited by the thought of studying law.”

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<sup>551</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 10-11.

A few of the essays discuss the issue of instability, particularly in their living arrangements, relationships, and choices. For some students, just going to college is a whirlwind: “Even though I go to college less than an hour away from home, moving out, setting my own rules and schedule, and meeting people who have a different background than I has been an incredibly eye opening experience.” The college experience, in general, is described as a jarring and destabilizing experience: “College has a way of forcing you to figure things out that life had not yet filled you in on.....The lessons learned from experiences past or present don’t grant you any credit hours but complement the classroom diet to serve you a genuine education.” Big questions are being asked; Jeff describes the experience of being confronted by deep questions: “For the first time I questioned what it was exactly that I was going and what I was planning to do with my life.” Greg also laments: college is the time to figure out “what the heck I am going to do with the rest of my life.” In the midst of all these big and important questions personally, college itself is a shock. Patricia writes: “Freshman year is quite possibly one of the most intense emotional experiences facing traditional college students” which is “an odd mixture of self-awareness and being completely adrift at the same time.” Next, William remarks that he experienced a kind of “shock I encountered during my first few weeks of college.” And Tracey states that she experienced an intense feeling when she move into her dorm: “At that moment of ‘oh crap,’ I realized that I was stepping out of my comfort zone for the first time in my life. I didn’t really know what I stood for, what I believed in, or what talents I possessed to make me a unique contributor to my community.”

Finally, instability is reflected in Katie's statement that "College is a time where you do an incredible amount of growing in a short period of time. Sometimes huge discoveries are made and other times circumstances change so rapidly that you can barely keep up with yourself." For emerging adults, this is a stage of marked instability. Most emerging adults do not know where they will be living next year and the whirlwind experience of college adds to this feeling of instability. Plans are made and re-made, or sometimes dropped completely. Identity exploration, while a necessary and worthy task, also brings with it times of insecurity and uncertainty.

### *Three: The Self-Focused Age*

Emerging adulthood as a "self-focused" age is not meant pejoratively. For Arnett, being self-focused is different than being self-centered. He explains:

Emerging adults are self-focused in the sense that they have little in the way of social obligations, little in the way of duties and commitments to others, which leaves them with a great deal of autonomy in running their own lives.<sup>552</sup>

Self-focused refers to emerging adults' status as (often for the first time) autonomous and independent from previous roles and commitments. He adds, "Emerging adults are not selfish or self-centered, by and large."<sup>553</sup> Arnett is keen to point out that it is normal, healthy, and temporary. "By focusing on themselves, emerging adults develop skills for daily living, gain a better understanding of who they are and what they want from life, and begin to build a foundation for their adult lives."<sup>554</sup> This self-focused nature is a necessary step before commitment to enduring relationships with others in love and work.

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<sup>552</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America*, 10.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>554</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 13.

Again, the explorations in emerging adulthood are viewed “as part of obtaining a broad range of life experiences before taking on enduring – and limiting – adult responsibilities.”<sup>555</sup> This absence of enduring role commitments makes experimentation and exploration possible. This autonomy is reflected in research which demonstrates that young Americans, age 19-29, spend more of their leisure time alone than any other demographic except the elderly; furthermore, this group spends more of their time in productive activities (school and work) alone than any other age group.<sup>556</sup> Other reports suggest that this age group reports greater feelings of loneliness than either adolescents or adults.<sup>557</sup> Arnett comments: “The self-focused quality of emerging adulthood makes it arguably the freest time of life, at least in terms of freedom from social obligations and expectations. However, the flip side of this freedom is that emerging adults spend a considerable amount of time alone during these self-focused years.”

Emerging adults recognize that this period is a time in their life when they have few commitments and have the freedom to experiment before they enter into the permanent and enduring obligations of adulthood. This self-focused age is a time to test self-sufficiency and the question of “who am I?” This self focused age is characterized by few ties that entail daily obligations and commitment to others. I looked to the essays to discern any essays that described a daily obligation or commitment to another person. Families were rarely mentioned. Only one essay mentioned a husband while another essay discussed a boyfriend, but otherwise, the essays lacked descriptions of significant commitments to anyone other than themselves.

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<sup>555</sup> Arnett, *Readings on Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 24.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>557</sup> Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 189.

Again, a theme in the essays is that college is about figuring yourself out and what “the heck” to do with the rest of life. Julie states, that college “it is during this time that we make the decisions of what exactly we want to do with our lives.” And because of the nature of the essay question, all the essayists are very much self-focused in their responses. Beth reflects that the nature of these “a-ha” moments “that have helped me to come to a deeper understanding of who I am and what my life is asking of me.” Steve remarks that in college he has been “incredibly self-centered.” Doug states that “college represents a time of independence and self-actualization. Many individuals utilize the years to enhance themselves in various aspects of their lives; thus, emphasizing the importance of effectively participating in the ‘true’ college experience. The purpose of college incorporates many things, including the idea of discovering interests and future goals.” Later, Doug states, “I would encourage every college student to attain personal growth, and to utilize the knowledge in future activities.”

#### *Four: The Age of Feeling In-Between*

One of the reasons Arnett chose the term *emerging adulthood* was because it described the way his interview subjects viewed themselves developmentally.<sup>558</sup> Arnett explains:

The exploration and instability of emerging adulthood give it the quality of an ‘in- between’ period – between adolescence, when most people live in their parents’ home and are required to attend secondary school, and young adulthood, when most people have entered into marriage and parenthood and have settled into a stable occupational path.<sup>559</sup>

This feeling is best characterized as feeling “in-between” adolescence and adulthood. “In between the restrictions of adolescence and the responsibilities of adulthood lie the

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<sup>558</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America*, 11.

<sup>559</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 14.

explorations and instability of emerging adulthood.”<sup>560</sup> The term emerging refers to feeling of being in-between, of not quite being an adult but no longer an adolescent.

In Arnett’s research, he asks the question: Do you feel like you have reached adulthood? The majority of respondents answer ambiguously “in some respect yes, in some respect no.”<sup>561</sup> Emerging adults feel “in-between” because of the criteria they consider to be most important for becoming an adult. For emerging adults, there are three basic criteria for adulthood: 1) accepting responsibility for yourself; 2) making independent decisions; 3) becoming financially independent.<sup>562</sup> Arnett discusses that this list might differ from commonly held beliefs about adulthood and its milestones: full time work, parenthood, the end of education, or getting married. Instead, emerging adults perceive adulthood on criteria that are reached gradually, instead of milestone events. The criteria for adulthood are transition events rather than discrete events. Therefore, Arnett states that “While they are in the process of developing those qualities they feel as if they are in between adolescence and full adulthood.”<sup>563</sup>

The essays do not necessarily mention directly this feeling of being “in-between” as Arnett suggests; however, underlying many of the essays is a tension about how to describe their stage of life. For example, one essayist wonders: “I wonder if it’s not more that we’re young adults entering a new phase in life than that we’re college students.” This is the same “new phase in life” that Arnett is referring to in his research. Later Ann adds that “I feel most in limbo between the worlds of home and school and (future) career

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<sup>560</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>561</sup>Arnett, *Readings on Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 21.

<sup>562</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America*, 12 and Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 15.

<sup>563</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America*, 12.

as the times when I am most ready to look at myself and who I'm becoming, and the times when I am most creative.”

However, my own anecdotal evidence serves to highlight the feeling of in-between that Arnett's research describes. In May of 2007, I taught a theology class titled “Theology and the Search for Identity” at Hanover College. Because they were cohorts of the essay group, I asked these students the same question Arnett posed: Do you feel like you have reached adulthood? Most of the students responded no. I followed up with the question: If you are not adults, are you adolescents? Absolutely not! The students were actually offended that I would call them adolescents and balked at this label as even being applicable. Adolescents were “tween-agers” and even though most were 18 or 19 years old (and recognized themselves as still technically teenagers), they still felt they were worlds apart from *adolescents*. Given a choice between the two, almost all of the students would rather be considered an adult, rather than an adolescent. We discussed other terms – young adult, youth, late adolescence, and transition to adulthood – and I suggested the term emerging adulthood. The students seemed lukewarm about this being a fitting description, with one student – who was a biology major – remarking that it sounded like how they refer to insects or pupae as they “emerge” from their shell. Although the class was a bit repelled by the pupae reference, I thought the emerging form of a butterfly was quite an apt metaphor.

#### *Five: The Age of Possibilities*

Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities in two ways. One, this period is a time of great optimism and high hopes for the future. Arnett references a national survey where 96% of 18-24 year old Americans agreed with the statement: I will get to where I

want to be in life.<sup>564</sup> Two, emerging adulthood represents a “crucial opportunity for young people who have experienced difficult conditions in their family lives to move away from home and to steer their lives in a different and more favorable directions before they enter the commitments in love and work that structure an adult life.”<sup>565</sup>

Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities because it represents a chance for young people to transform their lives, free themselves from family commitments, and try to create their lives in a new and better direction.

This age of possibilities is characterized by a lack of commitments to a person or network where, instead, many potential futures are map-able. It is during this time that dramatic changes can take place and emerging adults can transform themselves.

“Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities, when many different futures remain open, when little about a person’s direction in life has been decided for certain.”<sup>566</sup> For the first time in their lives, emerging adults are “on their own” both literally and figuratively, and they have opportunity to change their lives in profound ways. Family backgrounds and contexts which so defined the person in the past are now cast off; instead, new identities and the investigation of new possibilities are embraced.

The best example of this age of new possibilities is the essay I nick-named the “adventure gal.” The enthusiasm in her essay is palpable: she is “excited to finally be independent. I could go wherever, whenever.... The consequences would no longer be enforced by the parents, teachers, or small town gossips. Far, far away from home without any plane ticket until Christmas, I was independent!!” She remarks that the adventurous streak was a new realization and its impetus came from a graduation gift she

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<sup>564</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adults in America*, 13.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>566</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 16.



received from her youth group leaders. On a frame with a picture of the group was a word meant to correspond to each person's "real personality." Her frame was inscribed with the word "adventure: 1) a daring hazardous undertaking; 2) an unusual, exciting, often suspenseful experience." Part of her a-ha moment is the realization that college is her new adventure: "College is a wonderful adventure for me, and my first semester was palpable. Each day I was excited to learn something new, whether in the classroom or in recreation." Her excitement is clear: college offers a completely new environment to explore possibilities as well as the freedom to do it!

These new possibilities and options can be a bit frightening and anxiety provoking as well. Tina remarks, "For the first time, my future seems to be entirely in my hands, and yet I feel more out of control than ever before. I like to have a plan, and contemplating a future of many choices (and the known and unknown consequences of those choices) is unsettling. This is the anxiety that colors my thoughts during these first weeks of school." Neil remarks: "I grew up in a very small town and went to high school in which I practically knew everybody. Therefore, it was a big struggle for me coming to college and knowing only one other person." Shelia comments: "As a freshman at college, one of the main things I tried to do was make new friends, try new things and step out of my comfort zone." In the age of possibilities, it is possible to step out of comfort zones, and although this can cause some discomfort, there is also great optimism and high hopes for the future. Overall, the age of possibilities represents developmental transformation as emerging adults try and create their lives in new and better directions.

In closing, these essayists are best described developmentally as emerging adults. Evidence gleaned from the essays matches the themes of Arnett's five developmental

markers. Issues surrounding identity exploration, instability, possibilities, and being self-focused dominate the essays. Rather than described developmentally as adolescents or young adults, emerging adults is a better and more fitting description. Because of distinct biological and cultural changes, emerging adulthood is literally “a new phase in life.” For the purpose of this dissertation, I will henceforth refer to the essayists as emerging adults in terms of their psychosocial development.

An aside: This summer, I sat at a kitchen table with two women, one in her eighties and the other well in her seventies. They had asked what I had been working on, so I decided to tell them about emerging adulthood as a new developmental period. In short, they were disgusted and appalled. I heard a litany of things they had done by the age of twenty, much less by thirty, which included being married, having kids, and careers. They couldn’t believe how late people were “starting their lives” and seemed quite averse to the twenties as an age period of personal exploration. They sounded a lot like Tom Ashbrook from before: come off it. Get a job. Get going! As I sat there and listened to the growing list of things they had accomplished and done at my age – I was thirty-five – I realized that I, too, was perhaps technically still an emerging adult. Because I was unmarried, job-less, with no kids, and still in graduate school, I was still *not* an adult. If adulthood meant a full-time job and family, then I am an emerging adult, too.

I certainly spent most of my college years, and those after, exploring different jobs and contexts, living in places Virginia to Hawaii, doing what some still call “trying to find yourself in Wyoming.” In many ways, learning and researching on emerging adulthood allowed me to have a better understanding for why I did the things I did and

what was actually pushing me to do things that at the time seemed absurd and against the grain. I remember my parents asking me: are you on crazy? But I wasn't crazy: if Arnett is correct, I was experiencing a crucial period of development where exploration and "finding yourself" is not only important, but should be encouraged. I had a lot empathy for these essayists as they described their exploration and searches. It seems clear to me that developmentally, at least in industrialized countries, exploring possibilities and new contexts is the new standard for this college age period.

## CHAPTER V

### OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY

*“It is not too late. It is never too late to do what you dream of doing. You have a choice to make, dear. Today, you have a choice to make. You can continue to sell these bagels for the rest of your life. Or you can quit life as you know it and go to school. You can choose to follow your dream. Either way, today you have to decide.”*

A clear pattern appeared upon my first reading of the essays: in ninety percent of the essays, the presence of another person or group of people was central to the person’s a-ha moment. At first glance, this is surprising because the question (what has been *your* biggest a-ha moment?) seems to elicit a kind of singular response and self revelation. So why bother mentioning anyone else? Looking at their responses, it becomes immediately clear that relationships are pivotal in engendering a-ha moments for these emerging adults. My own coursework focused on the importance of relationships and their influence on healthy development. According to object relations theory (ORT), one’s primary drive is towards relationships, not towards pleasure or power. Humans are fundamentally relational creatures driven to seek relationships with others; furthermore, this primacy of relation-seeking occurs throughout life, according to ORT. Using this theoretical lens, I test the utility of this theory with the experiences described in the essays. If relationships are so important, what kinds of relationships are present in the essays? Furthermore, what kinds of relationships are reported in relation to their formative moment?

## Effective History: Object Relations Theory

Like many fields, object relations theory (ORT) is an academic area that defies a quick and easy definition. In *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell posit ORT is a “troublesome term” that “has been used in many different contexts and with any number of different connotations and denotations, resulting in considerable ambiguity and confusion.”<sup>567</sup> ORT coursework with Volney Gay defined the field as those contemporary schools of psychoanalytic thought, often stemming from British authors Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, which focus attention upon the ways in which relationships, “object relations,” between parent and child deeply influence the intrapsychic realm.<sup>568</sup> For Gay, an object is an actual, external person, thing, or other being important to a person; object representations refer to conscious and unconscious images of an external object.<sup>569</sup> John McDargh states that ORT gives “pride of place to personal relationships as the matrix within which the human psyche is formed, and as the model for its subsequent operation.”<sup>570</sup> Central to ORT is the idea that a person’s primary motivational drive is to seek relationship with others.<sup>571</sup> Human beings are relationship-seeking, not pleasure-seeking, and the end goal is a relationship with another human being.

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<sup>567</sup>Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 12.

<sup>568</sup> Volney Gay, “Glossary of Technical Terms and References,” *Post-Freudian Theory and Religion* (GDR 3061, Fall 2003), 6.

<sup>569</sup>Gay states: “Like the development of the libido, the development of object relations progresses from an intensely narcissistic focus through the cathexis of part-objects, to the possibility of fully mature relationships between the whole beings.” Volney Gay, “Winnicott’s Contribution to Religious Studies: The Resurrection of the Culture Hero,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LI/3: 379.

<sup>570</sup>John McDargh, *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religion* (New York: University Press of America, 1983), 17, original emphasis.

<sup>571</sup> Anthony Bateman and Jeremy Holmes, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis: Contemporary Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 41.

For Charles Gerkin, the term “object relations” is an extension of Freudian language where the concept of “object” is used to primarily designate a person toward which the individual develops a significant attitude or relationship.<sup>572</sup> Because Freud understood our basic drive to be a pleasure-seeking drive, he constructed hypotheses about objects in relation to sexual and aggressive drives.<sup>573</sup> For Freud, “drive” is a physical force that seeks an object to reduce and relieve bodily tension and aggression. ORT proposes a different primary drive: although still object-seeking, this drive is towards relationship with an object – not an impersonal energy discharge. The basic human drive is towards relationships with others. Humans are object-seeking, not pleasure seeking. For ORT, there is a fundamental need for relationships and all development takes place within the context of these relationships.

The rise of ORT in psychoanalysis is also associated with a shift of interest towards developmental issues, particularly in infants.<sup>574</sup> And it is Freud’s theories on infants and children (particularly their sexuality, such as the Oedipus complex) that are most often critically dismissed. Greenberg and Mitchell state: “Freud’s initial inquiry into the meaning behind the neurotic symptoms of adults had led to some elaborate system of unforeseen and rather staggering hypotheses concerning the emotional life of children.”<sup>575</sup> Freud never studied children directly, or had a therapeutic relationship with a child. So, it is little surprising that a woman – who was also a mother – would fundamentally challenge Freud’s legacy.

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<sup>572</sup>Charles Gerkin, *Living Human Document*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984), 82.

<sup>573</sup>Mitchell and Black explain: “oral libido arises in the oral cavity (its source), creates a need for sucking activity (its aim), and becomes targeted towards and attached to something such as a breast (its object), which is required for satisfaction.” See: Stephen Mitchell and Margaret Black, *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 13.

<sup>574</sup>Peter Fongay, *Attachment Theory and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Other Press, 2001), 80.

<sup>575</sup> Mitchell and Black, *Freud and Beyond*, 119.

## Melanie Klein

Throughout her career as a clinician, Melanie Klein developed her basic position that drives are inherently and inseparably directed towards objects.<sup>576</sup> Instead of a pleasure-seeking drive, Klein postulated an object-seeking drive. By redefining the nature of drive to include built-in human objects, “Klein fundamentally altered the basic premises and metaphors underlying psychoanalytic theorizing.”<sup>577</sup> For Klein, the drives are essentially psychological forces, not physical forces, which use the body as a vehicle for expression. The basic units of mental processes are not packets of objectless energy, but relational units.<sup>578</sup> Klein concluded that the basic human drive was towards objects, and relationships with those objects; furthermore, all development takes place and has meaning within the context of those relationships. Klein’s theory resulted in a fundamental shift in vision concerning human motivation, development, and mental processes.<sup>579</sup>

Klein came to these conclusions as a divorced mother with four children who described herself as a “psychological invalid” until she first read Freud on dreams.<sup>580</sup> In 1910, she went into analysis with Sandor Fereczi, one of Freud’s closest and most influential disciples. With his approval, she began to apply the Freudian techniques of analysis with children and in 1919, Klein presented her first paper.<sup>581</sup> Klein postulated

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<sup>576</sup> Greenberg and Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, 138

<sup>577</sup> Mitchell and Black, *Freud and Beyond*, 113.

<sup>578</sup> Greenberg and Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, 138.

<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>580</sup> Mitchell and Black, *Freud and Beyond*, 13. (?)

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

that by observing play, interpretation can be used to understand the child's mind; that is, children are analyzable. This seemingly simple conclusion was the source of a "vituperative" conflict with Anna Freud, who argued that children are not analyzable because their weak and undeveloped egos cannot handle deep interpretation of instinctual conflict.<sup>582</sup> Klein was publicly denounced, yet her supporters grew fiercer. Many critics accused Klein of distorting and betraying the basic principles of psychoanalytic theory. The conflict culminated in the 1940's with a three-way split in the British Psychoanalytic Society: "A Group" (loyal to Freud), "B Group" (loyal to Klein), and the "middle group" (which included people like Winnicott who did not choose either side).<sup>583</sup>

Klein, until her death, firmly believed and openly stated that her ideas were completely commensurate with Freud. And Freud, until his death, refused to acknowledge any of Klein's contributions.<sup>584</sup> What Klein contributed, particularly to this discussion, is the recognition of the importance of relationships and that humans are fundamentally object-seeking, rather than pleasure-seeking. Objects are basic and essential; drives are inherently and inseparably directed and aimed towards objects. The primary activity of the libido is object-seeking, not pleasure-seeking; therefore, the strongest motive in life is to seek relationships, not an impersonal energy discharge. A relationship is an end *in and of itself*, not a means towards the end of gratification.<sup>585</sup> In brief, Klein reformulated the concept of drive to be primarily directed towards relationships with objects. Because of these conclusions, Klein has been referenced as

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<sup>582</sup> Mitchell and Black, *Freud and Beyond*, 86.

<sup>583</sup> Greenberg and Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, 120.

<sup>584</sup> Greenberg and Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, 144.

<sup>585</sup> Mitchell and Black, *Freud and Beyond*, 115.



“one of the most original and challenging thinkers in the history of psychoanalysis.”<sup>586</sup>

David Scharff claims that Klein’s power of observation and thinking “has come to be perhaps the greatest single force for psychoanalytic observation since Freud.”<sup>587</sup> Philip Cushman contends that Klein was “one of the most colorful, outspoken, and creative psychotherapists” and that her work so shocked the psychoanalytic community that some ideas are still too radical to be embraced.<sup>588</sup>

Klein’s ideas continue as bedrock for many object relation theorists. Klein formed her theory from direct observation of children and used extensive clinical illustrations.<sup>589</sup>

And it is evident that the rise of ORT was associated with a shift of interest towards the developmental issues of infants.<sup>590</sup> John McDargh states:

The insight central to this perspective is that the person is not constituted by the isolated play of impersonal instinctual energies, but the inter-play of human persons – both as those relationships actually occur in the world and as they are carried on in conscious and unconscious fantasy, or we might say, internalized.<sup>591</sup>

ORT holds that humans, from the very beginning, are motivated by a fundamental need for relationships and that all development takes place and has meaning within the context of relationships. In short, human beings have a biological readiness to form relationships.

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<sup>586</sup>Anthony Bateman and Jeremy Holmes, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis: Contemporary Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 38.

<sup>587</sup>David Scharff, *Object Relations Theory and Practice* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996), 3.

<sup>588</sup>Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1996), 192.

<sup>589</sup>Scharff, *Object Relations Theory and Practice*, 3.

<sup>590</sup>Fongay, *Attachment Theory and Psychoanalysis*, 80.

<sup>591</sup>McDargh, *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religion*, 17.

## Donald Woods Winnicott

These same ideals were inherited by Donalds Woods Winnicott, who studied with and was supervised by Klein for about six years.<sup>592</sup> Winnicott was supervised by Klein from about 1936-40. As I stated previously, in 1940, the British Psychoanalytic Society split. Winnicott did not join “B” Group which was loyal to Klein in her feud with Anna Freud. Winnicott joined the “C group” that refused to take sides. It’s a curious situation, particularly because Winnicott did support Klein’s claims that children were analyzable. However, this alliance with the “C group” reportedly doomed his therapeutic relationship with Klein.<sup>593</sup> Other accounts state that Klein wanted Winnicott to analyze her son under her own supervision. He refused, thus ending their relationship. However, later, Winnicott did analyze Klein’s son, but not under anyone’s supervision but his own.

Winnicott was foremost a pediatrician and although he became a psychoanalyst, he continued to work with children throughout his analytic career. His work largely focused on human-to-human relating, but specifically on the infant-mother interaction; like Klein, he formed theory from observation in his clinical work. Also like Klein, Winnicott used play as a way of analyzing and understanding the inhabited world of the child. One famous technique is Winnicott’s “squiggle game” where squiggles are turned playfully into pictures by both the therapist and the child. For Winnicott, playing is a universal activity and situated firmly in the realm of healthy activity.<sup>594</sup>

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<sup>592</sup>Greenberg and Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, 190.

<sup>593</sup>*Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>594</sup>Scharff, *Object Relations Theory and Practice*, 257.

Winnicott has been typified as the first major theorist to fully appreciate the role of the mother in the psychological development of the child.<sup>595</sup> He was sure that “the secrets of the human being were contained in the intimate space between caretaker and infant in the early months and years of life.”<sup>596</sup> Because object relationships are initially formed during early interactions between infants and primary caregivers, Winnicott studied the early relationship between mother and child. For Winnicott, an infant cannot develop into a full person without the mother’s management; without this principle human relationship, a false self results. Because the quality of the infant’s experience of the earliest months is crucial for the emergence of personhood, he often stated that his aim was to give young mothers support and guidance; to this end, he is credited with the concept of the “good enough mother.”<sup>597</sup> It is also clear, however, that Winnicott took care to state that the role of the mother can be any person who acts as the primary caregiver. Perhaps it is more appropriate to say that Winnicott helped to encourage and support the “good enough caregiver.”

Greenberg and Mitchell comment on the uniqueness of Winnicott’s language and style when they state:

Winnicott, an extremely innovative and influential contributor to the development of psychoanalytic theory and practice, has provided an intricate, subtle, and often powerfully poetic account of the development of the self out of its relational matrix.<sup>598</sup>

In this sense, Winnicott’s work rests solidly within a relational paradigm. Winnicott designated three forms of experience needed by the infant: objective reality, subjective

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<sup>595</sup>Bruce Brodie, *Adolescence and Delinquency: An Object Relations Theory Approach* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2007), 98.

<sup>596</sup>Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America*, 253.

<sup>597</sup>Mitchell and Black, *Freud and Beyond*, 125.

<sup>598</sup>Greenberg and Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, 189.

experience, and transitional experience.<sup>599</sup> Freud dichotomized the world into two areas: reality/truth and falsity/delusion. Winnicott moved beyond this dichotomy by proposing a third area: transitional space.<sup>600</sup> In transitional space, a transitional object helps the infant to navigate the area between objective reality and subjective reality; transitional objects can take on a variety of forms: a blanket, favorite teddy bear or imaginary friend.<sup>601</sup> Transitional objects are important because of the relationship the child has with the object, “representing a developmental way station between hallucinatory omnipotence and the recognition of objective reality.”<sup>602</sup> For Winnicott, the analytical setting provides a safe place to play with transitional objects; therapy centered on the therapist and patient playing together as a way to foster growth through play.<sup>603</sup> Creativity allows for the reconciliation of the inner and outer world because for Winnicott, humans are basically good and playful creatures.

Winnicott’s *Playing and Reality* begins with a chapter on transitional objects and moves on to discuss playing, both theoretically and as a creative activity. Interestingly enough, Winnicott ends the book with a chapter titled, “Contemporary Concepts of Adolescent Development and their Implication for Higher Education.”<sup>604</sup> Before becoming his final chapter, Winnicott originally gave this as an address to college

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<sup>599</sup>James Jones states: “Winnicott struggled to move beyond Freud’s nineteenth-century dichotomy of reason and imagination, objectivity and subjectivity, by the articulation of a third, or transitional, realm, rooted in interpersonal experience.” James Jones, *Religion and Psychology* (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 1996), 112.

<sup>600</sup>Jones, *Religion and Psychology*, 129.

<sup>601</sup>Mitchell and Black state, “The transitional object, with its paradoxical ambiguity, cushions the fall from a world where the child’s desires omnipotently actualize their objects to one where desires require accommodation to and collaboration of others to be fulfilled.” Mitchell and Black, *Freud and Beyond*, 128.

<sup>602</sup>Greenberg and Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, 195.

<sup>603</sup>Gerkin also makes a direct connection between Winnicott’s transitional objects and hermeneutic theory. Gerkin, *Living Human Document*, 83-85.

<sup>604</sup>During the time of his writing, adolescence was considered to end at 24, which Winnicott also assumed.

students.<sup>605</sup> Along with giving these students advice on how to raise their children, Winnicott discusses their developmental immaturity.<sup>606</sup> He remarks rather ironically on even commenting on the audience's immaturity:

I confess that I am insulting this subject by talking about it. The more easily we verbalize, the less are we effectual. Imagine someone talking down to adolescents and saying to them: 'The exciting part of you is your immaturity!' This would be a gross example of failure to meet the adolescent challenge.<sup>607</sup>

Again, Winnicott gave this last chapter originally as an address to college students, who were still considered to be adolescents. And adolescents are immature. But this is a great thing, says Winnicott. He states:

What I am stating (dogmatically in order to be brief) is that the adolescent is *immature*. Immaturity is an essential element of health at adolescence. There is only one cure for immaturity and that is the *passage of time* and the growth into maturity that time may bring.<sup>608</sup>

This immaturity is a precious and exciting thing, according to Winnicott, because it is here where we find idealism, creativity, new and fresh feelings, and a potential for new living. Also during this time of immaturity, relationships in terms of friendships and peer groups have prime significance. Friends and peer groups aid in cultivating creativity and potentiality: "They have not yet settled down into disillusionment and the corollary of this is that they are free to formulate ideal plans."<sup>609</sup> And, it's a time that is all about growth: "adolescence implies growth, and this growth takes time."<sup>610</sup>

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<sup>605</sup>This address was part of a symposium given at the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting of the British Student Health Association at Newcastle upon Tyne, July 18, 1968. It should also be noted that Winnicott uses inclusive language by referring both to boys and girls. See: Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1971), 138-150.

<sup>606</sup>Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 146.

<sup>607</sup>*Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>608</sup>*Ibid.*, 149, original emphasis.

<sup>609</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>610</sup>*Ibid.*

Winnicott explores the nature of immaturity and believes there is a particular need by the adolescent for confrontation with an adult. For him, “what counts is that the adolescents’ challenge be met.”<sup>611</sup> Winnicott discusses the concept of confrontation and understands this as “a meeting of the adolescent challenge;” more specifically:

The word confrontation is used here to mean that a grown-up person stands up and claims the right to have a personal point of view, one that may have the backing of other grown-up people.<sup>612</sup>

Winnicott is clear that adolescents need to be confronted by adults; further, Winnicott states: “If the adult abdicate, the adolescent becomes prematurely, and by false process, adult.”<sup>613</sup> Because of its relevance in my analysis, I will continue to quote Winnicott at length as his language is quite unique. This paragraph is titled “Summary” and is found on the very last page of *Playing and Reality*:

In brief, it is exciting that adolescence has become vocal and active, but the adolescent striving that makes itself felt over the whole world today needs to be met, needs to be given reality by an act of confrontation. Confrontation must be personal. Adults are needed if adolescents are to have life and liveliness. Confrontation belongs to containment that is non-retaliatory, without vindictiveness, but having its own strength. It is salutary to remember that the present student unrest and its manifest expression may be in part a product of the attitude we are proud to have attained towards baby care, and child care. Let the young alter society and teach grownups how to see the world afresh; but, where there is the challenge of the growing boy or girl, there let an adult meet the challenge. And it will not necessarily be nice. In the unconscious fantasy these are matters of life and death.<sup>614</sup>

Adolescents are vocal and active but they also need to be confronted; adults are needed to personally confront adolescents. Confrontation is not hostile or vindictive, but not necessarily nice. Adults are needed in the lives of college students if they “are to have life and liveliness.” Winnicott’s insights into the significance of adults, specifically those

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<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>612</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>613</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

who will guide and challenge the “growing girl or boy” becomes an important category in my analysis. Winnicott is clear that personal confrontation is necessary and should occur within the context of an adult relationship. Simply put, when there is a challenge, “let an adult meet the challenge.” This insight certainly rang true in the essays that I read. Nearly a quarter of the essays mention what Winnicott calls an “adult.” And often, this adult or mentor steps in to provide pivotal support in a challenging time. Again, in this section, Winnicott subtly identifies three basic categories of relationships during this “time of immaturity:” friends, peers, and adults.

### **Examining the Essays: Object Relations Theory**

But first, I want to be clear about the key ideals and presuppositions of the ORT lens I use to view the essays. It is important to summarize the basic tenets of ORT as a way to develop a historical effective consciousness, or situatedness, of this perspective. Key assumptions and ideals of ORT are stated in the following claims:

- Human beings primary drive is towards relationship with others
- Human beings are object-seeking rather than pleasure-seeking
- This fundamental need for relationship is at the center of human development
- All development takes place and has meaning in the context of relationships

This last statement is of crucial importance because it gives partial explanation as to why relationships are mentioned in the context of the a-ha moment: development and formation take place and have meaning within the context of relationships. Human beings are fundamentally relational creatures who require and need relationships. This fundamental need for relationship is at the center of human development and the essays reflect the importance of those relationships. Looking through this lens of ORT, what

relationships are present in the essays? Who is mentioned and what relationships are influential in the a-ha moment? If relationships are our primary drive, what kinds of relationships are portrayed in the essays?

Relationships were not difficult to spot: almost ninety of the essays mentioned a specific relationship and most mentioned more than one relationship. The remaining six essays that did not mention one or more relationships featured a particular text or idea that changed the way they thought. For example, one student describes a dream about God. These are objects to be sure, and of interest to ORT, but I limited my investigation to relationships with other people. When more than one relationship was mentioned, I tried to focus on the most important and influential relationship discussed. Again, the question posed to the essayist was: what has been your biggest a-ha moment in college? This question asks about a seemingly singular experience, so it seems curious that other people would have such a widespread impact on these reported experiences. It is clear from the essays that relationships with other people are highly influential on the formation of these emerging adults.

What is also interesting: who is *not* mentioned in the essays. Parents were rarely if ever mentioned, and if they were mentioned, it was usually in passing as a way to impart information. A parent as a key relationship did not occur in any of the essays; furthermore, there are few references to family members in general. Another relationship that was absent: the role of a boyfriend or girlfriend as a romantic relationship. Only one essay mentioned a boyfriend and his importance in the context of her a-ha moment; beyond that one example, significant romantic relationships were simply not discussed.



If parents, family, and romantic relationships were not influential relationships, what kinds of relationships are influential? Using Winnicott and his reflections on students in higher education as a guide, three kinds of influential relationships appeared: friends, peer groups, and adults. These three categories accounted for the main relationships described in all 42 essays. A friend, or close set of friends (including one boyfriend), is mentioned in almost thirty percent of the essays. Another 30% of essays mentioned adults, like professors, pastors, youth leaders, advisors, and coaches. Finally, peer groups, which are generally a cluster of students with a common interest, accounted for more than 40% of the formative relationships mentioned in the essays.

#### *Adults*

Because of Winnicott, I was interested in the role of the adult in the essays. There were thirteen responses that directly mentioned an adult, usually acting as a professor, minister, coach, or counselor. However, none of the essays scored the adult as a parent. In fact, as discussed above, parents are rarely mentioned in the essays and when they are, it is a way to pass on information.<sup>615</sup> In the essays, relationships with adults range from the most intimate of relationships, as with a counselor or minister, to what appears to be random yet powerful interactions with an adult who is a stranger.

In these stories, adults appear as mentors who encourage the student to see themselves, others, or a situation in a new and different light. For example, Henry describes his pivotal moment as a result of his professor's urging that he, too, was a scholar and "therefore, I should confront every aspect of my education with this mode of thinking." As a result of this "encouragement to be a scholar," Henry increased his GPA

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<sup>615</sup>In two cases, family relationships are revealed by way of introduction: my parents are ministers or my family's business. In another case, a mom is relieved after Lindsay changes her major.

and felt a renewed sense of confidence. A new kind of determination arose and Henry “began to visualize life in a manner that I have never thought of before.”<sup>616</sup> Another student, Michael, mentions a professor who mentors a small group of students. Through “his mentoring us has created a safe place for me to try and make sense of my little ‘aha!’ moments, in turn causing many other mini ‘aha’ moments.” Similar powerful accounts include how a counselor gave an insightful interpretation, a coach who was helpful during a difficult time, and a youth leader’s impact.

However, another trend appears within the adult category. In three cases, the adult is a complete stranger who lends unsolicited advice and help. One example is Sharon, who was languishing at her job at a bagel shop. One morning, a half hour before opening time, an older man rudely and persistently tapped at the window: “He was the stranger who changed my life.” He orders rather abruptly and conversation reveals that he is a doctor who trains surgical students. Sharon blurts out that she always wanted to go to medical school, but then offers a litany of excuses as to why it would never work.

“That’s no excuse,” he said after I completed my rehearsed list. “It is not too late. It is never too late to do what you dream of doing. You have a choice to make, dear. Today, you have a choice to make. You can continue to sell these bagels for the rest of your life. Or you can quit life as you know it and go to school. You can choose to follow your dream. Either way, today you have to decide.” He reached for a piece of register tape scribbled a name and phone number on it and reached for my hand. He pressed the folded paper into my left palm and smiled, saying, “Call that number and speak to the woman. Tell her everything you have told me and she will help you get into school.” And with that, he pushed the door open and walked out.

Sharon called the number and was enrolled in a pre-med program that day. She goes on to address all the different experiences that she has now had in the medical field, all because some seemingly grumpy doctor wanted his bagel early that morning. It is a

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<sup>616</sup>Henry adds, “I forever appreciate the profound impact that Professor J. had on my life.”

powerful story and one that demonstrates the power of what can be described as a “lightning strike” encounter: brief, powerful, and out of nowhere. This story certainly calls attention to the role of an adult and the act of confrontation. This stranger, impatient with his need for his early morning coffee, prompts her in an act of confrontation with an opportunity that was personal and straight-forward. It is interesting to note that this adult is a stranger, not an adult with a long standing connection, but a relationship that can be impactful as a result of a single encounter and the kindness of a stranger. Another example of this kind of encounter with an adult is Hillary as she discusses an “elderly gentleman” who struck up conversation with her in the book store one day. Even though she had another major, he insisted, “No, I think that you should be a nurse. He didn’t have any good rationale for why I should be a nurse other than he thought that I would be good at it.” The stranger was persistent and the strange conversation stayed with her. The story unfolds with a crisis about her choice in major and through some twists and turns, she recalls this conversation and becomes a nursing major. Now “I honestly cannot imagine myself doing anything else and I find great peace in that.”

Winnicott is certainly on point when he observes that adults are needed to confront the needs of the burgeoning group and the challenges they face. Certainly adults are needed to help students flourish in their idealism, creativity, and “potential for new living.” Mentors, coaches, ministers, counselors, and even strangers are described by the essayists as having a direct impact on their a-ha moments. Roughly thirty percent of the essayists mention an adult as pivotal in their formative moment. And interestingly enough, an adult does not need to function as a long-standing or persistent conversation

partner. Some of the most powerful stories are complete strangers who confront them and tell them to follow their dreams.

### *Peer Groups*

Peer groups are a larger group of acquaintances, usually found within the same cohort group and often within the presence of particular activities. Peer groups can develop in the context of classes, social service trips, study abroad communities, youth groups, and even a flag football game. But more than just the activity, peer groups represent communities of people with whom an attachment is made, usually in connection with a common interest or experience. But what these groups have in common is the powerful formative force that occurs when surrounded by a group of like minded people with a common goal. Peer groups also scored the most essays of any category, with a total of 18 responses.

Winnicott states that students in higher education need to “prod society repeatedly so that society’s antagonism is made manifest and can be met with antagonism.”<sup>617</sup> Although not overt, this sense of antagonism – challenging commonly held social mores and attitudes – was present in a few of these essays. Rather the power of the group to take a stand or make a statement was described. One student, Rosala, states that as a part of her experience with a social service group, the relationships she encountered challenged her commonly held beliefs and perceptions. She states: “This discovery was an ‘aha!’ moment for me – the personal relationships I developed at college completely changed my perception of the social problems people face each day in our society.” In turn, she was made more aware of the actual problems of the world – prodding society and finding

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<sup>617</sup>Donald Woods Winnicott, “Adolescence: Struggling through the Doldrums,” in *The Family and Individual Development* (London: Tavistock Books, 1965), 47.

it lacking. Another student echoes Rosala's sentiment about her study abroad experience, "I never expected the challenges and discoveries that I would encounter when I entered the group."

One riveting essay is about Claire's adventure into something she had never done before: acting. Participating in a production of *Vagina Monologues* offered her an opportunity to raise a voice with a literal chorus of voices to push the boundaries of sexuality. Being on stage opening night "was possibly the most amazing night of my life" and the closing number involved a dance:

As we froze at the end of the dance and the applause swept over us and the lights beat down on us and the energy radiated off of us... I felt infinite. I experienced such a powerful formative feeling in that moment: I was making a statement through my involvement and my commitment. I was working to create a change in our world – a change I truly believed in. I involved myself with a group of other people equally committed to this cause. And I was involved in something bigger than myself – so inconceivably bigger than little, insignificant me. This moment may not seem momentous, but it served to spur me to action and groups on other causes I believe in.

For Claire, her a-ha moment was the "powerful formative feeling" of making a statement through her involvement and commitment in something bigger than herself. Claire was creating social change through her performance with the group; additionally, she felt compelled to go on to other groups and causes she believed in. Rosala and Claire's experiences demonstrate that these collective efforts result in powerful events that impact the community.

Other students reflect on how being part of a group can help feel like "changing the world." Brian reflects on the powerful feeling of fellowship, both with God and God's creation, by taking part in a game of capture the flag. Samuel discusses the deep communal presence he felt while involved in a Quaker meeting. Paul describes a

powerful feeling of fellowship, both with God and God’s creation, by taking part in the liturgical practices of his church. Denise describes the power of the “authentic relationships I encountered in true community living.” Living in community and taking part in meaningful fellowship activities in the context of a peer group appeared in more than 40% of the essays and scored the highest percent of any category.

### *Friends*

The final category consists of friends – either a single friend or a small set of intimate relationships developed over time. In thirty percent of the essays, a friend was the central relationship in the a-ha moment. This category also includes romantic relationships, although only one is mentioned. However, as opposed to the other two categories, the relationship with a friend is not always positive. For example, a rich friend flippantly refuses to donate money to Darfur; Michelle wonders if she really is such a good friend. Another student, Jill, discusses the suicide attempt of a friend. Jill realizes that apart from taking her to the hospital, she cannot “save” her friend. In these two cases, and others, it is clear that the relationship involving a friend is certainly impactful, but not always in positive ways. Rather, certain difficulties arise within the context of friendships that do not occur as clearly in the adult and peer group categories.

Friends are important because they offer feedback and honest reactions to difficult situations. And friends are more than just acquaintances and are, in fact, the most intimate of any of the relationship categories. One touching story written by Dave focuses on helping his friend after his father is killed. Not only does Dave learn much more about his friend, but Dave also learns a lot about himself and his ability to help a friend in need. Another student, Isaac, reflects on how his “experience find its roots in a small group of

friends who shared a common interest in theology....I never expected the challenges and discoveries that I would encounter when I entered the group.” And finally, Sayidama reflects on waking up before sunrise with her friend on Sehri, the opening of the fast of the holy month of Ramadan. The two share a meal together and decide to take a stroll before prayer begins: “We walk a few blocks and happen to see a pack of deer and then decide to run after them flaying arms to see where they went, a very silly act but one of the most carefree moments of my young life. In that moment, even though our behavior was quite extraordinary, nothing mattered but the fulfillment and happiness I gained and shared.” It is that gaining and sharing within the relationship of a close friendship that influences the context of the a-ha moment.

In conclusion, relationships offer powerful formative forces in the world of emerging adults. Central to their description of an a-ha moment is the inclusion of a significant relationship with an adult, peer group, or a friend. These three categories occur in forty-two of the essays, nearly ninety percent of the responses. Certain relationships, like family, are barely mentioned at all: A simple conclusion might be that in terms of the formation of emerging adults, parents and romantic relationships are not influential relationships. Adults as mentors, coaches, and counselors occur in a third of the essays; however, these formative relationships do not need to be long-standing or consistent. Some relationships with adults are confrontations reported like a lightning strike: fast, utterly unpredictable, and with long standing effects. Relationships in a peer group represent a community of people with which an attachment is made and within which powerful moments transpire. The most frequently reported category of relationships, peer groups, are often described as a vehicle with which to join together to

challenge the status quo. A-ha moments within peer groups often describe feeling a part of “something bigger” than the self. Finally, the involvement of friends scored roughly thirty percent of the reported a-ha moments. Friends appear to be the most challenging of the relationships because a few of the essays describe a difficult experience with a friend as a part of the a-ha moment. Friends are also the most intimate of the categories and include romantic relationships. In summary, relationships are of crucial importance in the formative moments of emerging adults.



## CHAPTER XI

### CRISIS

*Confronted with death, I lost my spiritual identity again because I could not comprehend how the God that I had known all of my life would suddenly throw me into such a test...I became spiritually dormant...I fought violently with my emotions, feeling incapable of being loved or loving others.”* -- Amanda, essayist

One surprise embedded in the essays was the repeated description of a negative event. Two-thirds of the essayists responded to the question by discussing a negative or inimical experience. For example, one essayist admits:

I became spiritually dormant. I was caught between a nether world where God’s existence seemed futile and my own understanding of God’s role no longer coalesced with reality....I struggled with my identity, about who I was to God, about who I was to others...It is a slow, sobering, awkward process to move from a point of desertion and disillusion.

Another essayist confesses:

This time in my life became a deep valley and the lowest of lows for me. I didn’t want to eat. I stayed in my room constantly. And I slept a lot because I couldn’t feel the pain when I was asleep. I was hurting and I needed help.

I was astonished to find such personal accounts of angst and woundedness. And, I was taken aback by the vulnerability being expressed through the exposure of deep pain. I was also surprised because the question asked: what has been your biggest “a-ha” moment? The question did not ask about a difficult time or an adverse experience; yet, twenty-nine of the essayists respond by including an account of a negative event. I was astounded by the openness and vulnerability of almost two-thirds of the essayists who revealed such intense personal events. Their accounts were honest, sincere, and revealing in their descriptions of difficulties and troubles involving grief, confusion, sadness, and

struggle. Contained within these essays were important revelations about adverse experiences of college students and it seemed important to lift up these voices to be heard.

### **Sharon Parks and Shipwreck**

A further surprise came when, in a conversation with Sharon Parks, she predicted the strong pattern involving a negative event in the essays.<sup>618</sup> Parks, who has worked with and written extensively about college students, told me that I should not be surprised to find a description of a crisis event in the essays. In *Big Question, Worthy Dreams*, Parks states that college students often encounter a “shipwreck” moment: “a kind of experience that can suddenly rip into the fabric of life, or it may slowly yet just as surely unravel the meanings that have served as the home of the soul.”<sup>619</sup> Parks is referring to Niebuhr’s “shipwreck, gladness, amazement” metaphor. This metaphor connotes the subjective, affective, and dynamic transformative nature of faith for Niebuhr. Shipwreck occurs “with the loss of a relationship, violence to one’s property, collapse of a career venture, physical illness or injury, defeat of a cause, a fateful choice that irrevocably reorders one’s life, betrayal by a community or government, or the discovery that an intellectual construct is inadequate.”<sup>620</sup> Given her work on mentoring in higher education, Parks was particularly interested in these “shipwreck” experiences in the essays. During these

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<sup>618</sup>I sat down with Parks at a PTEV Plenary Conference in 2207 and I mention this conversation in my Introduction. I had read the essays extensively but her confirmation on a pattern I was already noticing was extremely helpful. This might be a good example of my own “lightning strike” experience with an adult, as discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>619</sup>Sharon Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 28.

<sup>620</sup>Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 28.

college years, Parks believes a person begins to self-consciously reflect on the meaning of life itself and for this reason, she recognizes it as a crucial and new developmental period. It is important to nurture these burgeoning adults because this time is “the birthplace of adult vision and the power of on-going cultural renewal.”<sup>621</sup> *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* is her account of listening carefully to “young adults grappling with the particular stresses of making meaning in these complex times” which “has prodded me to significantly amend those theories (including my own) by which they have been interpreted.”<sup>622</sup> She gives anecdotal accounts of helping students through the shipwreck experience, and onto gladness and the amazement that can follow. For Parks, it is important to thoroughly understand these moments of shipwreck in order to help others to navigate times of troubled waters.

Added to Parks’ assertion is my own area of study’s general focus on suffering and human angst. Bonnie Miller-McLemore asserts:

My beginning proposition about how one studies religion in the general area of religion and personality studies, and pastoral theology within that area, is simple, even if its practice issues in terribly complex questions, forms, and problems: one studies religion at the point where human suffering evokes or calls for a religious response and sometimes at the point where a religious response is given and/or experienced.<sup>623</sup>

Understanding human struggle and strife is a focal starting point of pastoral theology; further, if there is a comprehensive orientation that distinguishes the area “it is the focus on living, rather than dead persons and cultures, the focus on the psyche, whether understood as ego, soul, or self, and the focus on the clinical or therapeutic or healing

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<sup>621</sup>Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith, and Commitment* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), xii.

<sup>622</sup>Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 12.

<sup>623</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “The subject and practice of pastoral theology as a practical theological discipline: pushing past the nagging identity crisis to the poetics of resistance,” in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, eds. Denise Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm (Leuven, 1998), 179.

dimension of psyche and living persons.”<sup>624</sup> In later work, Miller-McLemore expands upon her statements by using Mary McClintock Fulkerson’s reflections on pain and wounds: “Wounds generate thinking” and theology begins with the “inchoate sense that something *must* be addressed;” further, to focus on the wound is to study a “*situation characterized by harm that demands redress.*”<sup>625</sup> Focusing on wounds evokes the pain and struggle involved, yet it also calls for a response. Miller-McLemore states: “So pain insinuates its opposite, that relief and even salvation are possible, even demanded.”<sup>626</sup> She contends that a commitment “to a *theology of experience* has led the discipline to the inadvertent creation of alternative theological *loci of angst and flourishing.*”<sup>627</sup>

Pastoral theology offers a unique and fitting approach to the essays because of its focus on human struggle and woundedness. I could certainly see the alternative loci of angst and flourishing within the essays. But it was the angst, or struggle, that evoked a strong response from me: What are these negative or inimical experiences and how might they be best described? Looking to the resources of pastoral theology, “crisis” as a concept and a construct has been well explored. Charles Gerkin and Evelyn and James Whitehead offer insights into the nature of a crisis and with their help, I refine my questions: Are these negative or inimical experiences of the essays better understood and described as a crisis? If so, are there particular crisis patterns that appear?

Before addressing these questions, I want to contextualize my approach by situating it in the field of pastoral theology. A very brief background of pastoral theology

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<sup>624</sup>Miller-McLemore, *Liberating Faith Practices*, 180.

<sup>625</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian,” 23; she is quoting Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Theology and the Lure of the Practical: An Overview” *Religion Compass* 1, no.2 (2007), 294-304, original emphasis.

<sup>626</sup>Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian,” 24.

<sup>627</sup>Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian,” 1, original emphasis.

is given, as well as a short discussion on the relationship between practical and pastoral theology. My goal is to describe the basic ideals and suppositions of pastoral theology in order to contextually locate the concept of crisis that I use it to view the essays. Drawing on Gerkin, Whitehead, and Whitehead, a crisis is a boundary experience that confronts the unknown and brings change and awareness of contradiction, finitude, and vulnerability. Often unexpected and unpredictable, crisis disrupts life and reveals a fundamental contradiction between human aspirations and finite possibilities. Three basic crisis categories emerge from the essays: crisis as death, crisis as loss, and crisis as confrontation with the unknown.

### **Effective History: Pastoral Theology**

The idea that persons can be approached as “living human documents” is certainly a defining and central idea of the field of pastoral theology. Anton Boisen viewed the task of understanding the individual as analogous to understanding and interpreting a historical text. Having experienced his own profound personal struggles, Boison placed the crux of human suffering as the focus of deep theological reflection.<sup>628</sup> His approach as an interpreter of the “inner world” who offers the possibility of new meaning is of core importance to pastoral theology. In fact, Boison is often cited as the founder of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and the modern pastoral care and counseling movement.<sup>629</sup>

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<sup>628</sup>Charles Gerkin argues “that Boisen was fundamentally correct in his placing of the crux of human spiritual suffering at the point of the connection between experience and idea, between the occurrence of events and a language of meaning for those events. It is when that connection becomes blocked, distorted, or made impossible that the troubled person must seek a helper, an interpreter who may offer a new possibility of meaning.” Charles Gerkin, *Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984), 53.

<sup>629</sup>Charles Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997) 14-15, and

Boisen's student Seward Hiltner continued his legacy and most assert Hiltner had more influence on the field of pastoral theology than any other; Hiltner instigated a renewed focus on pastoral theology.<sup>630</sup> His basic approach to pastoral theology is one focused on the idea of Christian shepherding, a disciplined inquiry into the *healing, sustaining, and guiding* activities of the minister. For Hiltner, pastoral care provides an important context for critical theological reflection and his case study method reflects this assertion.

Pastoral theology, as a "theology of shepherding," focused on the *healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling* of troubled persons, as noted by William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle.<sup>631</sup> Fifteen years later, Howard Clinebell added *nurturing* to this list.<sup>632</sup> Edward Wimberly challenged Clebsch and Jaekle's schema and suggested an enlargement of Hiltner's understanding of ministry.<sup>633</sup> In 1999, Carroll Watkins Ali in *Survival and Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African-American Context* expands the list to suggest new concepts for pastoral theology where:

the contents of ministry needs to expand beyond the traditional aspects of shepherding – healing, sustaining, guiding – in order to meet the survival and liberation needs of the African-American context. Poor black women and their families require functions of ministry that are also nurturing, empowering, and ultimately liberating in praxis.<sup>634</sup>

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Charles Gerkin, *Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984), 39 and 53.

<sup>630</sup>John Polk, "Practical Theology," in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, eds. Donald Mussre and Joseph Price (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 376.

<sup>631</sup>William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective: An Essay with Exhibits* (New York: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964).

<sup>632</sup>Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984).

<sup>633</sup>Edward Wimberly, *Pastoral Care in the Black Church* (1979), referenced by Carroll Watkins Ali, "A Womanist Search for Sources," in *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 55.

<sup>634</sup>Watkins Ali, "A Womanist Search for Sources," 63-64.

Emmanuel Lartey adds further refinement to the definition with the addition of *resisting*, *empowering*, and *liberating*.<sup>635</sup> Finally, this new sustained focus on the *healing*, *sustaining*, *guiding*, *reconciling*, *nurturing*, *resisting*, *empowering*, and *liberating* of troubled persons grows out of data gathered from three sources. For Wimberly, these three sources are: 1) revelation about the human condition uncovered by the social and behavioral sciences, 2) wisdom from the classical theological disciplines, and 3) insight garnered from reflection on the pastoral ministry event.<sup>636</sup>

During the development of pastoral theology, the awareness and importance of secular sources of knowledge, particularly psychology and the human sciences, created “the need for Christian pastors to respond in appropriate fashion to these sources.”<sup>637</sup> Because pastoral theology is distinguished by close attention to the individual, many engaged with psychological resources to serve as practical and prescriptive tools for ministry. In this sense, pastoral theology, and pastoral care and counseling within it, is a distinctive twentieth century phenomenon. Bonnie Miller-McLemore states:

In a sense, pastoral theology is a modern study of religion *par excellence*, coming to fruition precisely as a result of new so-called objective, measurable, empirical means of knowing the ‘truths’ of human experience.

In other words, she continues: “the field did not consolidate its academic position until after the social sciences, psychology in particular, had given new life to the study of the person, religious experience, pastoral care and ministry.”<sup>638</sup> For example, The Society of Pastoral Theology – founded in 1985 – describes pastoral theology as a constructive

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<sup>635</sup>Emmanuel Lartey and James Poling, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003).

<sup>636</sup>Edward Wimberly, *Counseling African American Marriages and Families* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), viii.

<sup>637</sup>Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996), 63.

<sup>638</sup>Miller-McLemore, *Liberating Faith Practices*, 177.

practical theological enterprise focused on the care of persons, families, and communities that draws on interdisciplinary methods. This focus on care, whether the critical engagement in acts of care or response to needs posed for such care, situates pastoral theology as a distinct form of contextual theology.<sup>639</sup> For this reason, Miller-McLemore proposes reimagining Boisen's powerful foundational metaphor: "the 'living human *web*' suggests itself as a better term for the appropriate subject for investigation, interpretation, and transformation."<sup>640</sup>

### **The Relationship Between Pastoral and Practical Theology**

But what is the relationship between pastoral theology and practical theology? This question deserves brief mention because of my previous attention to the field of practical theology. Ed Farley comments that the relationship between practical theology and pastoral theology has a complex and confusing history. Most typical, Farley says, "is the usage of practical theology as a term to include all disciplines of church or ministerial activity and pastoral theology as a narrower term for studies pertaining to pastoral care."<sup>641</sup> Woodward and Pattison consider pastoral theology as a discipline within practical theology and describe common ground between the two approaches. They describe pastoral and practical theology together as "a prime place where contemporary experience and the resources of religious tradition meet in a critical dialogue with current

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<sup>639</sup>Nancy Ramsay, *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>640</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "The Living Human Web: Pastoral Theology at the Turn of the Century" in *Through the Eyes of Women*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 16.

<sup>641</sup>Edward Farley, "Practical Theology, Protestant" in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney Hunter (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 935.



disciplines that is mutually and practically transforming.”<sup>642</sup> Woodward and Pattison note that contemporary North American theologians have been keen to identify themselves distinctively as either pastoral or practical theologians.<sup>643</sup> In general, pastoral theologians tend to focus on care and counseling, particularly those issues concerned with the flourishing of individuals and groups. On the other hand, practical theologians have “been more traditionally ‘academic’ and scholarly,” concerned with establishing broad theoretical theological and ethical frameworks for understanding situations.<sup>644</sup> In conclusion, Woodward and Pattison believe that the two areas have much more in common and overlap significantly such that to draw differences between the two seems “to be more of emphasis than substance.”<sup>645</sup>

Like Woodward and Pattison, Barbara McClure argues that the primary objective of pastoral theology is to help create the conditions for human flourishing.<sup>646</sup> For McClure, pastoral theology is the branch of theology that is concerned with the basic principles, theories, and practices of caring and counseling: “Pastoral theology is a reflection on concrete human experience with the explicit goal of formulating practical methods of dealing with problems or crises that can be used in the context of ministry.”<sup>647</sup> More specifically, pastoral theology is concerned with how theology connects with

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<sup>642</sup>James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, “Introduction” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), xv.

<sup>643</sup>Woodward and Pattison, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, 2.

<sup>644</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>645</sup>*Ibid.*, 3. Woodward and Pattison suggest a phenomenological definition of pastoral and practical theology as “a place where religious beliefs, tradition, and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions and actions and conducts a dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually critical, and practically transforming, p.7

<sup>646</sup> Barbara McClure, *Moving Beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling: Reflection on Theory, Theology and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 3.

<sup>647</sup>McClure, *Moving Beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care*, 19-20.

concrete experience, thus, it is “a mode of contextual and practical theology.”<sup>648</sup> McClure investigates the inherent individualism present and persistent in the field, which she sees as a dominating and a constraining ideology in *Moving Beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling*. For McClure, pastoral theology:

seeks to bring religious and moral meanings to bear on the needs, problems, and activities of everyday human experience to interpret their significance, understand their etiologies, and guide appropriate and healing interventions.<sup>649</sup>

McClure’s end goal is to move the ministry beyond individualistic limitations and instead offer healing and conditions for human flourishing in more complex, effective, and socially adequate ways.

As a pastoral theologian who understands her work as situated within the broader enterprise of practical theology, Miller-McLemore remains a pastoral theologian at heart because “of its appropriation of psychology as a key means to comprehend what matters most to persons.”<sup>650</sup> According to Miller-McLemore, both pastoral and practical theologies “seek to articulate a dynamic theology that complicates and enriches the study of religious traditions and texts through proximity to practice, activity, events, and situations.”<sup>651</sup> However, there are crucial differences between the two areas, particularly that pastoral theology pays particular attention to human pathos and is “preoccupied with everyday concerns that evade and disrupt traditional categories, doctrines, and loci in theological and religious study.”<sup>652</sup> This emphasis on human struggle contrasts with practical theology, which “has an important breadth. It encompasses pastoral

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<sup>648</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>649</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>650</sup>Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian, 1.

<sup>651</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>652</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

theology.”<sup>653</sup> In short: “Pastoral and practical theologies are theologies caught in the act of people’s lives.”<sup>654</sup>

### Gerkin and Crisis

A leading figure in the mid-twentieth century revival of pastoral theology and scholar at Emory, Charles Gerkin proposes that what makes pastoral counseling *pastoral* is the willingness of the counselor to help translate and interpret the stories of human lives. Gerkin emphasizes the role of the pastoral counselor as one who addresses the human identity paradox: how the self lives with the tensions of suffering and human expectation. Gerkin reflects on the influence of Boisen and his insistence on beginning with the individual’s experience, and he expands Boisen’s famous metaphor in *The Living Human Document: Revisioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*. The metaphor of the living human document is important because it means that a person’s experience is worthy of attention, but also that the integrity of her experience should be valued and taken as an authoritative source of theological reflection. Gerkin understands the basic tools of pastoral counseling are hermeneutical tools, the tools of interpretation.<sup>655</sup> For Gerkin, a “hermeneutical perspective sees all human language systems, including both theology and psychology, as efforts to penetrate the mystery of what is beyond human understanding and make sense of it.”<sup>656</sup> James Poling refers to Gerkin’s approach as a “narrative hermeneutical perspective” that uses the stories of

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<sup>653</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>654</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>655</sup>Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 20.

<sup>656</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

individuals and groups as case material.<sup>657</sup> Since the basic tools of pastoral counseling are the tools of interpretation, pastoral counseling may be understood as a dialogical hermeneutical process involving the client and therapist. The pastoral counselor aids in helping the client translate, interpret, and re-interpret the stories of her life. Gerkin states, “We must exercise our need and capacity to make meaningful interpretations of who we are, what the world is, and what, given our situation, is most meaningful – what Tillich calls our ultimate concern.”<sup>658</sup>

For Gerkin, pastoral theology has crucial communal dimensions having to do with initiating persons into the community that nurtures faith and with sustaining individuals in their efforts to lead faithful lives while under the strain of everyday life in a predominantly secular world.<sup>659</sup> Gerkin’s work has four distinct levels, one of which is doing crisis ministry with individuals and families.<sup>660</sup> Working with individuals and families in crisis gives Gerkin a unique perspective and he uses case material to approach and understand the nature of a crisis. Gerkin introduces *Crisis Experience in Modern Life* as concerned with crisis as it is experienced most commonly by contemporary persons.<sup>661</sup> Rather than a book on “how to-do” crisis intervention, Gerkin seeks to fundamentally “understand what is going on in a given human situation with the greatest breadth and richness of perception possible.”<sup>662</sup> Gerkin is attracted to the idea of understanding the situation in its “greatest breadth.” He refers to this again when he discusses the advantage

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<sup>657</sup>James Poling, “A Critical Appraisal of Charles Gerkin’s Pastoral Theology,” *Journal of Pastoral Psychology* 37, vol. 2 (Winter 1988): 85 (85-96).

<sup>658</sup>Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 49.

<sup>659</sup>Gerkin, *Introduction to Pastoral Care*, 29.

<sup>660</sup>The other three levels, as expanded by Gerkin, involves maintaining congregational communities, building community in the midst of diversity, and providing pastoral leadership. Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care*, 240.

<sup>661</sup>Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1979), 11.

<sup>662</sup>Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life*, 12.

of the pastoral care perspective, that within it “lies a certain capacity to see particular human problems with both great breadth and profound depth of perspective.”<sup>663</sup> Gerkin uses case material and specific cases of crisis experience to demonstrate the different dimensions of crisis present, “experiences which together make up the human experience of finitude and vulnerability.”<sup>664</sup>

Gerkin delineates between a crisis event and a crisis experience. “Crisis” is often associated with an event and in this sense, a crisis is an occurrence that triggers or initiates a set of dynamic forces and processes within and around an individual, family, or community.<sup>665</sup> Crisis as an event is often unexpected and specific, “exceptional and unpredictable upheavals resulting from unusual circumstances such as divorce or a disabling accident.”<sup>666</sup> Gerkin, however, prefers the term “crisis experience” to refer to the multiple factors of meanings, ideas, and feelings, conscious and unconscious processes which taken together form a gestalt.<sup>667</sup> Using systems theory, a crisis experience is “what happens when the equilibrium or vital balance in the life space of an individual, family, or community is disrupted or interrupted by some more or less drastic change in the dynamic relationships within the system.”<sup>668</sup> In this way, Gerkin admits to using a “wide-angle lens” in his attempt to understand and define crisis. Fundamentally, he sees crisis as a multidimensional encounter in which a complex network of factors comes together to shape a particular crisis experience.

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<sup>663</sup>Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life*, 12.

<sup>664</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>665</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>666</sup>*Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>667</sup>Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life*, 41.

<sup>668</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

Gerkin defines crisis as: “for modern persons, an extreme or boundary situation in which the fundamental contradiction between human aspirations and finite possibilities becomes visible in such a way as to demand attention.”<sup>669</sup> For Gerkin, crisis causes persons to confront our human vulnerability, finitude, and the perhaps utter impossibility of hopes and wishes. Persons are forced to confront the unknown and many powerful forces, both personal and cultural, come together to exert pressure on the situation. Crisis is most often associated with an event that interrupts life, such as death, divorce, illness or a job loss and “are precipitants of crisis for everyone who experiences them.”<sup>670</sup> He adds: “But the core of crisis experience is awareness of contradiction, finitude, and vulnerability; and the elemental choice presented is one of faith.”<sup>671</sup> For Gerkin, a crisis “is to be seen fundamentally as any threat to the ultimate meaning of things” and, as well, “it is a boundary experience.”<sup>672</sup>

According to Gerkin, experiencing death is the primary paradigm of crisis experience. “Our definition of crisis as the extreme or boundary situation in which persons become aware of their finite existence compels the selection of death and dying as the primary paradigm.”<sup>673</sup> This includes catastrophic death, terminal illness, suicide, coping with the vulnerability of dying, and exploration of death’s meaning. But even beyond this, Gerkin makes crucial links between crisis and anguish, bereavement, grief, hopelessness, despair, alienation, loneliness, all within the context of broken relationships. Dealing with death and dying becomes a part of the adult task because for Gerkin, it “is in adulthood that persons experience both the fullness and the realistic

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<sup>669</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>670</sup>*Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>671</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>672</sup>*Ibid.*, 72-74.

<sup>673</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

limits of life most completely in a kind of tension between what is possible and what is desirable.”<sup>674</sup> During the college years, students often confront death for the first time. During an interview, Hanover College President Sue DeWine revealed that one quarter of college students will experience the death of a loved one during college, and often, for the very first time.

Overall a crisis, for Gerkin, is a boundary experience that confronts the unknown which brings change and awareness of contradiction, finitude, and vulnerability. Often unexpected and unpredictable, crisis disrupts life and reveals a fundamental contradiction between human aspirations and finite possibilities. Persons are forced to confront the unknown, including the utter impossibility of hopes and wishes. Death is the primary paradigm of crisis, for Gerkin, and dealing with death and dying becomes a primary task of an adult. In short, a crisis is a threat to ultimate meaning.

### **Whitehead and Whitehead**

James and Evelyn Whitehead, as a historian of religion and a social psychologist respectively, bring together theology and the psychological disciplines to construct a Christian based approach to Erikson’s work on adult development. Their text *Christian Life Patterns* focuses on the psychological and religious challenges of adult life. They challenge the misconception that once adulthood is reached, development is over; moreover, they directly confront the expectation that adulthood is a time of stability and permanence. Instead, for Whitehead and Whitehead, adulthood is a time of crisis.<sup>675</sup>

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<sup>674</sup>*Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>675</sup>Evelyn Whitehead and James Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns: The Psychological Challenges and*

Although they do not identify explicitly as pastoral theologians, their work on adult development reflects pastoral theological sensitivity and I include it because of its valuable insight as a lens to understand the essays. Whitehead and Whitehead's attention is focused on those who seek to minister to adults in crisis. However, their perspective and attention to loss is important. They state: "In the midst of a crisis a person is often challenged to let go some part of the self, even before it is clear what will replace this loss."<sup>676</sup> This loss of some aspect of the self is a necessary challenge in the midst of a crisis. Using the work of Peter Marris on loss and change, they describe crisis in terms of loss. In crisis, "a person will likely lose his bearings; the ordinary reference points that previously anchored his values and sense of self no longer avail."<sup>677</sup> This loss of bearings and ordinary reference points, especially concerning one's sense of self, results in the experience of discontinuity and loss.

The first characteristic of crisis is disorientation. Disorientation results from the experience of discontinuity and loss – loss of control over the situation and a loss of some part of the self. This sense of loss is experienced in a myriad of ways: the loss of hopes and wishes, the loss of security, the loss of a future, the loss of bearings, and most significant, the loss of a part of the self. For Whitehead and Whitehead, the role of the pastoral caregiver is "to acknowledge and mourn the loss, while gradually letting go of the lost object. The task is thus dual: to identify and accept the loss while interpreting one's life so that the positive value of the lost object survives."<sup>678</sup> Using language of ORT, they highlight that the lost object must be mourned and accepted. Something is

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*Invitations of Adult Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 53-55. Because they use an Erikson framework, these college students would be adults, specifically young adults in the first phase of adulthood.

<sup>676</sup>Whitehead and Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns*, 55.

<sup>677</sup>*Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>678</sup>*Ibid.*, 53.



lost, but yet something can be gained. Whitehead and Whitehead discuss the disconcerting aspects of crisis involving disorientation, ambivalence, and loss; however, their focus is ultimately on suggesting ways to reinterpret loss into opportunities for growth.

### **Examining the Essays: Crisis**

Looking to the essays and their description of a negative event, I ask: how might they best be described? Using the literature from pastoral theology, I look through this lens to determine if these experiences are revealed as crisis. In a crisis, persons are forced to confront the unknown, including the utter impossibility of hopes and wishes. A crisis is a boundary experience that confronts the unknown which brings change and awareness of contradiction, finitude, and vulnerability. Often unexpected and unpredictable, crisis disrupts life and reveals a fundamental contradiction between human aspirations and finite possibilities.

Drawing on Whitehead and Whitehead, I looked to the essays for themes of loss and disorientation. What I noticed were accounts of grief, hopelessness, loneliness, ambivalence, anguish, and despair. Within these accounts of struggle, significant loss was being experienced. Sometimes these losses involve death – including three accounts of suicide – while others discuss “falling apart” or the anxieties of confronting an unknown future. These stories seem to reflect what Whitehead and Whitehead describe as the challenge of crisis: “to let go some part of the self, even before it is clear what will

replace this loss.”<sup>679</sup> For Gerkin, crisis causes persons to confront the unknown and the impossibility of hopes and wishes. Because death is the primary paradigm for crisis, I looked to the essays and found six accounts that discuss death.

### *Crisis: Death*

Hanover College President, Sue DeWine, quoted statistics that said one in four college students will experience the death of a loved one during college, and often confront death for the very first time. Six essays reflect on the experience of death and their moving stories emote grief and bereavement. Sharon states:

This year my ‘Aha moment’ came when one of my good friends suddenly died. My friend’s death was hard to deal with. It filled my mind with questions, anger and sadness. Through all the emotions that I was feeling, her death made me realize that tomorrow is not promised. I may be here today, but I don’t know about tomorrow. For that reason, I need to live my life to the fullest.

Sharon reflects on the questions, anger, and sadness that resulted from her friend’s death. Her conclusion, and part of her a-ha moment, is to face and accept finitude by living “life to the fullest.” Amanda describes her feeling of abandonment and turmoil as she tried to deal with a death in her family:

I began to question, I started to scrutinize, and learned how to doubt or ignore the God I once knew was there beside me... And I felt abandoned and adrift within a sea of changing friends... I didn’t and still do not know how to react, how to incorporate God into such a desolate realm of familial turmoil. I began to feel abandoned, alone, worthless, and forgotten. Confronted with death, I lost my spiritual identity again because I could not comprehend how the God that I had known all of my life would suddenly throw me into such a test...I became spiritually dormant...I fought violently with my emotions, feeling incapable of being loved or loving others.

Jesse expresses his deepening relationship with a friend who lost his father in a freak industrial accident. Jesse was with his friend when he heard the news and was witness to his friend’s constant struggle to comprehend the accident. This death and its

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<sup>679</sup>Whitehead and Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns*, 55.

ramifications allowed Jesse to step in as a steady presence through his friend's grieving process. Another student, Rebecca, reflects on what she learned in grief counseling. Because she was having a very difficult time dealing with her friend's suicide death, Rebecca started grief counseling and in the midst of her process, a lot of personal discovery was made.

Two other essays involve suicide. In one essay, Ted very candidly describes the tumultuous beginning of his freshman year of college when he learned about the suicide of a very close friend back home:

It was a big struggle for me coming to college and knowing only one other person. To make matters worse, the one person I knew was my girlfriend of two years who had just broken up with me. Also, within the very first week of classes, I found out that one of my very close friends from back home had committed suicide. So I found myself at college, not knowing anyone, two hours from home, and heartbroken over the loss of my girlfriend and very dear friend... This time in my life became a deep valley and the lowest of lows for me. I didn't want to eat. I stayed in my room constantly. And I slept a lot because I couldn't feel the pain when I was asleep. I was hurting and I needed help.

Ted openly discusses a deep depression in which he did not want to eat and slept constantly. Heartbroken over the death of his friend, he details the depths of loneliness of experiencing death far from home. In another essay, Tina describes making a decision to drive a suicidal friend to the hospital. Although her friend did not die, this brush with death was deeply moving for Tina: "It finally got to the point where my friends and I had to drive her to the hospital and leave our beloved, suicidal friend in the hands of the psychiatric ward. I was then faced with the immense reality that no matter what I did, I could not save her. I could not save her anymore than I can save myself."

### *Crisis: Loss*

Looking through the lens of crisis, another theme emerged: the loss of a part of the self. In eight different essays, the students discussed losing a part of their self by experiencing a difficulty or hardship. From feeling like a failure to stepping out of a comfort zone, students described an encounter with a situation that challenged their bearings and assumptions they had about themselves and their world. Troy writes that he “turned to hopelessness and despair. That semester, fall of sophomore year, was the worst of my life. Trying to quit the team in December, I fell apart in the coach’s office, and finally reached rock bottom.” Marcia reflects on her inability to fulfill her own expectations, as well as what she felt was expected of her: “As I sat there fruitlessly staring at my books and my computer screen I felt like I was failing. Failing myself, my calling, my vocation, my salvation, worst of all, my Lord. I felt like I was a disappointment to God because of the academics I wasn’t easily producing.” Courtney writes about her struggle to keep up with the demands of college life: “I quickly lost the energy, focus and passion needed to really make a difference. I got frustrated and burnt out.”

Alexis examines her experience of stepping out of her comfort zone. Her loss of self is reflected in the realization that she no longer felt confident about herself and the loss of security that entailed. Alexis writes: “At that moment of ‘oh crap,’ I realized that I was stepping out of my comfort zone for the first time in my life. I didn’t really know what I stood for, what I believed in, or what talents I possessed to make me a unique contributor to the community, and the world more generally.” Another student, Theresa, comments on the void she felt in college when she realized that something was missing in

her life. She describes feeling a loss of self by articulating about a distinct void: “I also felt that despite the great experiences I was having as a college freshman, something was missing in my life. I thought and prayed about the void I was feeling, I discovered that I sincerely missed the youth activities I had been so involved with as a high school student.”

In two other essays, the students discuss a loss in terms of an ideal held about the self and the world. Carrie saw herself as an activist and her interest in social justice was encouraged on a campus that promotes diversity. But during a training session for resident assistants, Carrie was called a racist. Carrie felt she was called “racist only because I was white. This really struck me and confused me and still does to this day...I could not and do not understand how someone who barely knew me could just look at me and call me racist for the sole reason because I was white; not because of any of my actions or any of my words, only the color of my skin.” Carrie’s own ideal image about herself was confronted by a stressful situation. And ideals she thought she shared with others were lost. In the other essays, George confesses that he lost his ideal image of the United States: “I felt shame in my country that supported El Salvador’s oppressive government, prolonging the revolution and causing pain and death to many Salvadorans. The exploding bullet that ravaged the praying heart of Romero as he was giving mass was designed and built in the US. The elite battalion that murdered the Jesuits was trained and equipped by the US.”

*Crisis: Confrontation with the Unknown*

For Gerkin, crisis causes a confrontation with the unknown, where hopes and wishes for the future are challenged. Powerful forces, both personal and cultural, come

together to exert pressure on the situation in a crisis. During crisis, persons are forced to confront finitude and the vulnerability of life. In nine of the essays, confronting the unknown was a theme; furthermore, this confrontation with the unknown is usually added to the already stressful and pressure-filled environment of college life. Sarah writes:

Whether self-inflicted or imposed by some outside force, college students are constantly under some type of pressure. Perhaps this is due to our newfound responsibility, and ability to effectively manage our time. Failure to embrace these requirements all too often results in a highly stressful situation, induced by procrastination or angst. In my case, a great deal of pressure came from within me, as I tried to make sense of the events surrounding my college experience.

This pressure, combined with an unseen and unknowable future, confronts students as they try to navigate and explore opportunities. Elizabeth writes that: “For the first time I questioned what it was exactly that I was doing and what I was planning to do with my life.” These “major life decisions” are often made apart from family; yet, family and outside forces usually add pressure through persistent questioning about future plans. This can be a very difficult situation, as Ted adds: “I was desperate to decide on what I was going to do with my life. I was trying so hard to hear God calling me that it was stressful and draining.”

Pressure, stress, and anxiety color many of the accounts of crisis. Change is a constant experience for emerging adults and, in one essay, Mark highlights the fast and furious pace of some of these changes: “College is a time where you do an incredible amount of growing in a short period of time. Sometimes huge discoveries are made and other times circumstances change so rapidly that you can barely keep up with yourself.” The future and its weighty concerns are also ever-present and the realization that major decisions are “entirely in my hands” heightens feelings of stress and anxiety. As Lisa explains:

When I graduated from high school, I knew what was coming next – college. But after college, there are choices. For the first time, my future seems entirely in my hands, and yet I feel more out of control than ever before. I like to have a plan, and contemplating a future of many choices (and the known and unknown consequences of those choices) is unsettling. This is the anxiety that colors my thoughts during these first weeks of school.

These anxieties involving the future are often waylaid through the construction of “a plan.” Discussed earlier in Chapter Four, “a plan” is often formulated by emerging adults regarding their majors and future careers. Difficulties arise, however, when those plans and possibilities are confronted by reality. Future projected plans are frequently revised and sometimes destroyed completely. Holly confesses:

I will...I will...I will...this was the mentality I entered college with. I thought I had my life mapped out on a piece of paper and I believed that there was no possible way I would become a college statistic and change my major at least one time. To make a long story short, I have contemplated at least ten different majors, have decided that I have no idea where I will end up, what I will be doing, or if I will even unite in marriage one day.

Regina echoes this sentiment when she explains what happened to her plan: “I felt pretty confident that that was a great plan. The only problem was that as much as I enjoyed biology, I found out that I didn’t love it. The classes required were a constant struggle for me, so much that instead of enjoying what I was doing, it felt like a burden.” Student enter with ideal images of a future life that can “quickly unravel” when confronted by reality. Emily adds:

I came into college with the idea that I had everything figured out. I was going to attend undergraduate for four years, obtain a degree in the sciences, and then go on to medical school. This was the vision I had imagined since I was a little girl and I was positive everything would go according to plan. My perfect, ideal image began to quickly unravel when I started my job at the medical center.

Although Emily admits that this experience was difficult, even destabilizing, in the end it offered her the chance to explore different options. Finally, Vicki describes the

disorientation she felt when her plan was confronted by the reality of classes. She explains: “As a freshman, I had plans of completing my four years and then attending law school. This was something I had been thinking about for some time; however, as I got into the routine of classes, I suddenly felt myself not so excited by the thought of studying law.”

In summary, there were a lot of descriptions of crisis experience within the essays. Crisis is categorized as a boundary experience that confronts the unknown and which brings change. The question (what has been your biggest a-ha moment in college?) fundamentally asks a question about a change. Often, the description of the a-ha moment revealed a need for change or as a response to a change already made. Rather than slow-moving growth as change over time, some change comes quickly and unexpectedly, creating uncertainty and anxiety. In response to the question, over 60% of the essays describe a negative event. Pastoral theology draws attention to these moments of struggle and angst in the midst of people’s lives. Drawing on Gerkin, Whitehead, and Whitehead, a crisis is a boundary experience that confronts the unknown and brings change and awareness of contradiction, finitude, and vulnerability. Often unexpected and unpredictable, crisis disrupts life and reveals a fundamental contradiction between human aspirations and finite possibilities. Using this definition, I examine the essays and three basic crisis categories emerge: crisis as death, crisis as loss, and crisis as confrontation with the unknown. These stories are accounts of hopelessness, loneliness, ambivalence, and despair; overall, they contained distinct themes of loss and disorientation. Death is also a pertinent theme, which includes three accounts of suicide. Overall, these accounts of crisis indicate that emerging adults, despite all their opportunities and golden



tomorrows, also experience deep pain and struggle. Added to the instability of an already chaotic life, a crisis forces a confrontation with the unknown, including the utter impossibility of hopes and wishes. Because of these experiences and my own, I make specific recommendations for higher education to provide resources to specifically deal with crisis in Chapter Eight.

## CHAPTER VII

### PRACTICES

*“Many times in college students have ideas, good ideas. I believe the simple game of Capture the Flag showed my friends and me what can happen when students do not limit themselves and do not limit God in what can be accomplished.” – Andrew, essayist*

A pattern that immediately caught my eye was that the essayists were *doing something* in the midst of their a-ha experience. This active sense of participating in an activity or event, which spurred the a-ha moment, occurred in ninety-four percent of the essays. Additionally, there were particular categories of activities that seemed to directly impact their formative experience. These events varied: participating in social service trips, reflecting on texts, working in an internship, conversing with a mentor, or playing a game of capture the flag. In the midst of participating in such events and activities, something happened to help change the way in which the essayists thought about themselves and about life. A certain sense of embodiedness and activity precipitated the a-ha moments.

I wanted to describe these accounts as practices; rather, I could see categories and groupings of activities around particular themes, which looked like a practice. For example, ten essays described their a-ha moment in the context of participating in a social service event; I wanted to describe this as a “practice of social service.” However, turning to the vast literature on practices, I struggled to find a singular definition that described what I was seeing (or thought that I was seeing). Instead by reviewing the literature on practices, I borrow from different practical and pastoral theologians in order to construct my own definition of practice. A practice is a communal and contextual, purposeful

activity strategically undertaken by embodied persons. I use this definition of practice as a lens with which to view the essays. From this practice lens, five basic categories (or congeries) of practice emerge: practices of service, practices of fellowship, practices of work, practices of reading and reflection, and practices of conversation. I argue that the essayists offer stories of the “person-forming power of practices;” furthermore, embedded in these essays are important lessons about practices that can be learned and taught. In the end, I encourage higher education and those interested in college student life to consider these practices in their programmatic development. Listening to the voices of these emerging adults, it seems clear that the activities that engender and precipitate their a-ha moments are important; furthermore, these practices can be learned and taught.

### **Problems with Practice**

As a practical theologian, the concept of “practice” seems like a good place to start. First, practical theology holds the subject of practice to be a pertinent and significant subject. That is to say, practical theology has an inherent interest in practices; in fact, some scholars, like Elaine Graham, argue that practices should be the focus of pastoral and practical theology. Second, the scholarly literature in theology concerning practices “has become all the rage in religious and theological studies in the past decade. Practices language is everywhere today.”<sup>680</sup> Thomas Long states that the term practice “has lately reentered the theological stream with revived energy.”<sup>681</sup> Others, like Francis

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<sup>680</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “The Politics of Practical Theological Knowledge,” unpublished essay, 27.

<sup>681</sup>Thomas Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice* (Louisville, KY:

Schussler Fiorenza complain: “The term ‘practice’ has become a shibboleth. Theologians use it as the password to cross from the dry desert of intellectualism into the land where theory and practice overflow each other.”<sup>682</sup> For Joyce Ann Mercer, practice “is something of a buzzword in theological circles spurred on by recent developments in the field of practical theology as well as some scholarly border-crossing into sociology, philosophy, and ritual theory.”<sup>683</sup> In short, the field is abuzz with the language of practice. The concept of practice is everywhere; consequently, the concept of practice is prominent in practical theology.

Turning to the literature on practices, I quickly became overwhelmed. Practices language *is* everywhere and its use within the field is not at all consistent. In a panic, I looked up the word “shibboleth”: it refers to a kind of pet phrase used to distinguish a particular class or set of persons from another. Originally, “shibboleth” was the test word use by the Gileadites to distinguish the fleeing Ephramites who could not pronounce the sounds *sh/th*; however, Fiorenza’s use of shibboleth is an incisive and important critique. Fiorenza refers to the password mentality of today’s practices language: everyone is using it to get ahead, but no one really knows what it means. Practice is a catch phrase used to “get by” and is employed in order to be included in the group; but in the end, for Fiorenza, the word appears to be nonsense.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore offers a similar criticism as Fiorenza. In her own attempt to describe and define pastoral and practical theology, she found that “behind definitions lie untold political battles over turf, ideological clashes over ultimate

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Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>682</sup>Francis Schussler Fiorenza, “Theory and Practice: Theological Education as a Reconstructive, Hermeneutical, and Practical Task,” *Theological Supplement* (1987), 113.

<sup>683</sup>Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (Duluth, GA: Chalice Press, 2005) 13.

commitments and epistemological skirmishes over what counts as knowledge.”<sup>684</sup> To define is also to rule, remarks Miller-McLemore, and although dictionaries contribute to the perception that all is a fairly cut-and-dry task, definitional tasks are complicated and tensions are real. Furthermore, she comments specifically on the concept of practice: “To trace the evolution of terms in the study of theology and practice is to mark power struggles.”<sup>685</sup> These power struggles are real, involving time and resources, and embedded with particular ideologies. And, often, these power struggles are hidden and unspoken. She states: “Like language and culture itself, definitions shape reality and determine who has access to producing and maintaining knowledge.”<sup>686</sup> Following Miller-McLemore, offering definitions is difficult work: it requires careful consideration and attention to hidden meanings, political undercurrents, and concealed ideologies. I attempt in the next section to trace some of the hidden meanings and political undercurrents around the concept of practice; furthermore, I choose carefully from other definitions by being explicit about their ideologies.

I also wondered if my desire to focus on “what the essayist were doing” might be better described using other words: actions, activities, tasks, habits, endeavours, engagements, disciplines, rituals, or praxis. However, none of these words seemed to adequately reflect the active sense of interacting and reacting I was seeing; furthermore, it was clear that there were clusters of similar activities having comparable effects and these events needed to be explored and held up. I decided that a survey of the literature

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<sup>684</sup>Miller-McLemore, “The Politics of Practical Theological Knowledge,” 2.

<sup>685</sup>Miller-McLemore goes on to expand Schreier’s analysis of power by examining how the modern dichotomy between theory and practice operates to suppress and control knowledge. Miller-McLemore, “The Politics of Practical Theological Knowledge,” 3.

<sup>686</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

on practices would allow me to construct my own definition of practice which I could use to help describe the essays.

In the end, my search for a simple and easy definition of practice came up empty-handed. The problem with practice is that it is everywhere and yet no consensus exists about the concept. Underlying definitions of practice are marked by hidden and unspoken power struggles; for this reason, offering definitions is difficult work. Although characterized as the focus of pastoral and practical theology, practices appear to have the buzzword mentality of a growing fad. Within the scholarly literature, the concept of practice lacks a singular definition and it presents a “series of quandaries rather than a stable set of ingredients.”<sup>687</sup> For this reason, I carefully construct an effective history of practice. Beginning with the practice-theory divide, I situate the theological conversation on practices by examining several contemporary approaches. Drawing from the resources of each, I construct the definition of practice that I use to examine the essays.

### **Effective History: Practice**

Miroslav Volf traces the history of practice by discussing the practice versus theory divide. This divide is rooted in the understanding of knowledge that divides theory from practice. Volf cites Aristotle and his distinction between *episteme* and *techne*: theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge.<sup>688</sup> “According to this distinction, the goal of theoretical sciences is truth, and the goal of the practical sciences is action.”<sup>689</sup> Here,

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<sup>687</sup>Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Laurie and Leigh Schmidt and Mark Valeri, *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 2006), vii-viii.

<sup>688</sup> In my conclusion, I continue this discussion but include a third partner, *phronesis*.

<sup>689</sup>Miroslav Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian*

the assumption is that theory is conducted very much removed from the practical in order to render a “value-free” view of reality; on the other hand, practice is distanced from theory since it describes how things should be done. In this relationship, the theoretical sciences (in which knowledge is pursued for knowledge’s sake) are understood as a higher form of knowing or wisdom than the practical sciences, which are pursued for their usefulness. This Aristotelian schema and practice versus theory divide has raised debate, specifically in theology when the question is asked: where does theology fit in?

Volf adds:

Obviously, if theology is a theoretical science, then it only secondarily has something to do with practices; one has to make separate inquiry into practical implications of knowledge pursued for its own sake. But if theology is a practical science, then practices are from the start included within the purview of its concerns.<sup>690</sup>

The practice versus theory divide is rooted in an understanding of knowledge that divides theory (*episteme*) from practice (*techne*). A hierarchy of theory over and against practice is assumed.

Fast forward to the twentieth century: postmodernity has deconstructed oppositional pairs and dualistic thinking because of their tendency to imply relationships of superiority and inferiority. One role of the academy has been to underscore the propensity in Western thought to construct knowledge using oppositional pairs which ultimately creates hierarchies and the subordination of one over and against the other: black versus white, female versus male, and in this case, practice versus theory.<sup>691</sup>

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*Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 246.

<sup>690</sup> Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” 246.

<sup>691</sup> Miller-McLemore, “The Politics of Practical Theological Knowledge,” 17. Miller-McLemore quotes Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins: “Thus, whites rule Blacks, males dominate females, reason is touted as superior to emotion in ascertaining truth, facts supercede opinion in evaluating knowledge, and subjects rule objects. Dichotomous oppositional differences invariably imply relationships of superiority and

Dichotomous oppositional pairs imply hierarchical relationships that often reflect the status quo; and in the case of practice, the pairing with theory eventually defines one through the exclusion of the other as well as eventually prefacing one over the other.

Miller-McLemore states:

The hierarchy of theory over practice is as questionable a construction as any of the more commonly cited hierarchies. Opposition between theory and practice in academic theology, a legacy of a narrow approach to knowledge, has functioned in ways similar to other dichotomies, such as those between men and women and blacks and whites, to establish political status and assign positions of inferiority and superiority that harm the potential of theology to flourish in diverse places within and beyond the academy.<sup>692</sup>

Miller-McLemore's critique is incisive because she highlights the inherited suppositions within certain constructions of practice that define it with and against theory. This dichotomous thinking functions to enforce political ideologies and systems of domination and subordination, all of which is harmful to theology and its potential flourishing.

### **Practice: A Bifurcation**

Miller-McLemore argues that the oppositional pairing of theory and practice ultimately harms the potential of theology to flourish. Therefore, it seems ironic that a different – and almost more damaging – dichotomy appears within the literature on practice. Perhaps better described as a bifurcation, much of the literature suggests two fundamentally different approaches to practice: one based on the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu and the other based on the virtue ethicist, Alasdair MacIntyre. This split is

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inferiority, hierarchical relationships that mesh with political economies of domination and subordination.” From Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 42.

<sup>692</sup>Miller-McLemore, “The Politics of Practical Theological Knowledge,” 18.



made noticeable because scholars often choose one or the other: a concept of practice that stresses power negotiations in social structures OR a normative vision of practice that seeks to proscribe a form of more virtuous and sacred living. These two basic intellectual approaches stand out as the foundation for the theological conversation on practices with scholars and academics, often citing one or the other. Dorothy Bass summarizes these two positions by stating:

MacIntyre's virtue ethics emphasizes that practices pursue the good in a coherent, traditioned way, while social scientists influenced by Marxist thought stress the constant negotiations over power that give particular shape to practices in specific social situations.<sup>693</sup>

These two approaches towards practice dominate the scholarly literature and act as polar opposites. On one end, Bourdieu is a social science theorist who uses the concept of practice to reflect on social relations and ideologies. Influenced by Marx, Bourdieu takes a critical stance towards the power arrangements embodied in practices. He calls attention to the political dimensions – particularly positions of domination and subordination – of power differentials by illuminating situations of conflict between prevailing groups and less powerful social actors.<sup>694</sup> On the other end, Alasdair MacIntyre relies on Aristotelian virtue ethics as grounds for the concept of practice in the good life where social practices contain internal goods. The good life does not happen through haphazard action, but instead is achieved through intentional action and reflection. Virtues are those values which enable us to give moral substance and direction

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<sup>693</sup>Dorothy Bass, "Introduction," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids, MI; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 6.

<sup>694</sup> Maffly-Kipp et al., *Practicing Protestants*, 2-3.

to practice.<sup>695</sup> MacIntyre “develops the concept of practice as the means by which human action is the bearer of a consistent and historically rooted system of values.”<sup>696</sup>

This bifurcation is reflected in the account of practice given by Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Laurie Schmidt, and Mark Valeri in the text *Practicing Protestants*. The authors set out to confront the concept of Christian practice as an aspect of American religious history and to bring questions about practice into more sustained historical and theoretical focus.<sup>697</sup> Recognizing that the concept of practice lacks a singular definition and presents a “series of quandaries rather than a stable set of ingredients,” the authors divide the scholarly literature into the basic two intellectual lineages: social theorists and contemporary theologians. Leading social theorists of practice, like Bourdieu and Catherine Bell, are posed on one side and theologians, like Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, on the other side. They admit that these two groups “often stand in tension with one another.”<sup>698</sup>

The authors go into detail concerning the work of Bourdieu and his argument that practices reflect exterior social conditions. Practices allow room for resistance, negotiation, and redirection. They state:

In Bourdieu’s terms, practice was an inevitable aspect of social existence; practice was equated with the habits of body and mind, the customary acts and routine disciplines that formed the very texture of everyday life.<sup>699</sup>

In this sense, critical emphasis is placed on the hegemonic, regulatory, and structuring character of practice. For Bourdieu’s concept of practices, a particular “logic” of social

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<sup>695</sup>Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996).

<sup>696</sup>Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 99.

<sup>697</sup>Maffly-Kipp et al., *Practicing Protestants*, vii-viii.

<sup>698</sup>Maffly-Kipp et al., *Practicing Protestants*, viii.

<sup>699</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

and cultural fields manifests. On the other end, the “second intellectual lineage” that they call “constructive theology” lies with Bass and Dykstra. This group has drawn upon the images of the virtuous life, via Alasdair MacIntyre, and practices as a way to get there; in essence, their interest is in revitalizing the Christian life through “a sustained recovery of practices.”<sup>700</sup> Their focus is on cultivating certain practices, even spiritual practices, in the hopes of seeking more virtuous or consecrated lives. Proponents of this approach are ecumenical in nature, “all are convinced that in the self-conscious cultivation of particular types of traditional Christian habit lies the key to a renewal of the Christian life.”<sup>701</sup> This group seeks to restore and revitalize Christian life through a sustained cultivation of particular types of traditional Christian habits that they call practices.

In their account, Maffly-Kipp, Schmidt, and Valeri reinforce a basic dichotomy in the theological conversation on practice: Bourdieu and Bell describe the landscape of everyday practices in terms of ideological and political dimensions; Bass and Dykstra seek to form more virtuous and sacred living.<sup>702</sup> The authors state:

If our first group of theorists assume that social structures are generally hegemonic, with resistance located in small scale tactics of getting by or making room, Christian theorists view such regulatory structuring as largely human, enabling and supportive.<sup>703</sup>

In short, the assumption is that social scientific thought adopts a critical stance towards the power arrangements embodied in practices, while “Protestant theorists” are more interested in strengthening practices they take to be basically benevolent.<sup>704</sup> One, and only one, perspective raises up the influences of power and political control in practices,

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<sup>700</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>701</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>702</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>703</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>704</sup> Dorothy Bass, “Ways of Life Abundant,” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, eds. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 30, footnote 10.

and the other skips along in mamby-pamby land and revels in the “enabling and supporting” arms of practice. But is this a helpful distinction? Furthermore, it is even true?

Dorothy Bass resists this classification. She devotes a lengthy footnote to this matter in *For Life Abundant*. She recognizes that theories of practice are identified by two main schools: social scientific thought and constructive theological thought. However, this dichotomy that one perspective is critical while the other (hers) is seemingly superficial is unhelpful and incorrect. She states:

In fact, Dykstra and I believe that each ‘Christian practice’ incorporates critical and self-critical perspectives, though it is true that our normative and theological understanding of practices does indeed lead us to see each Christian practice as a whole as good.<sup>705</sup>

Bonnie Miller-McLemore highlights this and other oversights. She, too, questions this dichotomy and dualism in approach to the concept of practice. She also asks why the authors overlook the substantive literature in practical and pastoral theology as a significant middle ground between these two groups. Practical and pastoral theology, as a significant middle ground between the two perspectives, has long supported work that has delved deeply into practices and religious experience. Additionally, Miller-McLemore questions their use of “constructive theology” and “practical theology” as transposable and interchangeable terms.<sup>706</sup> Although she commends their good work on the project, she calls for better scholarship on practice and its history in the academy. The portrait painted by Maffly-Kipp, Schmidt and Valeri sets up a harmful dichotomy that presents an adversarial image of the practices literature that doesn’t quite exist. As

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<sup>705</sup> Bass, *For Life Abundant*, 30, footnote 10.

<sup>706</sup> Miller-McLemore, “The Politics of Practical Theological Knowledge,” 29-30.

historians approaching a historical subject, their painting of the present situation seems rather curious.

Furthermore, not all theologians, constructive or practical, cling to MacIntyre's virtue ethic as the automatic default for the concept of practice. As I will explore, theologians Elaine Graham, Ted Smith, James Nieman, and Joyce Ann Mercer do not rely on MacIntyre for their concept of practice. Instead, they affirm the embodied nature of practices and their distinct social function within culture. Graham recognizes the importance of MacIntyre's appraisal of the moral norms built into practices, but argues that practices are not simply moral entities; "they have creative and epistemological significance as well."<sup>707</sup> Smith advocates for a concept of practice on a "smaller scale" than MacIntyre, which he believes is more effective for framing questions about *telos*. Nieman rejects MacIntyre for his "muddiness" and instead looks to a "clear and durable" concept of practice. Finally, Mercer contends that MacIntyre's understanding of the term is basically individualistic and ignores social enactment and transformational possibility; moreover, he ignores the ability of a given practice to bear alternative meanings.<sup>708</sup>

Mary McClintock Fulkerson also criticizes MacIntyre: "Forms of theology relying upon a MacIntyrean definition of practice have refrained from recognizing the racialized, gendered, and otherwise power-laden nature of Christian tradition."<sup>709</sup> Furthermore, "The concern for identity expressed in the MacIntyrean-inflected practice focus has left unexplored the ways power is always a part of any contemporary

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<sup>707</sup>Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 99.

<sup>708</sup>Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 15

<sup>709</sup>Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Theology and the Lure of the Practical: An Overview," *Religion Compass* 1/2 (2007), 300. (Overall 294-304).

situation...<sup>710</sup> Fulkerson is clear: if theology is a practice (which she argues it is), then social location of theologians needs factoring in the analysis.<sup>711</sup> Although Fulkerson does not say so, I would say that many MacIntyrean-based definitions of practice appear to ignore the important issues of social location and the way in which individuals internalize their values, standards, and mores of society. In this sense, Graham, Mercer, Smith, Nieman, and Fulkerson reinforce the pronounced critique: MacIntyre does not offer the resources for a critical and contextual perspective on practice.

### **Theories about Practice**

But first, I want to situate the conversation on practices as it has evolved in the literature. In my opinion, to begin a conversation about practices is to begin with Craig Dykstra. His work on practices, with Dorothy Bass as a strong and consistent conversation partner, has done much to push the discussion and literature about practices in the past thirty years.<sup>712</sup> Dykstra began his work originally because he was unsatisfied with the resources on practices and found theology “burdened by a picture of practice that is harmfully individualistic, technological, ahistorical, and abstract.”<sup>713</sup> In “Reconceiving Practice in Theological Inquiry and Education,” he suggests the work of MacIntyre as a corrective for the concept of practice; by doing so, Dykstra fundamentally alters the

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<sup>710</sup>Fulkerson, “Theology and the Lure of the Practical,” 300.

<sup>711</sup>Fulkerson asks: How is the intellectual imagination, regardless of good intentions, constrained by such factors? “The Lure of the Practical,” 300.

<sup>712</sup>Dorothy Bass, “Foreword,” in Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practice*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), xiii. Bass remarks that she has been privileged to share in this work of the foundation-supported projects which sponsored books and other resources.

<sup>713</sup>Craig Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice in Theological Inquiry and Education,” in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, eds. Nancey Murphy, Brad Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 162.

theological conversation on practices. Dykstra firmly plants an approach to practice which grows out of MacIntyre's definition.<sup>714</sup> Dykstra believes that virtues and wisdom result from participation in practices; therefore, practices deserve a pivotal place in Christian formation, theological study, and theological education. Dykstra makes suppositions about the nature of practice: that it might be the conditions under which various kinds of knowledge emerge, like knowledge of God, of ourselves, and the world. Because he believes thinking and doing cannot be separated, Dykstra's approach combines thinking and acting as inextricably intertwined in meaningful human activity.

In 1997, Dorothy Bass came out with her edited volume *Practicing Our Faith*. This set of essays originated in Dykstra's insight that "the idea of 'practice' provides a potentially helpful way of addressing the yearning of contemporary people for deeper understanding of and involvement in the redemptive practice of God in the world."<sup>715</sup> Bass defines practices as "those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life."<sup>716</sup> These practices are described as "constituent elements within a way of life that is responsive to and illuminated by God's active presence for the life of the world."<sup>717</sup> Furthermore, Bass highlights that practices can change how we live each day and together and form the basis for a faithful way of life. The collaborating authors identify twelve particular practices that contribute to a

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<sup>714</sup> A practice, for MacIntyre, is "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice in Theological Inquiry and Education," 169. This definition appears originally in MacIntyre's *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 187-88. This article first appeared in Lewis Mudge and James Poling, *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

<sup>715</sup> Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for Searching People*, (Edison, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 1997), xiii.

<sup>716</sup> Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, xi.

<sup>717</sup> Bass, *Practicing Theology*, 3.

Christian way of life.<sup>718</sup> These twelve practices offer the basic categories for all practices and are composed of seemingly ordinary activities done over time which contain standards of excellence. For Bass, “our deepest and dearest purpose is to contribute to the search that is going on all around us for a life-giving way of life.”<sup>719</sup> Christian faith is described in terms of a “life-giving way of life”; discerning and encouraging practices is central to forming the shape and substance of this life.

Dykstra expands upon the concept of practice via MacIntyre in *Growing in the Life of Faith*. Practices involve ordinary activities with multiple levels of complexity and broad ranges of participation; they involve both experience and guidance and, as a result, practices can be learned and taught.<sup>720</sup> In a section titled “What is a practice?” Dykstra unpacks MacIntyre’s definition to name some very specific characteristics of a practice. A practice is a cooperative human activity which is socially established and provides for moral progress as well as having standards of excellence. Dykstra states:

In sum, then, practices are those cooperative human activities through which we, as individuals and as communities, grow and develop in moral character and substance. They have built up over time and, through experience and testing, have developed patterns of reciprocal expectations among participants.<sup>721</sup>

Dykstra’s example of a practice, via MacIntyre, is baseball. Baseball operates as a “coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity” which over time has established rules and through which, powerful internal goods are realized. Dykstra extends this definition to include God and the Christian faith, where faith is made alive and shaped by practices. For Dykstra, practices allow people to recognize and

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<sup>718</sup>These 12 practices are: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, singing our lives.

<sup>719</sup>Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, 195.

<sup>720</sup>Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 44.

<sup>721</sup>Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 69.



participate in the work of God's grace and allow space for God's redemptive activity, through Christ, to be made known and experienced.

Bass and Dykstra continue their theological conversation on practices in *Practicing Theology*. The stated purpose of this volume is to rectify a perceived omission in their earlier work on practices, specifically that *Practicing Our Faith* offered little attention "to specific Christian beliefs or to the process of reflection by which Christian people sustain the integrity of these beliefs."<sup>722</sup> Instead, *Practicing Theology* is an invitation for systematic theologians to reflect on the concept of practice and move into a process of reflection on the "vital messiness and adaptive interplay" of practices, as they are expressed in Christian communities, both past and present. This text "offers a range of theological interpretations of the role of practices in a way of life that is attuned to God's grace."<sup>723</sup> Bass and Dykstra think carefully about a way of life that is deeply responsive to God's grace and how it can take shape among human beings. "Christian practices address needs that are basic to human existence as such, and they do so in ways that reflect God's purposes for humankind. When they participate in such practices, Christian people are taking part in God's work of creation and new creation and thereby growing into a deeper knowledge of God and of creation."<sup>724</sup> Christian practices are things people do together over time to address fundamental human needs as a response to God's presence for life in the world.<sup>725</sup> Here the focus is on "life as lived" and the study of these practices as a generative force for theological reflection.

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<sup>722</sup>Bass, *Practicing Theology*, 3.

<sup>723</sup>Bass, *For Life Abundant*, 12.

<sup>724</sup>Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids, MI; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 21.

<sup>725</sup>Bass and Dykstra, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," 18.

This focus on “life as lived” is reflected in the attention given to practices by systematic theologians in *Practicing Theology*. Kathryn Tanner focuses on the practice of welcome and highlights the real-life negotiations involved. Tanner argues that “theological reflection instead arises within the ordinary workings of Christian lives to meet pressing practical needs.”<sup>726</sup> These practical needs are (sometimes) met by practices as forms of social coordinated action. Furthermore, she argues that Christian practices need not be an exception to a more general description of practices: “The ambiguities, inconsistencies, and open-endedness of Christian practice are, however, the very things that establish an essential place for theological reflection in everyday Christian lives.”<sup>727</sup> Volf’s stated contention is that “at the heart of every good theology lies not simply a plausible intellectual vision but more importantly a compelling account of a way of life, and that theology is therefore best done from within the pursuit of this way of life.”<sup>728</sup> He uses the term practice as cooperative and meaningful human endeavors that seek to satisfy fundamental human need and conditions and that people do together over time.<sup>729</sup> Volf argues that Christian beliefs normatively shape Christian practices, and engaging in practices can lead to acceptance and deeper understanding of these beliefs. All the authors in *Practicing Theology* do not agree on one succinct definitions of practice and practice’s relationship with beliefs, even if they do agree that both are essential to the life of faith.

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<sup>726</sup>Kathryn Tanner, “Theological Reflection and Christian Practices,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids, MI; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 228.

<sup>727</sup> Tanner, *Practicing Theology*, 232.

<sup>728</sup> Volf, *Practicing Theology*, 247.

<sup>729</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

For Bass and Dykstra, practices are a path to the abundant life. Focusing on practices allows for theological reflection on ordinary activities: specific people doing specific things within a shared framework of meaning. Thinking and reflecting about a life composed of practices aids people to “more fully to understand their shared life of response to God’s active presence in Christ and to embody God’s grace and love to others amid the complexities of contemporary life.”<sup>730</sup> Theology both shapes and is shaped by practices. Furthermore, Bass and Dykstra understand their approach towards practice differs from others because it is theological and “and thus normed not only internally but also through the responsive relationship of Christian practices to God.”<sup>731</sup>

Bass and Dykstra’s *For Life Abundant* “continues a conversation that focuses the attention of theologians, pastors, and others on Christian practices and their role within a faithful way of life that takes shape in and for the good of the world.”<sup>732</sup> This volume represents more than a decade of research as it has developed ways of thinking about and strengthening Christian practices.<sup>733</sup> Bass contends, “It has seemed to us, therefore, that to be called ‘Christian’ a practice must pursue a good beyond itself, responding to and embodying the self-giving dynamics of God’s own creating, redeeming, and sustaining grace.”<sup>734</sup> Bass states the following as a summary of a theological and normative understanding of practices interprets:

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<sup>730</sup>Bass, *Practicing Theology*, 7.

<sup>731</sup>Bass and Dykstra, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 21, footnote 8.

<sup>732</sup> Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, “Introduction,” *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 12.

<sup>733</sup>This book reflects the work of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, a Lilly Endowment project based at Valparaiso University. Bass and Dykstra, *For Life Abundant*, 12.

<sup>734</sup>Dorothy Bass, “Ways of Life Abundant,” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, eds. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 30.

practices as the traditioned yet always-emerging patterns through which communities live as Jesus' disciples, responding to God's grace and to the needs of humans beings and all creation. It interprets practices, in short, as forms within and through which a Christian way of life takes shape.<sup>735</sup>

Ultimately, practical theology attends to the following question: How might a way of life that is life-giving in and for the sake of the world be best understood and described, and how might contemporary people come to live it more fully?<sup>736</sup> For Bass and Dykstra, the answer seems to be encouraging specific practices from the Christian tradition.

In the end, for Bass and Dykstra, practices are those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life. Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world. For both, practices are shaped by the context of Christian faith that is both attuned to present-day needs and taught by ancient wisdom. Again, they base their definition on MacIntyre's development of the concept of practice as the means by which human action is the bearer of consistent and historically rooted system of values. Specifically, Bass and Dykstra want practices to be bearers of tradition since they rest on a complex convention of interactions over time. Practices are rooted in the past, and although they can change in present communities and circumstances, they are historical in that they are activities people engage in together over time.<sup>737</sup>

Tradition and convention are two important aspects of their concept of practice; additionally, these two aspects were difficult to find when I looked to the essays. The activities I was witnessing were not traditional or conventional; instead, they were

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<sup>735</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>736</sup> Bass and Dykstra, "Introduction," in *For Life Abundant*, 2.

<sup>737</sup> Bass and Dykstra, *Practicing Theology*, 26.

spontaneous and open-ended. The activities of the college students were not rooted in the past, nor were most even tied to a faith tradition or a faith community. For example, one essay discusses a flag football game during which an a-ha moment occurred. It was hard to understand how a game of flag football might be tied to the ancient wisdom of biblical communities or even as a part of a “complex convention of interactions over time.” Moreover, not all of the essayists are Christian; in fact, one important essay reflects on fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. Many essayists do not really mention God and only about a quarter mention a particular faith tradition. Bass and Dykstra are clear: their use of practices is rooted in the Christian tradition. Christian practices are things that Christians do over time to address fundamental human (Christian) needs.

For Bass and Dykstra there are twelve practices, as described in *Practicing Our Faith*. These practices are: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives. I saw some potential in the categories of “shaping communities,” “hospitality,” and especially “discernment” as descriptions of practices of the essayists. However, the twelve practices described by Bass and Dykstra did not describe the activities I was witnessing. I should say that I had started with their definition and had wanted it to work as a way to analyze the essays; in short, I had expected to use it. But as I worked my way into the essays, I realized my expectation was misguided: trying to fit the essays into their framework was like trying to fit a circle into a square hole: it just didn’t fit. I wondered if their twelve practices might better describe adult practices. Perhaps there were more than just twelve practices out

there; perhaps some practices might be constructed based on the evidence of the essayists in order to suggest practices for a younger generation.

However, I also realized my approach towards practices was fundamentally different from Bass and Dykstra. Simply put: my task is to describe, whereas their task is to prescribe. Their task is to *prescribe* because they ultimately offer guides and recommendations via particular practices for more virtuous living. As example, Bass offers a summary of Dykstra's lifelong interest with two questions: What does it mean to live the Christian life faithfully and well? And how can we help one another to do so?<sup>738</sup> Although unstated, it seems like these questions are at least partially answered by the concept of practice. For Dykstra, practices are those activities which guide Christians towards the abundant life; because practices can be learned and taught, they function as prescriptive ways to the life abundant. Additionally, Dykstra plants his approach firmly in the Protestant faith; he claims that this tradition's practices have great wisdom to impart. Because practices are historical and rooted in tradition, he excavates Christianity for normative suggestions of the virtuous life. Dykstra believes people can be habituated into believing the truths of Christianity through the practices of Christian life.<sup>739</sup>

These insights highlight the overall *telos* of Bass and Dykstra's concept of practice: they ultimately want to recommend to people to ways in which to live a better and more virtuous life. My task, however, is more focused on the "life as lived" of the college students: often complicated, messy, and defying categorization. My task is to listen to the voices of the college students and glean from their statements particular aspects of their experience through thick description. Trying to fit their activities into

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<sup>738</sup>Bass, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, xiii.

<sup>739</sup>Maffly-Kipp et al., *Practicing Protestants*, 4.

Bass and Dykstra's definition of practice was forcing them into a very square peg. Rather than proscribing things for college students to do, my task is to start with their experience and describe what they are actually doing. The hope is that the lessons learned in the essays can be passed on and encouraged in other spheres, particularly in higher education.

However, I do want to draw on the important work of Bass and Dykstra because I found aspects of their definition very compelling, once the Christian language and the focus on tradition are stripped away. Practices are ordinary and shared activities that address fundamental human needs that can change how each day is lived. Practices involve cooperative human activity within a shared framework of meaning. Practices involve multiple levels of complexity and broad ranges of participation; furthermore, practices can be learned and taught. The insight that practices can be learned and taught is one of the most compelling aspects of Bass and Dykstra's work on practices. This implies that we can learn from what other people are doing and additionally, we can pass those lessons on to others. This assertion supports my basic aim to learn from the essays in order to teach lessons about better practices.

I return to Miller-McLemore's early criticism of the portrait Shifly and others paint of the concept of practice. Besides offering an unhelpful dichotomy with Bass and Dykstra on one side and social theorists on the other, Miller McLemore asks why the authors overlook the substantive literature in practical and pastoral theology as a significant middle ground between these two opposing groups. She contends that practical and pastoral theology has long supported work that has delved deeply into practices and religious experience and names this as an important middle ground between

the apparent bifurcation on practices. Following Miller-McLemore's lead, I locate this important middle ground in the work of Elaine Graham, Ted Smith, James Nieman, and Joyce Ann Mercer. Using their work on practices, I excavate important aspects of practice found within the "middle ground" of practical and pastoral theology.

### **The Middle Ground: Graham, Smith, Neiman, and Mercer**

Elaine Graham describes her model of pastoral theology as "the interpretation of purposeful practices."<sup>740</sup> In *Transforming Practice*, Graham insists that living in today's world is to live uncertainty where all "grand narratives" have been dissolved; theology must confront the postmodern triad of pluralism, diversity, and skepticism. More specifically, the discipline of pastoral theology should confront postmodernism and reconceptualize itself as "the articulation and excavation of the sources and norms of Christian practice."<sup>741</sup> Graham envisions a new and central role of pastoral theology where the focus becomes directed towards the practices of faith communities; furthermore, women's experiences, liberation theology, and the stories of people are the sources of practical wisdom and ultimately, for transforming practice.

Graham advocates for pastoral theology to develop a broad category of analysis when it comes to the concept of practice. "As a working definition, we might characterize practices as purposeful activity performed by embodied persons in time and space as both the subjects of agency and the objects of history."<sup>742</sup> For support, Graham turns to the social sciences which "place the notion of 'practice' at the heart of the dynamics of the

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<sup>740</sup>Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 111.

<sup>741</sup>*Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>742</sup>*Ibid.*, 110.



formation and maintenance of the social order, both material and symbolic.”<sup>743</sup> She traces the beginning of this critical attention to practice to Max Weber, “the most important theorist of social action.”<sup>744</sup> Next is Giddens, then MacIntyre, whom she quotes at length. She recognizes the importance of MacIntyre’s appraisal of the moral norms built into practices, but argues that practices are not simply moral entities; “they have creative and epistemological significance as well.”<sup>745</sup> For Graham, there is a wider grounding for practices other than ethics; practice is more than just a kind of moral discourse towards virtuous living. She adds:

as a postmodern, gender-sensitive and performative discipline, pastoral theology is less concerned to legislate about the application of eternal moral norms or rules articulated outside the situation, as it is concerned to act as interpreter of the resources by which the faith-community may cultivate its sensibility for disclosure.<sup>746</sup>

For Graham, engagement in new practices gives rise to new kind of knowledge: “practice may also be intrinsically disclosive of new realms of understanding: reading a poem and making a connection with a deeper level of meaning or experience; or listening to the stories of other as in a pastoral encounter or therapeutic conversation.”<sup>747</sup>

Turning to Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of practice, Graham argues that practice both reflects and reinforces social relations and ideologies. Bourdieu emphasized the inventiveness and unpredictability of practice as well as the self-reflexivity of practice of human actors as the subjects of agency and objects of history.<sup>748</sup> Again, Graham’s defines a practice as “purposeful activity performed by embodied persons in space and time as

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<sup>743</sup>*Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>744</sup>*Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>745</sup>*Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>746</sup>*Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>747</sup>*Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>748</sup>*Ibid.*, 102-3.

the subject of agency and the object of history.”<sup>749</sup> Graham’s use of the later phrase “as the subjects of agency and objects of history” specifically reflects Bourdieu’s perspective that the concept of practice mediates the divide between structure and agency.<sup>750</sup>

Practices are in some sense rule-governed and institutional but are also still dependent on individual and collective agency for their maintenance. Graham states: “Embodied practices have meaning; but the meaning is implicit and inseparable from the practices themselves.”<sup>751</sup> Since Max Weber, emphasis has been placed on the centrality of practice as “a key concept in understanding how human culture is produced and reproduced.”<sup>752</sup>

Practices are processes by which social relations are generated and practices both reflect and reinforce social relations and ideologies. Graham concludes: “Practice is constitutive of a way of life, both individual and collective, personal and structural.”<sup>753</sup>

Again, for Graham, practices are activities performed by embodied persons in space and time and pastoral theology, as a discipline, should focus on these practices. Graham describes her model of pastoral theology as the interpretation of purposeful practices and “therefore, as a discipline pastoral theology is not legislative or prescriptive, but interpretive.”<sup>754</sup> The process is interpretive and inductive; pastoral theology should begin by looking carefully at the actual practices of faith communities. Graham states:

“In this sense, practical theology helps communities of faith both to articulate and

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<sup>749</sup>Elaine Graham, “Practical Theology as Transforming Practice,” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, eds. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 110.

<sup>750</sup>Graham states: “Such perspectives effectively mediate between theories of society which regard human relations as determined by the laws of history or forces of nature, and those which portray human culture as little more than agglomerations of the random activities and choices of individual actors. Rather, practice emerges as something which mediates between structure and agency, seeing culture as a human creation which nonetheless persists over time.” Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 97.

<sup>751</sup>Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 103.

<sup>752</sup>*Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>753</sup>Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 110.

<sup>754</sup>*Ibid.*, 208.

practice what they preach or believe and also to better articulate or preach what they practice.”<sup>755</sup> By examining practices, Graham sees this pursuit as one for *phronesis*, harkening to Aristotle’s notion of practical knowledge, what she calls “a performative practical wisdom (*phronesis*) which we inhabit and re-enact.”<sup>756</sup> Although Graham does not expand on her use of *phronesis*, I will continue this conversation in my conclusion in Chapter Eight. I follow Graham that if we examine practices, we can uncover accounts of *phronesis*.

In *For Life Abundant*, Ted Smith references the MacIntyre vs. Bourdieu split in the literature on practices. He leans towards Bourdieu because he specifically interprets practice on a smaller scale. Smith states that this “sense of practice calls for work at a smaller scale than the one suggested by Alasdair MacIntyre’s definition of practice.”<sup>757</sup> Smith goes on to entreat that he doesn’t mean to “reject MacIntyre’s definition;” furthermore, Smith confers that Bourdieu and MacIntyre “do not present mutually exclusive definitions.”<sup>758</sup> For example, for Smith, MacIntyre is more effective for framing questions about “the telos of preaching as a whole.” However, Bourdieu’s approach offers a tighter focus and a smaller scale of analysis where “actual sermons are congeries of practices, each with a telos of its own (for better or for worse).”<sup>759</sup> Particularly helpful for Smith is Bourdieu’s recognition of practices as “durable” and “transposable.” But Smith cautions that “this smaller scale of analysis risks giving up

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<sup>755</sup>James Woodward and Steven Pattison, “Introduction,” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, eds. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 105.

<sup>756</sup>Graham, “Practical Theology as Transforming Practice,” 110.

<sup>757</sup>Ted Smith, “History, Practice, and Theological Education,” in *For Life Abundant Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, eds. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 217, footnote 2.

<sup>758</sup>Smith, *For Life Abundant*, 217, footnote 2.

<sup>759</sup>*Ibid.*, 217, footnote 2.

questions of purpose of the whole.”<sup>760</sup> Smith is helpful by making this distinction between a smaller scale of analysis (Bourdieu) and one that looks broadly to the future goal (MacIntyre); in addition, these approaches are not mutually exclusive. Although explicitly unstated, the assumption is that both approaches might be used in conjunction with one another for a more thorough and critical view of practices. In the end, Smith opts for a tighter focus where “actual sermons are congeries of practices.” I adopt from Smith, and will sometimes use, his term of “congeries of practices” to describe the categories I found within the essays.

James Nieman cites that “vague terms and fuzzy thinking” contextualizes the conversation on practices.<sup>761</sup> Nieman seeks a “portable, supple, durable heuristic definition of practice” while avoiding the twin traps of either “false simplicity or mind-numbing detail.”<sup>762</sup> Surveying the range of contemporary approaches to practice, Nieman recognizes five basic features that often appear: the what (actions), who (common), why (meaningful), how (strategic), and where (purposive).<sup>763</sup> In other words, Nieman states, a “practice can be recognized as including common, meaningful, strategic, purposive actions.”<sup>764</sup> Ultimately, he rejects MacIntyre’s concept of practice because of his muddiness in exploring the “distinction between simple actions and fuller practices in his famous definition, although he often and unhelpfully blurred the same line in the examples he chose.”<sup>765</sup> Nieman admittedly discards MacIntyre because he aims to

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<sup>760</sup>*Ibid.*,

<sup>761</sup>James Nieman, “Why the Idea of Practice Matters,” in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice*, eds. Thomas Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 19.

<sup>762</sup>Nieman, “Why the Idea of Practice Matters,” 20.

<sup>763</sup>*Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>764</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>765</sup>Nieman specifically references MacIntyre’s work in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 187-88. Nieman, “Why the Idea of Practice Matters,” 19.

“develop a clear and durable understanding of the concept of practice.”<sup>766</sup> Practices, as suggested by Nieman, are patterned, common actions that are strategically undertaken toward realizing distinct communal goals.<sup>767</sup>

For Joyce Ann Mercer, practical theology is a way of engaging in theological action and reflection in connection with the life practices of persons and communities.<sup>768</sup> Practical theology takes seriously local contexts and practices in the everyday lives of people. Mercer highlights the current disparity concerning practice: on one hand, it is “something of a buzzword in theological circles” but on the other hand, its increasingly popular use has the term functioning “as a synonym for human activity – a practice is merely ‘what people do.’”<sup>769</sup> Mercer mediates this divide and instead, uses the term practice in two ways throughout her book, *Welcoming Children*. She states: “Practice refers to the productive, person-forming power of practices as socially shaped and shared forms of action. It refers also to the strategic and tactical ways in which persons engage in actions in a particular context.”<sup>770</sup> This “person-forming power of practices” expresses the dynamic and transformational potential of practices. In this sense, practices “are also sites for resistance, transformation, and change.”<sup>771</sup>

Engaging the perspective of Bourdieu and Bell, Mercer emphasizes the critical and transformative aspect of practice. Using these two social theorists, Mercer highlights that practices are a form of activity that is situational and strategic; furthermore, embedded within practices are “a misrecognition of what it is doing, and which both

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<sup>766</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>767</sup>Nieman, “Why the Idea of Practice Matters,” 43.

<sup>768</sup>Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 13.

<sup>769</sup>*Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>770</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>771</sup>*Ibid.*

structures and resists power/status relations between groups.”<sup>772</sup> Practices involve an element of misrecognition: they have meanings beyond what they appear to mean. Mercer states: “Practices can even mean something different from what their practitioners may articulate as their meanings.”<sup>773</sup> Furthermore, this “misrecognition is a key to the transformational potential of a practice because it indicates the ability of a given practice to bear alternative meanings within its purview.”<sup>774</sup> Mercer offers a key insight into the nature of practices that is important for my discussion: practices can mean many different things, even different from what the practitioner (or essayist) might imagine. This state of misrecognition allows for a plurality of interpretations regarding practice; moreover, misrecognition inadvertently allows for the transformative potential of practice through different meanings.

Overall, Graham defines practices as purposeful activity performed by embodied persons; she calls for the field of pastoral theology to re-situate its focus on these practices. Because practices are constitutive of a way of life, reflecting on practices cultivates *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. Furthermore, engaging in practices leads to new practices. Smith is helpful because he insists on working on a smaller scale of analysis: in his case, an actual sermon and in my case, a set of essays. Smith states that “actual sermons are congeries of practices:” these “congeries” are groupings of practices, similar to my five categories of practice. Practice, as a “durable” and “transposable” offers a tighter focus and a smaller scale of analysis. Nieman also wants a clear and “durable” concept of practice which includes common, meaningful, strategic, and purposive action. He defines practices as patterned, common actions that are strategically

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<sup>772</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>773</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>774</sup>*Ibid.*

undertaken toward distinct communal goals. Finally, Mercer contends that practices are productive activities that contain shared forms of action and also which have “person-forming power.” Additionally, practices involve strategic and tactical ways in which persons engage in actions within a particular context. Embedded within practices is “misrecognition” which allows for a multiplicity of interpretations and the holds the power of transformative potential.

All these theologians agree (Bass, Dykstra, Tanner, Volf, Graham, Smith, Nieman, and Mercer): practices are part of the everyday living of ordinary people within a variety of contexts. A practice is constitutive of a way of life, both of the individual and the community.<sup>775</sup> All agree that practices are meaningful clusters of human activity and shared forms of action which address fundamental human needs; furthermore, practices are unpredictable and inventive in their response to human need. Practices have multiple levels of complexity with broad ranges of participation. Practices are the real stuff of life, of “life as lived,” and complicated, messy, and otherwise very ordinary. Bass states:

Yet messy everyday practices, embraced humbly yet boldly, are precisely the forms of life that bear help and grace and companionship and challenge for figuring out what to do next within the actual complexities of contemporary society.<sup>776</sup>

This “challenge for figuring out what do next” is answered through the study and examination of practices because these purposeful activities are ultimately the sources of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Examining the lives and stories of everyday people with excruciating care in respect to their communal actions yields important insights that can be learned and taught. Finally, all would agree that the “person-forming power of practices” is an important focus of pastoral and practical theology.

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<sup>775</sup>Graham, *Transforming Practice*, 110.

<sup>776</sup>Bass, “Ways of Life Abundant,” in *For Life Abundant*, 34.

## Examining the Essays: Practices

From all these theologians I construct a basic definition of practice: communal, contextual and purposeful activity strategically undertaken by embodied persons. If I use this as a basic lens to view the essays, ninety-four percent of the essays describe particular practices. Further reflection generated five general categories of practice that emerge: practices of service, practices of fellowship, practices of work, practices of reading and reflection, and practices of conversation. Of the forty-eight essays, only three did not describe an activity or a practice. One described a vision, another detailed a self-revelation involving procrastination. Otherwise, over ninety percent of these emerging adults describe an activity that coincided with their a-ha moment. I will quote many at length as they describe the doing of something with the becoming of something. I will also say that this is the category that I see the most potential in and the one I was most excited about discussing. On the one hand, it seems obvious: going on social service trip, participating in fellowship, conversing with a mentor, or reading can have a profound impact. But what appears to be obvious is not practiced in higher education; rather, these kinds of activities are not part of a college curriculum, although they are often associated with a campus environment.

The a-ha moment occurred in the midst of doing what? If a practice is a communal, contextual and purposeful activity strategically undertaken by embodied persons, five basic categories emerge, otherwise known as “congeries of practice.” I describe the following five general categories, or congeries, of practice: practice of



service, practice of fellowship, practice of work, practice of reading and reflection, and practice of conversation. These categories are groupings of similar stories that appear to have comparable shared forms of action. These kinds of activities, best described as practices, encourage formation, flourishing, and growth. Best of all, as highlighted by Dykstra and Bass, practices can be encouraged, learned, replicated, and taught.

### *Practice of Service*

This category consists of experiences involving social justice, social action awareness, social service trips, and more generally, helping others. In short, these account express acting for another and not just for the self.<sup>777</sup> Ten responses, almost a quarter of the essays, reflect on a service experience involving helping others. Shelley offers a compelling case example: Shelley spent a summer working for a social service organization serving homeless and low-income people in a large city. Living in the organizations transitional housing afforded Shelley an intense look into the lives of the poor: “Working with inner city youth, living in a large city, and facing social issues on a personal level allowed me to have a life-changing summer.” Furthermore, Shelley goes on to list four major changes as a result of this service experience: first, she acknowledges the sheer enormity of life and the world; second, she realized that she can function independently; third, she developed a new sense of confidence; and finally, she affirmed her calling to continue to work with the poor. She goes on to say that beyond these personal insights, her views on social justice actually have changed; issues like poverty, hunger, homelessness, racism, and sexism were abstract terms for her before,

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<sup>777</sup> These accounts would offer an interesting discussion with Arnett’s developmental marker of the “self-focused age” of emerging adulthood. Perhaps by stepping out of the self-focusedness, even for a moment, adds to the further development of the identity.

but that “the personal relationships I formed completely changed my perception of the social problems people face each day in our society.”

Jackie’s weeklong service trip to Atlanta was “an amazing confirmation of my love of service.” This service trip helped her realize that there are great opportunities in nonprofit organizations: “Now I know I can make a living by serving others and nonprofits are a great way to do so.” Similarly, Ann’s a-ha moment occurred during her involvement with a campus group for social justice. For the very first time, Ann felt “very non-materialistic” but also an acute sense of futility: “For the first time I questioned what it was exactly that I was doing and what I was planning to do with my life.” It became clear that “social justice, politics, and world affairs” were incredibly important to her and this vision was confirmed with other social service projects in which she participated.

Another student, Kate, “‘fell’ in to a variety of ‘social justice’ based events...” It was during the course of these events when she realized that beyond feeling like she was doing a “good deed” donating to local care groups, it was the reality of hunger and homelessness that took her experience to a different level. Kate’s service in one event led her to service in other areas. Exposure to stories about the border of Mexico made her realize “that I needed to be immersed in a situation that dealt directly with the issues of social justice day in and day out.” Kate signed up for more service work, this time on the border. Her a-ha moment was when “I realized that I need to learn, need to love, and then I can serve... alongside those suffering injustice.”

A further example is Marcia who wrote about her trip to South Africa to study and work with AIDS patients. As a nursing student, this trip secured in her mind that she

will return one day to help those with AIDS in Africa. A similar experience was reflected on by Pete when he wrote about a social service trip to El Salvador to “learn about the community and people ravaged by a civil war...” Two emotions became readily apparent: shame and pride. The shame came from being a US citizen, supporters of their oppressive government and makers of the weapons that took Bishop Romero. But the pride also: “I felt pride in the human race’s defiant ability to forgive, love, and live.” Pete writes of a touching moment he had with an elderly man from a village they were visiting who “thanked me from coming and for my solidarity.” Finally, Stephanie reflects on involvement with her Social Action Leadership Group were working with others reminds her of the joy in giving. But also, she recognizes in her a-ha moment the difficulty of not being able to help everyone, everywhere; however, that doesn’t mean you should stop trying.

This category of “practice of service” reflects the impact and importance of serving others. As some of the essays suggest, it is also leads to more service and the seeking out of new opportunities. But also, there seems to be a profound impact when one is confronted with the realities of poverty, hunger, and homelessness, in tandem with the luxuries of college, meal plans, and warm beds. One these stark realities of this world are experienced, these emerging adults are confronted with a change in perception. In many ways, I see this practice of social service the most profound practice and the one I was most excited to see, which I will expand upon more in the conclusion.

### *Practices of Fellowship*

These activities include worship, youth groups, theatre productions, and even a game of capture the flag. In the midst of these fellowship experiences, something

changes: either a new personal insight or the feeling of merging with a larger group. For thirteen of the essays, the a-ha moment occurred as a result of a fellowship activity. One of the more striking accounts, and one that serves as a fitting first example of fellowship, is Andrew's account of a game of capture the flag, titled "An Impacting Evening of Unity." Andrew took part in the leadership of a campus event whose purpose was to unite the "different Christian and Catholic fellowships on campus." But, Andrew states, "this was no ordinary game.... This was a game of unity, filled with joy and fellowship." Andrew describes a "general feeling of tension between the various fellowships" but during the game of Capture the Flag, and the spontaneous activities that continued after, there were no tensions or boundaries. "This event was impacting and influential in my college career because it truly showed me that we, the students, could make faith in college what we want it to be." He adds:

Witnessing how God was able to take an idea and allow it to grow to something bigger and more dynamic than we had planned was also extremely influential in regards to how I think about how God can work today. Furthermore, this event opened the door for future events where all could come and share in community, allowing God to continue his mission of unity at -blank-. Many times in college students have ideas, good ideas. I believe the simple game of Capture the Flag showed my friends and me what can happen when students do not limit themselves and do not limit God in what can be accomplished.

This activity of capture the flag demonstrates several key aspects of a practice: a common, yet meaningful experience, whose ordinariness is transcended by its impact on the lives of emerging adults. It was also this account that confounded definitions of practice, like Bass and Dykstra, which required tradition and ancient wisdom. Capture the flag, as a game of sport, although similar to MacIntyre's example of baseball, does not reflect well in the Christian tradition or ancient biblical wisdom.

Other students reflect on the power of a youth group as a fellowship activity. Julie discusses the impact of freshman year, its unforeseen struggles, and also that it felt like “something was missing in my life.” Through prayer, she realized that what she missed was “the youth activities I had been so involved with as a high-school student.” Julie had held leadership positions within a youth group and missed the sense of involvement and community. Contacting her school’s chaplain, Julie was introduced to a local youth group and within that fellowship, her a-ha moments occurred. Julie states: “Working with – blank—has been an incredible blessing, one that God led me to, and because of my experiences with the group, I am now discerning a call into youth ministry, a call I was able to further explore...”

Next, Tom discusses going through a very deep depression after a crisis. He states, “Not long after I reached this low in my life, I was introduced to a local church’s youth group.” The youth minister and college minister “took me under their wings.” It was here that the practice began, the practice of attending this fellowship meeting: “I regularly attended the youth and college meetings at the church.” Through this participation and attendance he began to understand a new kind of relationship he could have with God and “This is the biggest ‘aha’ moment in my college experience.” For Tom, life is about God and “I want to do all that I can to fulfill the two greatest commandments given by Jesus: Love God and Love Others.” By attending the youth group at church, Tom formed a new relationship with God.

Other students remarked on the powerful feeling of fellowship within the context of worship. Whitney reflects on his involvement with planning the liturgy for his school’s worship service. Planning music, being involved in the choir, and leading in prayer are

events where voices join “in song and prayer in communion with one another, the world, and with God. These are the kind of experiences that bring me joy and a sense of fulfillment.” For Whitney, being involved with the liturgy engendered “a series of ‘aha’ moments that have helped me to come to a deeper understanding of who I am and what my life is asking of me. I am most alive when I am leading and walking with others in faith.” Participating in the fellowship of worship, Whitney states, “In doing this I have come to realize that not only do I love music ministry, but I am actually a talented conductor and director. And better yet, there is a need in the world for this kind of ministry. The ‘aha’ or realization of a blessing in these experiences is that my heart’s desire and passion is also my life’s calling and the world’s need.”

Meg also reflects on the power of communal worship and begins her essay: “One of the most profound ‘aha’ moments I’ve had in college, is experiencing a truly gathered Quaker meeting.” A class on Quakerism required students to independently attend three meetings in the area. Having grown up Quaker, Meg visited a meeting some distance away in order to experience a rural, conservative meeting. “I was not expecting to experience a worship that would deeply change my understanding and approach to Quaker worship.” This experience was vastly different from another other Quaker meeting and “Despite the sense of familiarity, once entering the Meeting I was immediately taken aback by the silence. It was powerful, deep, and present.” Later, “It was hard for me to describe and put into words the power and palpability of this silence. The silence seemed like a deep presence. It was separate from us, but at the same time we were an active part of it. . . . . I had never felt such a strong deep communal presence both outwardly and inwardly.” This deep communal presence is more than just the feeling of

fellowship, but the essay is clear that the power of participating in a kind of fellowship activity can herald in the opening for profound feelings.

I resisted the category of “Christian practices” in part on behalf of the essay by Sahar, involving fasting during a holy month of Islam. Her ‘aha’ moment occurred “during the month of Ramadan in which one prays and fasts, from sunrise to sunset without food or water. It allows oneself to practice control over oneself and a time to learn more about faith and life. Islam, ‘a way of life,’ is part of my identity and enriches my life daily.” Sahar discusses a very personal moment that happens at pre-dawn, before fasting, on a stroll with a friend and they begin to chase a herd of deer. Sahar states: “In that moment, even though our behavior was quite extraordinary, nothing mattered but the fulfillment and happiness I gained and shared.” She reflects on her faith and some of the negative feelings she has received because of inherent misperceptions about her culture’s faith in Islam. In the end, Sahar asks: “Through sharing our experiences, can we understand each other, respectful of others and oneself? Faith is a beautiful, human experience that should be shared and celebrated.” In sharing and celebrating with others, in a spirit of fellowship, people are formed and changed.

A final example is a story that has been quoted previously and involves Sandra’s involvement in a production of *Vagina Monologues*. What is important for this section is her description of how she felt in the context of performing the play: “I felt infinite. I experienced such a powerful feeling in that moment: I was making a statement through my involvement and my commitment. I was working to create a change in our world – a change that I truly believe in. I involved myself with a group of other people equally committed to this cause. And I was involved in something bigger than myself – so

inconceivably bigger than little, insignificant me.” This comment is significant because it raises an aspect of this category that is important: involvement in a group and participating in “something bigger” than the self has a positive formative impact. I describe this as fellowship, but it also indicates a need for merger into something more than just the self.

These activities of fellowship, like service, seem to encourage student to seek out and participate in other fellowship activities. It becomes a practice in the sense that it produces the desire to participate repeatedly in activities, like worship, that involve the greater community. Almost 30% of the essayist responded by describing a fellowship activity that precipitated the a-ha moment. And, in the midst of these fellowship experiences, something changes for these emerging adults.

#### *Practice of Work*

Practices involving work evolved as a category because about fifteen percent of the students discussed the impact of an internship or work-study job. This practice of work is more than just the exasperated command from parents in cartoons like *Zits*: get a job! Perhaps better: get a work-study job or internship that reflects interests in particular fields of employment. Work-study offers the opportunity for students to work part-time and receive compensation as part of their financial aid. For example, Barb discusses her “a-ha moment” when she started her work-study job at a medical center. Upon entering college, she thought “I had everything figured out. I was going to attend undergraduate for four years, obtain a degree in the sciences, and then go on to medical school. This was the vision I had imagined since I was a little girl, and I was positive everything would go according to plan.” However, “My perfect, ideal image began to quickly unravel when I



started my job at the medical center.” This job gave her a clear picture of the life of a doctor: “Unfortunately, it did not match up with the pretty photo in my head.” Through her work-study job, Barb realized that her reasons for wanting to be a doctor “were very superficial” and her a-ha moment was that working in the medical field “did not match up to what made me really happy and full of life.”

This trend of the a-ha moment happening within the context of a new work experience occurred within six of the essays. Not always a positive experience, participating in a work environment – either for money or for experience – was credited with engendering the a-ha moment in about fifteen percent of the essays. Two accounts describe jobs they didn’t like: both reflect on how this real world experience highlighted what they did NOT want to do; furthermore, it also caused reflection and exploration on how their talents might be better utilized. Another essay discusses a work study job that had a more positive result: Georgia’s friend was going abroad for a semester and asked “if I’d be interested in her work-study job.” The work study was working as a teacher’s aide and on a whim, she took it. “I have to admit that since I’d never worked in the school setting, I was very intimidated and, in the beginning, I doubted my decision about choosing to work there, but I had no idea that this opportunity was simply setting the stage for the rest of my college career.” In short, Georgia loved her job: “I started noticing that each morning, when I’d prepare for the day, I would get so happy at the thought of going into work because I couldn’t wait to be back in the presence of my students.” It was during this time that she decided to re-track her life away from a medical career and become a teacher. This a-ha moment was “the greatest feeling to

finally know what my calling was; I was still going to be able to work with people and help them like I had planned, but in a different way.”

Another work practice mentioned in the essays is having an internship. Mario states: “My internship helped me more clearly understand my sense of vocation.” As an intern in a campus ministry program, he worked alongside three other interns “to share our experiences and receive feedback from the associate chaplain. Through these experiences, three central passions were confirmed: studying scripture, teaching scripture, and spending time with people. “My ‘aha!’ moment came as a result of this feeling.” Another student, Kevin, credits an internship in historical research and gravestone restoration. Working everyday at the slow and patient work of gravestone restoration, Kevin realized: “Aha! It came on a sunny May afternoon in a graveyard, where I sat in gym clothes scrubbing away at marble epitaphs with a toothbrush. Awkward as it sounds, my call to ministry came in a cemetery.” In the context of this activity, Kevin had “hours of solace to speak to God, but more importantly to listen and take it all in.” Working every day with “toothbrushes worn to the nub” alone in a cemetery, Kevin had the time and space to hear his call to ministry. Real world experiences, outside of the classroom, offer different contexts with which student can experience (and sometimes make money!) Not always a positive experience, these essayists are clear that work-study jobs and internships are beneficial in charting one’s future course.

### *Practice of Reading and Reflection*

The practice of reading and reflection was a category I was surprised to find. Students quoted different texts at length and discussed important insights and conclusion

they gained. About 15% of the essays discussed reading an important book and through reflection, they applied those insights to their own life. Authors who were quoted ranged from Os Guinness and Parker Palmer to the Didache and the Apostolic Constitutions, and also included authors like George Vaillant, John Dewey, Ghandi, Henry Nouwen, and Richard Wright. It is the nature of college coursework to involve copious amounts of reading, and although some texts were from class, most texts did not seem part of course material.

Several of the essayist quoted text, some students quoting at length and even footnoting. Heather describes reading *Life of the Beloved* by Henry Nouwen. She reports being “frustrated and burnt out.” In the attempt to help others, Heather realized “that I had focused all my energy into helping others and was severely neglecting my own physical, spiritual and emotional needs.” Reading Nouwen, “it spoke to my heart. The most profound realization was: hearing that God loves me and believing it are two different things and I must admit that I am ‘blessed and broken’ before I can be shared.” Her a-ha moment came out of reading Nouwen, who spoke to her heart, and confirmed her own blessed and broken nature.

One example stands out given my discussion of practices. Ryan discusses college as a “rite of passage” and “most people who have gone through this ‘rite’ have experienced moments in their studies that have formed, shaped and ultimately changed them.” He traces his moment to reading early texts on Christian worship. He states:

My formative moment did not end in the discovery of these early texts though. My exposure to these early texts helped blaze a trail on the path of my own spiritual renewal. Merely reading a text was not enough for me. I began to realize that although these texts were ‘ancient’, they were far from dead. I found that the practices I was reading about were alive with meaning and symbol.

Although he describes his own change as slow, reading and reflecting on these texts encouraged him to liturgical expand his own horizons. He began to “incorporate these ancient prayers and practices in worship” and attend other services that used traditional liturgy. “My relationship with the ancient traditions of the Church changed from an intellectual knowing of various practices, to a formative experience.” This essay is important also because his language, as well as a couple of others, encouraged me to adopt the language of formation and formative experience.

This category of practice involving of reading and reflection – of engaging written material and having the time and space to reflect on its meaning – seems important given today’s current context where most “reading” is done via e-mail, texts, or twitter. Reading comprehension is on the decline and more electronic texts are now sold than paper copies. Reading and reflecting as an activity can generate insight and facilitate a-ha moments. Amy quotes two passages about the life of the artist and the life of the intellect. These two passages were in her mind when she went to a mass one night. “During the blessing of the gifts, it struck me. It was like the stars had aligned; everything came into focus for one brief second.” Her a-ha moment was involved understanding how her passions might be gifts from God and that her life’s work as an artist is utilizing those gifts.

Reading and reflection often expands vision and offers new possibilities in thinking. Through reading particular texts, John explains his aha moment occurred when he expanded the idea of what ministry could be. “I had no real concept of the diversity of ways in which God calls us as His ministers in the world: He called some to be business leaders, some to be teachers; some to be nurses, doctors, lawyers, and the list goes on.”

For John, after reading texts by Guinness and Palmer, ministry and being a minister is more than just preaching on Sundays. Brittany mentions reading material from a general education requirement that allowed him “to develop a perspective I had never seen before.” The critical insights gleaned totally changed the way she saw racial identity and this a-ha “has provided me with the tools to think critically and a wider perspective in other issues facing society.”

### *The Practice of Conversation*

This category of practice is based on the reported experience of the essayists when they describe an important conversation or series of conversations. Within the space of conversation, students ask questions, listen, and have questions asked of them to which they must respond. A previous chapter referenced the power of a single conversation, one happening at a bagel shop and the other at a book store. Both of these “lightning strike” experiences demonstrate the formative influence of a single encounter and the power of words. Moreover, almost one-quarter of the essays discussed the impact and influence of conversation. Tammy discusses the power of conversation and exchanging ideas with others: “We build our identities as collections of these experiences. It is anecdotes from those who are close to us, rather than faceless statistics, which change our minds about important issues.”

This exchange of anecdotes, opinions, and life stories within conversation among peers is incredibly important. Janice is a primary example of the power of conversation; in fact, she gives a methodology on how to do it! Her a-ha moment is “modest, simple and to me...quite profound.” Janice recalls a quote: A good conversation is as stimulating as black coffee and just as hard to sleep after. She jokes that although she knows the

powerful effects of coffee as a college student, “but a good conversation, that was something I was missing in my life at the time. From that moment on, I made it a point in my day to have a ‘good conversation.’” She made a conscious decision “to ask people how they were and then really stop and listen;” she stopped asking about the weather.

Janice states:

I found myself returning to my dorm room at the end of the day and feeling a sense of fulfillment and contentment. I could not sleep at night in pondering things I had learned about people, appreciating connections I had made or the grateful feeling I had that someone shared part of their day and life with me. Two years later, I still practice such questions.

Janice practices conversations as an activity that involves a true exchange between persons; conversation involves taking time to listen and to talk. Janice adds: “Everyone has a story; everyone has something that they want to share. Take time to listen, take time to be present and honor their moments when they open their life up to yours.” Gadamer could not have said it better.

Conversations in the context of a mentoring relationship are also mentioned. Abby as a mentor to high school students describes her “turning point” was when “I began to give back to the younger mentors in faith who were asking the same questions that I had been asking a year before.” She explains that this process “challenged her beliefs, and I began to see what type of person I am striving to become. I realized the unique gifts that I possess and how I can use them to help others in life, and to be a more holy person myself.” On the other side, being mentored through guided conversation is also helpful. Trent mentions the importance of conversations with his advisor during a difficult time. Maxwell was told by a professor that he was a scholar and “therefore, I should confront every aspect of my education with this mode of thinking. Due to this new fact, I became

more motivated to excel in my classes and improve my overall grade point average.”

Maxwell adds, that “after the event, I began to visualize life in a manner that I have never thought of before. I had the enthusiasm and determination to enhance myself spiritually, physically, and mentally. I contribute to the enlightened thinking process to the fact that I took to the idea of scholar and created my own personal definition.”

To sum up: practices are part of the everyday living of ordinary people within a variety of contexts; practices are unpredictable and inventive in their response to human needs. Practices have multiple levels of complexity and broad ranges of participation; they are meaningful clusters of human activity with shared forms of actions which address fundamental human needs. More specifically, I define a practice as a communal and purposeful activity strategically undertaken by embodied persons. Using this definition, five categories – or congeries – of practice emerge: practice of social service, practice of fellowship, practice of work, practice of reading and reflection, and practice of conversation. I argue, specifically my last chapter, that these kinds of practices are ultimately the source of practical wisdom, *phronesis*. Examining the lives and stories of everyday people with excruciating care in respect to their communal actions yields important insights that can be learned and taught. Embedded in these essays are powerful accounts of the “person-forming power of practices.”

Furthermore, these kinds of practices often to lead to more practices, more activities involving the homeless, more flag football games, more social service, more conversations, more fellowship, more exploration, more work, more reading: overall, more participation and involvement in community. In this sense, more is better! This sense of becoming and participating in more is reflected in Miller-McLemore’s statement

that practical theologians teach a practice knowing that “participation in that practice will cultivate the kind of knowledge, *phronesis*, which deepens the students’ capacity for that practice.”<sup>778</sup> It seems that by participating in these practices, the essayists’ capacity and desire for that practice increased and deepened.

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<sup>778</sup>Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Practical Theology and Pedagogy: Embodying Theological Know-How,” in *For Life Abundant*, ed. Dorthy Bass and Craig Dykstra. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 180.



## CHAPTER VIII

### *PHRONESIS*

*“To describe situations thickly, it is useful to understand the formal pattern of practical thinking. To describe situations is to describe how people think and act practically in specific contexts. To describe situations is to describe the forms of ‘phronesis’ that actors use in concrete situations.”<sup>779</sup>*

At the beginning of this dissertation, I claim that the voices in the essays have something significant to add to the growing interest in the lives of college students. I argue for a rich, thick, and complex set of interpretive lenses to examine the essays. I assert that the resources of practical theology and critical hermeneutical theory provide a methodology to support multiple theoretical perspectives despite competing claims and assumptions. In this case, critical hermeneutic theory offers a methodology which uses both religious and scientific perspectives to compare and contrast particular images and interpretations of humanity. The hope is that one can discover, as Browning asserts, “those perspectives that more adequately describe the human condition. This is what makes our view a form of critical hermeneutics.”<sup>780</sup> My construction of the lenses is important because they offer contrasting images of the same data, but many comparisons are obvious. One clear pattern is the role of mentors. The essays reveal again and again the importance of an adult and each lens touches on the importance of such mentors as professors, chaplains, coaches, or counselors. More will be stated about mentors and adults at the conclusion of this chapter in my seven suggestions for higher education.

My hypothesis is that a practical theological study of the lives of forty-eight college students, as expressed in their own words, has descriptive and explanatory power

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<sup>779</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 97.

<sup>780</sup>Browning, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, x.

for interpreting and understanding college student development and formation. Because meanings are often hidden, hermeneutical investigation can “bring explicitness of implicitness, to unveil the essence of the lived experience of a few, which allows for insight into the possible lived experience of others.”<sup>781</sup> The hope is that uncovering and dialoguing with the wisdom of a few can lead to insight and understanding into the lived experience of others.

My objective thus far has been to provide an orientation to the essays in the hopes of proposing suggestions to those in higher education. I claim that embedded in these essays is a kind of a real-life wisdom, *phronesis*. In Chapter Seven, I defined practical theology and stated that “practical theology ultimately seeks to clarify and cultivate *phronesis*.” I want to expand this statement and offer that practical theology and *phronesis* are one and the same. In this chapter, I trace *phronesis* to Aristotle, where Gadamer makes important connections between *phronesis* and hermeneutics. Browning expands on this as critical hermeneutical theory which is “nearly identical” to practical theology. Therefore, I conclude that *phronesis* and practical theology are nearly identical and have the same common goal: human flourishing. I expand briefly upon the implications, particularly in relation to the education of emerging adults.

In order to make these conclusions, I chart the concept of *phronesis* and offer an effective history of the concept. I begin with Aristotle and his use of the concept in *Nicomachean Ethics* and its wider use in Greek culture. For Aristotle, *phronesis* requires a deep knowledge of human beings and its ultimate end is *eudemonia*, human flourishing. Next, I move to Gadamer, who makes important connections between *phronesis* and hermeneutics. For Gadamer, *phronesis* illustrates the true meaning of understanding as

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<sup>781</sup>Torres, “Ethnic Identity Development,” ASHE Reader.

conversation and dialogue; further, *phronesis* offers a kind of model for the central problem of hermeneutics: application. Browning expands upon Gadamer's claim that there are important analogies between the understanding process, hermeneutics, and Aristotle's understanding of *phronesis*. For Browning, *phronesis* provides a framework for descriptive theology and ultimately guides the entire practical theological project. Ultimately, I try to make important connections between *phronesis* and practical theology. If we consider Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, including Gadamer's assertion of a close connection between *phronesis* and hermeneutics, and Browning's insistence on grounding the field of practical theology in critical hermeneutical theory, then practical theology is the pursuit of *phronesis*. *Phronesis* and practical theology are one and the same. In the end, I offer seven suggestions of interest to those in higher education, or anyone interested in college students and their flourishing – parents, mentors, chaplains, administrators, faculty, and student development theorists.

### **Aristotle and *Phronesis***

Aristotle describes *phronesis* as one of five intellectual virtues, all of which are related to truth. Three are important for my discussion: *phronesis*, *techne*, and *episteme*. As I discussed in Chapter Seven, Aristotle made careful distinctions between *episteme* and *techne*: theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. *Techne* is often translated as technical know-how or a skill that is learned (but can be forgotten) that is a means to an end (practical knowledge). *Techne* represents the knowledge of the craftsman who knows how to make a specific thing; therefore, *techne* as a rational activity is also

inherently interested in application.<sup>782</sup> *Epistme* is referred to as “theoretical knowledge” and is concerned with what is universal, usually taking the form of scientific demonstration (scientific knowledge).<sup>783</sup> The search for an enduring and foundational reality is the search for *epistme* and has been a long standing aspiration for many in positivistic science. As Volf stated earlier in Chapter Seven, the practice-versus-theory divide is rooted in an understanding of knowledge that divides theory (*episteme*) and removes it from practice (*techne*).<sup>784</sup>

Aristotle, however, distinguishes *phronesis* as “another kind of reasoning” distinct from both *episteme* and *techne*: *phronesis* is a kind of knowledge and reasoning which is required to make workable decisions about the common good.<sup>785</sup> In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that *phronesis* involves the ability to deliberate about what is good for the self *and* for others. Aristotle names Pericles as the exemplar for *phronesis* because he was able to extol the virtue of thoughtful reflection as well as discern what was good for himself and for other human beings.<sup>786</sup> Aristotle states, that someone with *phronesis*:

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<sup>782</sup> Part of the modern societies’ abandonment of *phronesis* in favor of *techne* occurs with Aristotle partially at fault. Joseph Dunne’s account, *Back to Rough Ground: ‘Phronesis’ and ‘Techne’ in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle*, suggests a certain polarity between *techne* and *phronesis* can be discerned within the concept of *techne* itself. Said in another way: “For Aristotle is far from univocal in his useage of *techne* and to the extent that he fails clearly to differentiate between its theoretical (analytical) and its experiential (active) sense, he contributes significantly to the rationalization of *techne* that so firmly grips the modern imagination.” Dunne demonstrates why robust accounts of practical reason, though scare in modernity, are indispensable. Modern culture has come under the spell of “the ubiquitous menace of technocratic consciousness.” Technocratic consciousness is exemplified technique, rigor, efficiency, control, predictability, rationality and by the “behavioral objectives model” that promotes the image of reason as “an agent of planning, mastery, and control.” The result has been the hegemony of technical reason, *techne*, over and against *phronesis*. “Dunne’s task is therefore to combat the hegemony of technical reason (*techne*) by exploding its limits and offering instead an alternative kind of reasonableness such as Aristotle worked out with his notion of *phronesis*.”

<sup>783</sup> Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 146.

<sup>784</sup> Volf, *Practicing Theology*, 211.

<sup>785</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 19

<sup>786</sup> Pericles was a prominent and influential statesman and general in ancient Athens during their golden age. Pericles was a magnificent orator, known for his scrupulous honesty, and 461B.C. – 429 B.C. is known as the “Age of Pericles.” Pericles promoted arts and literature while deepening and extending reform in democracy. He is credited with many of the buildings on the Acropolis and mostly noted for The

be able to deliberate beautifully about things that are good and advantageous for himself, not in part, such as the sort of things that are conducive to health or to strength, but the sort of things that are conducive to living well as a whole.<sup>787</sup>

For Aristotle, *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue that enables one to grasp the truth about human action by making practical judgments about the common good.<sup>788</sup> Aristotle also defines *phronesis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as “a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man.”<sup>789</sup> In short, someone with *phronesis* can deliberate beautifully about things that are conducive to living well as a whole.

This last phrase – living well as a whole – is translated from the Greek term *eudaimonia*, and is also translated as human flourishing or genuine happiness. For Aristotle, the goal of *phronesis* is to reach *eudaimonia*. Said another way, the “*telos* or goal in *phronesis* is *eudaimonia* which has been translated as genuine happiness, as human flourishing or as ‘being well and doing well.’”<sup>790</sup> *Eudaimonia* is a central concept in ancient Greek ethics and in classical Greek, *eudaimonia* is used as a term for the highest human good. Further, in the same section of the *Ethics*, Aristotle writes that in order to understand what *phronesis* means, we must look at a person who possesses *phronesis* – the *phronimos*.<sup>791</sup> Perhaps Aristotle’s longer definition of *phronesis*,

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Parthenon; Pericles is also credited as the chief reason Athens was an educational and cultural center of the ancient world. For more, see Christian Meier, *Athens: A Portrait of the City in Its Golden Age* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998).

<sup>787</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), 106 (6.5.1140a25-28).

<sup>788</sup>Aristide Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle’s Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric, and Political Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996),

<sup>789</sup>Noel, Jana, “On the Varieties of *Phronesis*,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 31, no. 3 (1999), 273.

<sup>790</sup>Don Flaming, “Using *phronesis* instead of ‘research-based practice’ as the guiding light for nursing practice,” *Nursing Philosophy* 2, 255.

<sup>791</sup>Noel, “On the Varieties of *Phronesis*, 274-75.

previously stated, might be more succinctly summed up as: A *phronimos* should be able to deliberate beautifully about *eudaimonia*.

*Phronesis* might best be typified, at least for the purpose of my argument, as practical wisdom. Aristotelian scholars have recognized a lack of clarity and consistency in the translation of *phronesis*.<sup>792</sup> Other characterizations of the concept of *phronesis* are prudence, practical thinking, moral discernment, pastoral wisdom, understanding, practical knowledge, moral knowledge, practical reasoning, theological know-how, and ethical know-how.<sup>793</sup> *Phronesis* is best conceptualized as a capability to deliberate on how to direct change as to ultimately enhance the quality of life for all. *Phronesis*, then, requires a deep knowledge of human beings in order to enhance conditions for the possibility of individual and communal transformation; the end goal of *phronesis* is human flourishing. In the practical world, things could be one way or another. *Phronesis* is deliberative and takes into account different circumstances, trade-offs, weighs uncertainties, requires judgment, addresses particulars, and:

is iterative and shifts aims in process when necessary. Practical reasoning is the stuff of practical life. It is not theoretical science. It is not enduring and it is not foundational. Its aim is to arrive at good but imperfect decisions with respect to particular circumstances.<sup>794</sup>

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<sup>792</sup>*Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>793</sup>*Phronesis* appears to be a confused, confusing concept when one thinks in a Cartesian framework, where subjective and objectivity exist, that the subjective-objective distinction is a fundamental one, “until the subjective becomes virtually synonymous with the private, idiosyncratic, and arbitrary, then the very idea of *phronesis* seems like a confused concept. Knowledge must be objective – or else it is only pseudo-knowledge. When values enter, they must be treated as noncognitive emotional response or private subjective preferences. From this perspective, especially in its positivist variants, talk of practical or political wisdom and *phronesis* as a special type of rational activity may have a certain charm but fails to live up to the promise of serious scientific knowledge.” See, Bernstien, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 47.

<sup>794</sup>Elliot W. Eisner, “From episteme to phronesis to artistry in the study and improvement of teaching.” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 18 (2002): 375 (–385).

*Phronesis*, as one piece of Aristotle's comprehensive writings on the ethics of human action, looks to address "the ways that people act in everyday situations. It deals with human action in terms of practical situations by looking at the question 'What should I do in this situation?'"<sup>795</sup>

### Gadamer, *Phronesis*, and Hermeneutics

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer makes significant statements about hermeneutics and *phronesis*. He states: "In considering the structure of the hermeneutic process I have explicitly referred to the Aristotelian analysis of *phronesis*."<sup>796</sup> Gadamer formulates important connections between Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* and his model of understanding as conversation or dialogue because: "Human understanding in its basic form is a dialogue or conversation in which practical questions are brought to the object of conversation from the beginning and not just added at the end."<sup>797</sup> In brief, Gadamer uses *phronesis* as a model of the process of understanding because it demonstrates the way in which application is a necessary and indispensable moment in the hermeneutic process. Gadamer states:

If we relate Aristotle's description of the ethical phenomenon and especially of the virtue of *phronesis* to our own investigation, we find that Aristotle's analysis is in fact a kind of model of the problems of hermeneutics.<sup>798</sup>

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<sup>795</sup>Noel, "The Varieties of *Phronesis*," 274.

<sup>796</sup>*Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>797</sup>*Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>798</sup>*Ibid.*, 289.

*Phronesis* is “a kind of model of the problem of hermeneutics” because it demonstrates the way in which application is a necessary and concurrent moment in the understanding process.

One of Gadamer’s strongest arguments comes from his use of Aristotle to investigate the way in which application is an essential moment of the hermeneutical experience. Bernstein states: “It is Aristotle’s analysis of *phronesis* that, according to Gadamer, enables us to understand the distinctive way in which application is an essential moment of the hermeneutic experience.”<sup>799</sup> As stated earlier, Gadamer is interested in this moment of application because he sees this as an indispensable moment of the interpretive process. Understanding, interpretation, *and* application are three internally related moments that occur together in the hermeneutical moment. As explained in Chapter Two, previous to Gadamer’s claim in *Truth and Method*, application was seen as a distinct and separate element in the hermeneutic process. Bernstein sums it up: “every act of understanding involves interpretation, and all interpretation involves application.”<sup>800</sup> For Gadamer, understanding and interpretation, whether in science, law, history, medicine, philosophy, or theology, have a broad concern with application.

For support on application, Gadamer looks to Aristotle and his distinction between *phronesis* and *techne* (technical knowledge). For Aristotle, both *phronesis* and *techne* are inherently interested in application. Gadamer personifies the knowledge of each as the knowledge of the craftsman and the knowledge of the ethicist. And although he gives a distinct outline as to how the two kinds of knowledge are different, what is the

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<sup>799</sup> Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 38

<sup>800</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.



same is that they are both interested in application from the beginning.<sup>801</sup> He states that “these two types of knowledge still include *the same task of application* that we have recognized as the central problem of hermeneutics.”<sup>802</sup> Because the central problem of hermeneutics is the task of application, Gadamer explicitly insisted that Aristotle’s theory of *phronesis* illustrates the true meaning of understanding as dialogue or conversation. I quote Gadamer at length, partly because this is Browning’s “favorite passage from Gadamer.”<sup>803</sup> Gadamer states:

We too determined that application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning. Here too application did not consist in relating some pre-given universal to the particular situation. The interpreter dealing with a traditional text tries to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the text is given for him as something universal, that he first understands it per se, and then afterward uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text – i.e. to understand what it says, what constitutes the text’s meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all.<sup>804</sup>

Gadamer is clear application is not an afterthought or an activity done at the end of the understanding process. Application codetermines understanding from the beginning. Further, there is no pre-given universal theory to be then applied to the situation as a solution to a problem, but instead requires attention to details and particulars. Concern with application happens when the researcher relates herself to the text and the text to her world. Gadamer’s hermeneutics is like *phronesis* because “neither applies abstract universals to concrete situations. In both hermeneutical conversation and moral judgment,

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<sup>801</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 315-320.

<sup>802</sup>*Ibid.*, 313, original emphasis.

<sup>803</sup>Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism*, 22.

<sup>804</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 321.

concern with application is there from the beginning.”<sup>805</sup> This interest in application from the beginning “implies more nearly a radical practice-theory-practice model of understanding that gives the entire theological enterprise a thoroughly practical case.”<sup>806</sup> As discussed earlier, an important implication is that this formulation razes the practice-theory divide and instead offers a radical practice-theory-practice model. Gadamer firmly refutes that theory and practice are separate movements over and against one another, but instead, are interrelated movements in the process of all understanding. Or as Browning states, one moves from “theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices.”<sup>807</sup>

### **Browning, *Phronesis*, and Practical Theology**

Browning is clear that the full implications of Gadamer’s thought have not been fully realized or grasped. Browning’s research in practical theology began in studying congregations, where he voiced concern that no discipline had the “methods for assessing the distinctively theological and ethical claims of religious communities.”<sup>808</sup> His interest in the situation of congregations was “primarily practical” and he wanted to “advance multidimensional descriptions of congregations.” In order to do this, Browning makes his agenda clear: “I both define and argue for the epistemological grounds of a critical practical theology.” These epistemological grounds are “established when implications of

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<sup>805</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 39.

<sup>806</sup>*Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>807</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>808</sup>Browning, *American Congregations*, 193.

Gadamer's theory of understanding as dialogue are grasped fully."<sup>809</sup> More specifically, Browning argues that Gadamer's view of the close relations between hermeneutics as dialogue or conversation and Aristotle's view of *phronesis* is often overlooked. Browning states:

I depend much as Gadamer's claim that there are important analogies between the interpretive process that he calls hermeneutics and Aristotle's understanding of *phronesis* or practical reason.<sup>810</sup>

Aristotle's conception of *phronesis* illustrates the true meaning of understanding as conversation for Gadamer. Browning states: "For Gadamer, both *phronesis* and understanding are historically situated inquiries guided from the beginning by interests in practical application."<sup>811</sup> Further, Browning states:

Gadamer's close association of hermeneutics and *phronesis* suggests a very different structure for both theology as a whole and the traditional view of practical theology. If one takes Gadamer seriously, all theology (and all the humanities and the social sciences) becomes practical through and through. All attempts to understand, even within theology, are guided from the beginning by a broad concern with application.<sup>812</sup>

Browning major claim is that the close association between hermeneutics and *phronesis* suggests a very different structure for theology. This association challenges the traditional view of practical theology; further, this relationship challenges all forms and ways of knowing in the humanities and the social sciences.<sup>813</sup> Instead, a different structure for understanding emerges where all disciplines become "becomes practical through and

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<sup>809</sup>*Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>810</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 11.

<sup>811</sup>Browning, *American Congregations*, 194.

<sup>812</sup>*Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>813</sup>Browning states: "If we accept Gadamer's claims about the close relation of hermeneutics and *phronesis*, psychoanalysis and most psychotherapy should be seen as practical hermeneutical attempts to reconstruct through dialogue the experience of the client. Since this reconstruction comes through dialogue, it necessarily entails a reconstruction of the experience of the therapist or counselor as well. Research and inquiry, in the context of therapy, are dimensions of the wider task of the practical reconstruction of experience, both the client's and the therapist's." Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 85.

through.” Overall, theology is a practical discipline; just as in the humanities and social sciences, theology is guided from the start by “a broad concern with application.”

To add to this radical position, I quote Browning again from my Introduction. Browning is firm that the full implications of Gadamer’s thought challenges the foundations of theology and all disciplinary boundaries. In *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*, Browning states that this proposition “silently informs every page.” He states:

When done rightly, good theology will look a lot more like good social science; that is, it will describe the world it is addressing with much more care and nuance than theology generally does. The converse is also true. When done rightly, good social science will look a lot more like good theology; that is, it will take more responsibility for revealing and critically defending the implicit norms and ideals that unwittingly guide its descriptions of the social world.<sup>814</sup>

Browning believes that a “thin line” separates a hermeneutically conceived theology and a hermeneutically conceived social science. Both are guided by application from the beginning. Theology can and is practical if we acknowledge that we bring practical concerns to it from the beginning. And according to Browning, both Gadamer and Aristotle prioritize the concern for application in practical matters from the beginning. All three thinkers share one fundamental idea: practical thinking is the center of human thinking. Fundamentally, then, Browning is interested in how religious communities exhibit practical thinking. Focusing on practical thinking, on *phronesis*, helps to answer the questions: What should we do? How should we live?<sup>815</sup>

To understand the impact of this position and these questions, Browning contrasts *phronesis* with the questions of *techne* (technical reason) and *theoria* (theoretical reason).

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<sup>814</sup> Browning et al., *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*, 335.

<sup>815</sup> Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 10.

Reason as *phronesis* is different from *theoria* which asks the more dispassionate, objective, or scientific question of: What is the case? or What is the nature of things?<sup>816</sup> *Techne*, or technical reason, asks the question: What are the most effective means to a given end?<sup>817</sup> Browning explains:

Since the Enlightenment, the modern experiment has been dedicated to the improvement of human life through the increase of objective scientific knowledge (*theoria*) that is then applied to the solution of human problems (*techne*).<sup>818</sup>

But *phronesis* offers a powerful third partner for dialogue and offers a new direction for thinking about the problems of human life. In contrast to theoretical reasoning or technical reasoning, practical reasoning deals with the way people act in everyday situations. It deals with human action in terms of practical situations by looking at the question: What should we do in this situation? *Phronesis* focuses its primary attention “on the ‘situation,’ on perceiving all that is involved in the situation, and on being able to act in best accordance with the particular situation.”<sup>819</sup> For Browning, *phronesis* is guided by application and like hermeneutics, is practical through and through. To describe situations is to describe the *phronesis* used, “how people think and act practically in specific contexts.”<sup>820</sup> Browning believes *phronesis* provides a framework for descriptive theology and guides the entire practical theological enterprise.

If there is one quote that sums up my entire project, it would be a quote from Browning when he states:

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<sup>816</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>817</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>818</sup> Browning adds: “The rebirth of practical philosophy signals a wish to question the dominance of theoretical and technical reason, to secure in our culture and in the university a strong role for practical reason, and to demonstrate that critical reflection about the goals of human action is both possible and necessary.” See Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 34.

<sup>819</sup> Noel, “The Varieties of *Phronesis*,” 279.

<sup>820</sup> Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 97.

To describe situations thickly, it is useful to understand the formal pattern of practical thinking. To describe situations is to describe how people think and act practically in specific contexts. To describe situations is to describe the forms of *phronesis* that actors use in concrete situations.<sup>821</sup>

As the first step, descriptive theology should advance multidimensional descriptions of situations. The purpose of “descriptive theology’s job of describing situations” is to help understand how communities and persons exercise *phronesis* through discerning the thickness of meaning within a situation. Browning states: “Descriptive theology attempts this deep understanding of others, their situations, and their identities.”<sup>822</sup> In describing situations thickly, “it is useful to see the focus of the special human sciences as illuminating different aspects of *phronesis*.”<sup>823</sup>

Thick description, as the first step in Browning’s complicated methodology, seeks to understand how persons use and exercise *phronesis*. I as have stated previously, I take only this first step of Browning’s full four-fold methodology. My hope is that I might be able to complete the full hermeneutical circle and move beyond this first step of thick description some day. However, so far, I have tried to complete this first step by raising the historical consciousness of *phronesis* by outlining an effective history of the concept. The purpose of this section is to highlight the key ideals and presuppositions behind the term and ultimately, tie *phronesis* into practical theology. To recap, Aristotle describes *phronesis* as another kind of knowledge whose *telos* is human flourishing. *Phronesis* aims to arrive at decisions regarding human flourishing and requires a deep knowledge of human beings. Gadamer highlights Aristotle’s concept to make important connections between hermeneutics and *phronesis*. For Gadamer, *phronesis* illustrates the true

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<sup>821</sup> Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 97.

<sup>822</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>823</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

meaning of understanding as conversation. Browning expands upon Gadamer and uses his argument to construct the epistemological grounds of a critical hermeneutics. When the implications of Gadamer's theory of understanding are fully understood, theology looks different. For Browning, critical hermeneutics offers a framework with which to compare and contrast particular images or lenses and interpretations of humanity. Browning also believes that critical hermeneutical theory and a critical practical theology are nearly identical. Therefore, important connections can be made between *phronesis* and practical theology. In many ways, practical theology encapsulates the pursuit of *phronesis*. Both are inherently interested in human flourishing and both are hermeneutically conceived modes of being. Both *phronesis* and practical theology hope to discover "those perspectives that more adequately describe the human condition."<sup>824</sup>

### ***Phronesis, Flourishing, and Practical Theology***

As I have stated, Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* has as an ultimate goal of *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing. Human flourishing is the ultimate end of human conduct and is a state conducive to living well as a whole. Someone with *phronesis* is called a *phronimos*, one who can deliberate beautifully about *eudaimonia*. In particular, *phronesis* offers a model of understanding that encapsulates the practical theological endeavour. If one follows the line of thinking, beginning with Aristotle and *phronesis*, and into Gadamer's insight into hermeneutics and *phronesis*, then, according to Browning, critical hermeneutics and practical theology are nearly identical. Taking this

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<sup>824</sup> Browning, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, x.

line of reasoning one step further, *phronesis* and practical theology are also nearly identical and have a common goal: human flourishing.

Making a direction connection between *phronesis* and practical theology is not a new or radical statement. But, I believe it is a connection that deserves highlighting as its implications are far reaching for the field, particularly in terms of its methodological commitments and the implications for the education of emerging adults. As I have previously cited, other scholars make connections between *phronesis* and practical theology. For example, in Chapter Seven, Elaine Graham states that the examination of practice is the pursuit of *phronesis*, “a performative practical wisdom (*phronesis*) which we inhabit and re-enact.”<sup>825</sup> Additionally, she describes her model of pastoral theology as the interpretation of purposeful practices: “In this sense, practical theology helps communities of faith both to articulate and practice what they preach or believe and also to better articulate or preach what they practice.”<sup>826</sup> As another example, Christian Scharen discusses the key role practical theology plays in educating and forming ministers.<sup>827</sup> The notion of embodied learning is one way to make sense of how such wisdom and imagination develop. This kind of holistic understanding is “more like what Aristotle called *phronesis* – practical wisdom – in which one does ‘quickly’ the ‘right thing, in the right way, and at the right time.’”<sup>828</sup> This kind of knowledge is learned through participation and held in a profoundly embodied way.<sup>829</sup> Randy Maddox echoes a

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<sup>825</sup> Graham, “Practical Theology as Transforming Practice,” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, eds. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 110.

<sup>826</sup> James Woodward and Steven Pattison, “Introduction,” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, eds. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 105.

<sup>827</sup> Christian Scharen. “Learning Ministry Over Time: Embodying Practical Wisdom,” 265.

<sup>828</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>829</sup> Scharen attributes this sentiment to Craig Dykstra and references his article “Reconceiving Practice in



similar sentiment about a kind of knowledge that theological reflection generates: “In large degree the move toward recovering theology as a practical discipline could also be seen as the move toward recognizing that theological reflection, in its most primary sense, is such *phronesis*.”<sup>830</sup>

Even correlating practical theology with the *telos* of *phronesis*, human flourishing, is a well stated premise of the field of practical and pastoral theology. As discussed in Chapter Six, Miller-McLemore contends that a commitment “to a theology of experience has led the discipline to the inadvertent creation of alternative loci of angst and flourishing.”<sup>831</sup> More so, McClure argues that the primary objective of pastoral theology is to help create the conditions for human flourishing in ways that are more complex, effective, and socially adequate.<sup>832</sup> Woodward and Pattison note that contemporary North American theologians focus on those issues concerned with the flourishing of individuals and groups.

Further, Browning states: “The entire education task is an act of *phronesis*.”<sup>833</sup>

This position is upheld in Miller-McLemore’s article “Practical Theology and Pedagogy” where she makes a bold claim:

basic to the practice of teaching in this field is a particular way of theological knowing that has important implications not only for the teaching of practical theology but also for the definition of the field and for the larger enterprise of theology itself.<sup>834</sup>

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Theological Inquiry and Education.”

<sup>830</sup> Maddox, “The Recovery of Theology as a Practical Discipline,” 669.

<sup>831</sup> Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian,” 1.

<sup>832</sup> McClure, *Moving Beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 3.

<sup>833</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>834</sup> Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Practical Theology and Pedagogy: Embodying Theological Know-How,” 171.

This way of theological knowing is “a form of *phronesis* that, in this context, might be called ‘pastoral wisdom’ or ‘theological know-how.’”<sup>835</sup> As with practice, continued participation in that practice will deepen and cultivate *phronesis*. Miller-McLemore states that practical theologians teach with the expectation that “participation in that practice will cultivate the kind of knowledge, *phronesis*, that deepens students’ capacities for further participation in the practice.”<sup>836</sup> But, she reminds us that the path towards that kind of theological wisdom and *phronesis* “is never quick or easy.”<sup>837</sup> Miller-McLemore contends:

Students must engage in “*phronetic* theological movement from ‘practice to theory and back again,’ as practical theologian Don Browning says, or, more specifically, from ‘theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices.’”<sup>838</sup>

For Browning, Aristotle emphasized “the role of tradition and community in the formation of *phronesis*.”<sup>839</sup> *Phronesis* is not about isolated contemplation, but instead is a capability to reflect upon different modes of action, which always requires practice and cultivation. In this sense, Aristotle’s *phronesis* as a capacity is not ascribed to every human being and only to those that have been properly educated, which leaves the concept open for criticism of its elitist connotations.<sup>840</sup> Aristotle himself did not think of it as a virtue that could be cultivated in every person; instead, “but only to those gifted individuals who had been properly educated.”<sup>841</sup> For Bernstein, however, Gadamer “softens the elitist connotations of *phronesis* by integrating it with his understanding of

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<sup>835</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>836</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>837</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>838</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>839</sup> Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 174.

<sup>840</sup> Bernstein, 165.

<sup>841</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

dialogue.”<sup>842</sup> Bernstein also concludes that if one follows out the logic of Gadamer’s line of thinking, then this demands that “we turn our attention to the question of how we can nurture the type of communities required for the flourishing of *phronesis*.”<sup>843</sup> Aristotle emphasized the role of tradition and community in the formation of *phronesis*.<sup>844</sup> The context of Aristotle’s reflection on the intellectual virtues came from his involvement with training political leadership; therefore, *phronesis* must be learned and taught and it required education and practice. *Phronesis* requires a deep knowledge of human beings in order to enhance conditions for the possibility of individual and communal transformation.

One of Browning’s central questions is how can Christian communities become vital centers of dialogue that can contribute to the good of the society and the world? One answer, says Cahalan, is that:

Browning proposes that the Christian community strives to create, nurture, and enhance the conditions for the possibility of individual and communal transformation through the ongoing practice of *phronesis*, practical reasoning, or reasoning-in-dialogue.<sup>845</sup>

*Phronesis*, for Cahalan, must attend to the multi-varied contextual conditions of contemporary life; moreover, the *telos* of practical theology is to guide the community to live and act faithfully. Cahalan adds, “For Browning, the practice of practical reason (*phronesis*) allows religious communities to engage in critical hermeneutical dialogue.”<sup>846</sup> Furthermore, because “situations are created by the struggles of practical

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<sup>842</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>843</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>844</sup> Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 174.

<sup>845</sup> Cahalan, “Three Approaches to Practical Theology, 71.

<sup>846</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

action and practical reason,” human struggles can answer questions about what to do and how to live.”<sup>847</sup>

In short, Cahalan states that practicing *phronesis* allows one to “engage in critical hermeneutical dialogue.” Said another way, “the *telos* of practical theology is to guide the community to live and act faithfully.” Shortened, Cahalan’s statement might be: the *telos* of practical theology is *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing. Because human flourishing is also the goal of *phronesis*, practical theology and *phronesis* have a common *telos*.

Browning says it yet another way, albeit a bit more convoluted:

The structure of practical reason provides the framework for descriptive theology; it also guides the normative reconstructive task of the entire fundamental practical theological project. *Phronesis*, as I will account for it, guides both the descriptive and the normative-critical task.<sup>848</sup>

*Phronesis* provides a framework for descriptive theology and ultimately guides the entire fundamental practical theological project. That framework has also been called critical hermeneutical theory. Because Browning makes a case that critical hermeneutics and practical theology are “nearly identical,” *phronesis* and practical theology are also very similar.

In conclusion, perhaps the essays are best described as accounts of human flourishing. Practical theology is intrinsically interested in human flourishing, which is also the *telos* of *phronesis*. But stating that both practical theology and *phronesis* have the same end goal is a bit redundant. For many neo-Aristotelian ethicists, human flourishing, or *eudaimonia*, is the ultimate end of all human conduct. Human flourishing is an all-inclusive end that includes all final ends. Human flourishing is “something plural and complex, not monistic and simple. As already noted, this view of human flourishing

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<sup>847</sup> Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 107.

<sup>848</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

amounts to a version of moral pluralism, because there are many goods that help to define human flourishing.”<sup>849</sup> Further, the role of *phronesis* in ethics has recently become prevalent in order to bridge the gap between the good and virtues of the individual and that of the good and virtues of the larger community. In this case, the concept of human flourishing offers a more satisfactory account of the ends of human action and the relationship between virtue and self-interest. However, for the Greeks and many contemporary ethicists, the concept of human flourishing is the ultimate end of all human conduct and the *telos* of all ends.

My ultimate goal is to draw from the wisdom embedded in the essays and give suggestions for higher education. These suggestions are accounts of *phronesis* as they reflect the situation of everyday life and they are accounts of human flourishing.

*Phronesis* is not the stuff of theoretical science or startling conclusions. It often states the obvious and seeks to illuminate practical judgments about the common good. The nature of *phronesis* is not enduring and not foundational; instead, *phronesis* offers good but imperfect suggestions with respect to particular circumstances. *Phronesis* doesn't apply abstract universals to concrete situations or provide quick and ready answers to theoretical questions. My suggestions may appear obvious and may, as one critic suggested, read as anyone might conclude from a casual glance at the essays. But I set out to learn from the wisdom of the voices in the essays and not to determine results that would have impact or the power of the unexpected. These are the lessons I have learned in listening to the voices of emerging adults.

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<sup>849</sup>Douglas B. Rasmussen. “Human Flourishing and the Appeal to Human Nature,” in *Human Flourishing* edited by Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred Miller, and Jeffrey Paul, (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 14.

## Seven Suggestions

It seemed clear to me that the students were answering the fundamental questions of *phronesis*: What should we do? How should we live? In essence, they were giving examples of human flourishing. In closing, I draw from the practical wisdom of the students as they reflect on their lives as lived and construct seven simple conclusions. If colleges and universities are interested in how students are formed and shaped, I believe these activities, as suggested by the essayists, help to engender a-ha moments and formative experiences. Embedded in the essays, I recognized a kind of practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, which seemed important to raise up for reflection. Because meanings are often hidden and must be brought to the surface through reflection, hermeneutics “can bring explicitness of implicitness, to unveil the essence of the lived experience of a few, which allows for insight into the possible lived experience of others.”<sup>850</sup> Critical hermeneutical theory encapsulates that humans are interpretive beings, but also that all understanding is interpretation. By being more aware of our basic mode of understanding, critical hermeneutical theory makes us more aware of the reflective dimension in all understanding. Further, these lessons are important because as Arnett and other researchers cite, there is a dearth of research efforts focused on this age group’s identity issues, because most research on identity formation is focused on the developmental period of adolescence. My suggestions challenge this oversight by suggesting identity-forming activities for emerging adults.

I constructed these lenses because I felt that they would help me better understand and describe the patterns and dynamics I had begun to discover. The first lens, based on

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<sup>850</sup> Torres, “Ethnic Identity Development,” ASHE reader.

psychosocial theory, explored the new life stage theory of emerging adulthood as a way to examine the essays. Because of the essayists focus on themes of identity, exploration, and instability, I argue in Chapter Four that the essayists are better understood as emerging adults, as they are neither adolescents nor young adults. The second lens is based on object relation theory (ORT). ORT postulates that our fundamental human drive is towards relationship and all development and formation takes place within the context of relationships. I discovered important conclusions about the relationships mentioned in the context of these self-reported a-ha moments in Chapter Five. Chapter Six uses pastoral theology to explore the concept of crisis, which was reported in about two-thirds of the essays. Emerging adults experience acute shifts in their awareness of contradiction, finitude, and vulnerability; consequently, a crisis can occur. Finally, Chapter Seven looks specifically at what the essayist are doing in the midst of their self-reported a-ha moment in terms of a practice. From this practice lens, five basic categories of practice emerge: practices of service, practices of fellowship, practices of work, practices of reading and reflection, and practices of conversation. I argue that the essayists offer stories of the “person-forming power of practices.” The following seven suggestions are gleaned from the essays and offered for those in higher education or anyone interested in the lives of emerging adults.

### **1) Mentors**

Mentors stood out in all four lenses. Mentors play a pivotal role in many of the a-ha moments. A mentor is an adult who steps in and offers many things: a relationship, a listening ear, advice, or even as an act of confrontation. A mentor can even be a random man in a bagel shop. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven mention the role of the mentor, or

adult, in more detail. In Chapter Seven, the practice of conversation often involves an adult. Chapter Six reflects on students' description of an inimical event and labels this as a crisis; in many of the crisis accounts, the students reach out to an adult for help. But most striking is the ORT lens which examines the particular relationships present in the essays. In a third of the essays, the role of an adult appears, usually as a mentor who confronts the student – much like Winnicott suggests. According to the essays, this adult is never a parent, but an adult who functions as an advisor or mentor. Although many interesting comments might be made about the specific role of the adult or mentor, suffice it to say that mentors, or adults, are extremely important to the emerging adults I studied.

Much has been written about the importance and impact of mentors. One such text, mentioned previously, is Sharon Parks' *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams, Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. Parks is clear that mentoring as an activity in a community of learning is important: the nature of the relationship is transformational and this kind of engagement honors both the potential and the vulnerability of the student. She seeks to restore the practice of mentoring in college environments by focusing on higher education as a mentoring community in order to encourage and enhance development. Parks states: "The power of mentoring relationships is that they help anchor the vision of the potential self."<sup>851</sup> Simply stated, mentors should be available to students on college campuses and at universities. The essays are clear that relationships and conversations with mentors, or adults, is pivotal in engendering a-ha moments. Often, a professor, chaplain, youth leader, or coach steps in to offer pivotal advice or a firm shoulder during a difficult time. Mentors play a

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<sup>851</sup>Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 81.



fundamental role in several accounts and serve as a springboard for formative moments. Further, a mentor, or the role of an adult, need not be a relationship that is long standing. Said another way, the formative power of a mentor can occur in something as simple as a brief conversation, a bit of advice, or some gentle prodding. In my experience in PTEV, some faculty groaned about the weighty responsibility and expectations of serving as a “mentor.” But this shouldn’t necessarily be so. One of the important things I realized as a mentor working with my own students is that simply inquiring into what they wanted to do with their lives was enough. One student remarked that his advisor and everyone else wanted to know about his major and his business classes, but no one had ever asked him: what do you want to do with the rest of your life? The role of the adult in life of an emerging adult and its impact can happen in a lightning flash conversation.

## **2) Social Service**

Many students discussed engaging in social service projects. Shelley states: “Working with inner city youth, living in a large city, and facing social issues on a personal level allowed me to have a life-changing summer.” For others, it can become a way of life. Jackie states: “Now I know I can make a living by serving others and nonprofits are a great way to do so.” Because of the impact of social service in many a-ha moments, it seems appropriate to encourage higher education to provide for opportunities for emerging adults to engage in social service. The lenses helped to display the characteristics of the social service experience. For example, Chapter Seven reflects on “what the students were doing” in their self-reported a-ha moments. Over a quarter of the essayists were engaged in social service activities when the a-ha moment occurred. According to the essays, social service refers to taking part in social service trips, social

justice issues, and taking social action; in short, these experiences involve helping others. More so, Chapter Four reflects on emerging adulthood as a descriptive category that highlights the need and desire to explore and seek out new identities. Engaging with “the other” and confronting poverty, homelessness, and despair is part of the realm of possibilities that emerging adults need to experience. In particular, the experience of a social service trip during spring break seems an ideal environment to help students have a-ha moments: they are taken out of their world, placed in a new environment, surrounded by a cohort group, and asked to engage the “real world.” Identities are confirmed and confronted. If Arnett is correct, this is a developmentally necessary step of emerging adulthood.

There is rich evidence within higher education on the impact social service and the value of service learning. The essays are certainly clear that participating in social service activities, social justice issues, taking social action, and helping others in need is very influential in their a-ha moments. Again, over 25% of the essays reflect on some kind of service experience where working in solidarity with the oppressed is life-changing. Further, these experiences often lead to participation in more social service events. Higher education should encourage students to donate their time and energy to such social service activities or make classes possible that encourage service learning.

### **3) Work Study and Internships**

As Arnett points out in Chapter Four, many emerging adults enter college with “a Plan.” But this Plan is subject to many revisions during the emerging adult years. Plan revision and in some case, outright Plan disintegration, were found throughout the essays. Many of these Plan revisions came about by engaging in work opportunities in their field

of interest. In some cases, these work experiences confirmed talents and gifts for the work; in many cases, the experiences confirmed that this work was NOT for them. In all cases, work and internships allow for a clarification of identity for emerging adults.

Chapter Seven reflects on the “practice of work” and the essays accounts of internships and work study which allowed student to acquire income as well as gain real world experience. Barb states: “My perfect, ideal image began to quickly unravel when I started my job at the medical school.” Sometimes this real world experience resulted in deciding not to follow that career path and sometimes, just the opposite: it confirmed talents and gifts in the process. But having internships and work study opportunities for students seem invaluable in providing real-world experience combined with an environment that can test weaknesses and confirm strengths. In their search for new identities discussed in Chapter Four, it seems important to encourage college students to find opportunities to try out different professions and work situations.

#### **4) Support Fellowship Groups**

In Chapter Five, co-hort and peer groups were the most important relationship category mentioned in the essays. These groups are also referred to as fellowship groups: a group of students with a common interest and participation in particular activities in Chapter Seven. The effect of fellowship groups on emerging adults is a powerful formative force for many reasons: it acts as a way to take a stand or make a statement, it demonstrates the impact of a collective effort, or it results in a powerful feeling of fellowship and belonging in something greater than the self. In over 40% of the essays in Chapter Five mentioned the importance of these groups. Further, in Chapter Seven, the “practice of fellowship” was important and mentioned in almost 30% of the essays. This

practice revolves around group activities like youth groups, theatre production, worship, and even a game of capture the flag. In the midst of these fellowship experiences, something changes and the result is an a-ha moment for some of the essayists. Many of these fellowship activities demonstrate the key aspects of a practice: a common, yet meaningful experience, whose ordinariness is transcended by its impact on the lives of emerging adults.

And according to Hanover College President Sue DeWine supporting fellowship groups is easy! In my interview with her, she believes that most a-ha moments happen outside the classroom in other activities. And although money prohibits new campus groups from forming, she always has enough money to buy T-shirts. DeWine mentioned a story of a new group that wanted to form a singing group on campus that sounded like a take-off on Glee. The students wanted her support and so, she offered to give them money to get T-shirts which was enough to get the group excited and started. Simple actions like this show how easy it can be for higher education to sponsor and encourage fellowship groups. For emerging adults, having co-hort groups and peer groups is immensely important for their development and formation.

#### **5) Resources and Staff for Crisis:**

Chapter Six is devoted to the concept of crisis and its appearance in the essays. As I stated previously, I was surprised to find very personal and moving accounts of inimical event in about two-thirds of the essays. I was surprised because the question asks about their “biggest a-ha moment in college” and yet twenty-nine of the essays respond by including an account of a negative event. I describe these events as a crisis and highlight some of their important revelations about the adverse experiences of college students. For

example, the crisis is often mediated by an adult who steps in to help or is asked to help. These accounts are clear that despite all the possibilities that life brings to emerging adults, some of those possibilities involve pain, struggle, and confrontation with the unknown. And these trends appear to be growing; for example, new evidence cites that 25% of college freshman are clinically depressed.

It appears that where there are college students, there will be crisis. Although not unexpected, I do believe that the real impact and extent of these crisis experiences are underestimated. Added to this is an ever-shifting campus environment whose instability and pressure can cause crisis in and of itself. Furthermore, resources for crisis are not meant as pamphlets on suicide prevention and eating disorders, but actual staff who can foremost listen and attend to crisis as it comes. Often, colleges have chaplains and psychologically trained counselors on hand for these situations; however, from my experience with the 88 PTEV schools, these resources often seem stretched and thin with the growing numbers of issues that these resources are forced to confront.

#### **6) Encourage Students to Explore and Dream**

As Chapter Four discusses, these essayists are in the “age of identity exploration” and it is a crucial period of identity development. For emerging adults, identity is formed in the context of trying out new possibilities and exploring new directions. Over three quarters of the essays scored themes of exploration and identity. For many of the essayists, the a-ha moment is a fundamental change in how they perceive themselves and their identity. If Arnett is correct, this is a crucial period of development where exploring and searching are developmental necessary for the formation of adulthood.

I think college students are often barraged with the question: what is your major? Then folks ask: well, what are you going to do with *that*? But rather than ask college students about their major, ask them about their aspirations and what they would do if they could do anything in the world. My short-hand is usually to ask: what's your dream job? If emerging adulthood is a new developmental lifestage for people age 18-25 in industrialized nations, then exploration must be encouraged!! Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities and exploration. The essays were dominated by themes of identity exploration, possibilities, adventures, and new beginnings. I believe it important to encourage exploration for emerging adults without resenting the freedom or the person experiencing it.

#### **7) Get Students Reading and Talking about Books!**

Another trend in the essays was the mentioning of a book or passage that was part of the a-ha moment. Almost one-quarter of the essayists refer to or quote a text. I don't think the power of a good book can ever be underestimated. Having stated that – and in an age where phones can read books, classes and class material are on-line, and electronic books have now surpassed regular books in sales – I think that getting students to read a good book cannot be overestimated. The essays are certainly clear that reading and reflection are formative activities. Getting college students to read a text and then setting up space for further reflection as an important suggestion seems a simple and obvious idea. Examples of texts that work well with college students from my own experience are Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak*, Will Campbell's *Brother to a Dragonfly*, Adam's *Watership Down*, or my personal favorite Wendell Berry's *Jayber Crow*. Further, it appears easy to adopt a book for the year to read and

discuss as a campus, class, or fellowship group. I saw a small community in Idaho adopt a book for the summer and they distributed free used copies with stickers on the front explaining the program and activities. Or smaller groups, like in a college fellowship group, can benefit from even one night of discussing a particular book. And for college faculty who want to include texts about living lives that matter, Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass made that easy with their *Leading Lives that Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*. This text is an excellent collection of essays and excerpts from William James to Theodore Roosevelt, from Dorothy Sayers to Dorothy Day, all reflecting on the meaning of work that is meaningful and significant. These are the kinds of conversations emerging adults seems to crave and desire during a particular part of their development where thinking about these things impacts their future adult development.

As an ending, I start with the beginning sentence of Gadamer's introduction:

These studies are concerned with the problem of hermeneutics. The phenomenon of understanding and of the correct interpretation of what has been understood is not a problem specific to the methodology of the human sciences alone.... The understanding and the interpretation of texts is not merely a concern of science, but obviously belongs to human experience of the world in general.<sup>852</sup>

Gadamer's investigation begins with resistance to modern science's claim of universal truth via the scientific method. Gadamer is interested in "the experience of truth that transcends the domain of scientific method" and believes that a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of understanding can provide the recognition that "science philosophy's claim of superiority has something chimeric and unreal about it."<sup>853</sup> Richard Bernstein observes that contemporary hermeneutic theory blossomed during a time of increasing

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<sup>852</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xx.

<sup>853</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi-xxxiv.

doubts about logical positivism; therefore, hermeneutic theory directly challenges the claim that the natural sciences alone can provide genuine knowledge.<sup>854</sup> As a corrective, hermeneutic theory offers both a method and methodology of careful textual analysis that rejects positivistic approaches and instead, offers a vision of reality based on a plurality of viable interpretations. I end with my favorite quote from Richard Bernstein who states:

The outstanding theme in Gadamer's philosophic hermeneutics is his fusion of hermeneutics and *praxis*, and the claim that understanding itself is a form of practical reasoning and practical knowledge – a form of *phronesis*. Initially Gadamer's appeal to *phronesis* was introduced to clarify the moment of application or appropriation that is involved in all understanding. But in arguing that hermeneutics itself is the heir to the older tradition of practical philosophy, Gadamer has sought to show how the appropriation of the classical concepts of *praxis* and *phronesis* enables us to gain a critical perspective on our own historical situation, in which there is the constant threat of danger of the domination of society by technology based on science, a false idolatry of the expert, a manipulation of public opinion by powerful techniques, a loss of moral and political orientation, and an undermining of the type of practical and political reason required for citizens to make responsible decisions.<sup>855</sup>

The value of my approach is that this demonstrates the utility of combining both religious and scientific perspectives to make recommendations based on *phronesis*. Critical hermeneutical theory offers a methodology for practical theology that can support multiple theoretical perspectives despite competing claims and assumptions. This framework can combine both religious and scientific perspectives to compare and contrast particular images and interpretations of humanity. Practical theology and critical hermeneutical theory offer a powerful conversation partner in the larger dialogue between religion and science.

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<sup>854</sup>Bernstein goes on to claim: "Every defender of hermeneutics, and more generally the humanistic tradition, has had to confront the persistent claim that it is science and science alone that is the measure of reality, knowledge, and truth"(46). Furthermore, he adds: "There are still many, perhaps the majority of thinkers... who view hermeneutics as some sort of woolly foreign intrusion to be approached with suspicion"(112). Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 40, 107, 110-114.

<sup>855</sup> Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 174-5



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