

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract: *Theology and theological education have a unique capacity to lead society toward ecological sustainability. However, this capacity has been diminished through (1) fragmentation of the disciplines, (2) submergence of the metaphor of the creation as a book of learning, and (3) diminishing of the once important concept of “the creation,” along with the rest of academia. Yet, this capacity can be realized toward producing critical leadership for addressing an intensifying uncreation of the world. The grand unreduced framework that they alone hold among the sciences provides unique potential for their renewed leadership in global stewardship and ecological sustainability.*

As I write this morning I am winging my way from LaGuardia back to my Wisconsin home on the great marsh. My liftoff brings the expanse of New York City into view, displays at sunrise a rigid landscape of crowded stony, steely, towers—structures when viewed from ground-level an hour earlier seemed to scrape the sky. As I gain altitude, their stature shrinks while some of their number seem to crowd in on a diminishing patch—Grand Central Park—a remainder of the earthy fabric that once was. Traffic is beginning to clot in an automotive circulatory system, its metal corpuscles with white and red beamings slowing down and condensing in their streaming. Rising exhaust filters light of the rising sun as Earth rotates toward it. Stacked offices project beams of incandescence and fluorescence through a million windows on the world, powered by unpacking twice-born solar energy extracted from Earth’s sequestered carbon stores. I rise above New York’s metabolism—the metabolism of the city. The scene fades as I am projected at the tip of a lengthening tail of jet exhaust into the thinning atmosphere of our 8000-mile diameter planet. I am heading home... wondering about vocations and invocations that bring us into the orbit of creation, creation’s creatures, and their joyful care. I am pondering on theology and theological education as these take on new proportions amidst what creation is telling—what it is telling of its beauty and integrity, what it is telling of our increasingly adverse relationship with its trophic dynamics and the biogeographical structure of its biosphere.

As ever more serious environmental degradations and disruptions unfold across landscapes and the biosphere, I find myself increasingly agreeing with what environmental ethicist Oelschlaeger confessed in his *Caring for Creation*: that the Church is our only best chance. Over the decades, he had put his faith, along with most secular thinkers, that the church was the problem. "For most of my adult life I believed, as many environmentalists do, that religion was the primary cause of ecological crisis..." But "I lost that faith by bits and pieces... I think of religion, or more specifically the church—both the public church and congregations of people or fellowships of believers gathered in places of worship, engaging in discourse about their responsibilities to care for creation in the context their traditions of faith—as being more important in the effort to conserve life on earth than all the politicians and experts put together. The church may be, in fact, our last, best chance" (Oelschlaeger, 1994).

Controls above; Controls within

Chemist and social scientist, Michael Polanyi (1968) in his essay “Life’s Irreducible Structure,” describes how everywhere in the natural world each system has two sets of controls, one within the system itself, and one provided by the larger system of which it is part. A living cell has its internal controls, for example, even as it is controlled by the tissue of which it is part. The tissue in turn has its own internal controls, even as it is controlled by the organ that incorporates it. And so it goes, upwards to higher and higher levels of control: cell to tissue, to organ, to organism, to ecosystem, to biosphere... In similar fashion, sub-atomic particles have their internal controls, even as they are controlled by the atoms of

which they are part, and upwards to molecules, minerals, rocks, mountain ranges, the Earth's crust, the geophysical planet... And all also are controlled upward toward the ultimate controller.

Polanyi's insight helps us to understand the capacity theology shares with the other sciences to descend into lower reductionist disciplinary realms; it also helps to understand its capacity to ascend to higher and higher levels of organization; and most importantly it helps to understand its unique capacity to embrace the ultimate Sustainer. *Theology and theological education occupy a unique position with regard to sustainability because they can embrace the very highest level of system controls.*

Reduction and Uncreation of our World

Over the decades and century past, continuing fragmentation and separation has continued to reduce the subject matter we investigate and teach in our academic institutions. By dividing and sub-dividing subjects—into disciplines, departments, divisions, colleges, and seminaries—we have created our reduced academic heritage. And quite remarkably, we now find that this heritage now poses a life-threatening problem for ourselves and the biosphere. By both conscious and inadvertent staffing of our colleges, seminaries, and universities with increasingly specialized scholars whose graduate education and training is highly focused and specialized, we continue to assure that our incoming professors, are reduced in scope and constrained by disciplinary compartmentalization. It is this that reduces our capacity for understanding the whole, and realizing its salvation.

In our time, we not only are discovering ourselves as part of the reductionist system we create, but also that it invites us, and even may compel us, to participate fully in the uncreation of creation. We find that this system provides no room for making sense of biospheric sustainability, restoration of creation and the biblical vision of conserving life on earth. Structurally infected with reductionism, this system increasingly pursues particulars at the expense of the whole. It is caught in a downstream flow that stymies theology's capacity to understand and articulate the integrated systems and processes that operate at the higher levels on up to the biosphere, and beyond. Yet, understanding of the higher levels—through the trophic dynamics and biogeographic structure of the biosphere and beyond—is vital to biospheric and planetary sustainability. Neglect of the whole by nearly exclusive focus on the parts puts creation at risk, including its biosphere, its vibrant life, its human populations, their culture, and their livelihoods. In its ultimate rendition, it uncreates creation. It moves forward from the risk of biospheric degradation and destruction to certainty.

Beyond the halls of colleges, seminaries, and universities, the wider society has joined this reduction and fragmentation. The creation, with all of its integrity and providential ecosystem services, is reduced and re-conceptualized as a collage of "resources." Great deposits of carbon sequestered from carbon dioxide of past atmospheres are designated "fossil fuels," a misnomer that obscures their testimony, and fosters their consumption. Even professors are reduced to exploitable fragments in some institutions as they may become managed by human resources departments. Trees and their vital services of carbon sequestration and evapotranspiration are wiped off the landscape. Even the Bald Cypress—one of the very few trees that demonstrably held the land together during the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina—continue to be "harvested" around New Orleans to be ground up into mulch and sliced into boards, as if they were some sort of agricultural crop instead of great barriers and storm-energy absorbers. Carbon-based soils are diminished by industrial farming that oxidizes centuries-worth of carbon-based substance into carbon dioxide gas; their substance is impoverished as it is transformed into mere root-holding media in continual need of artificial feeding. And coal and tar sands are relieved of the soils-and-vegetative fabric that knits together the landscape, as linguistic license is given to its removal by designating it with the disrespectful misnomer: "overburden."

Human transgression on creation has now gone sufficiently far that we have come to agree to be renamed “consumers”—a misnomer that thoughtfully denies the one whose love we image. We human beings, professors, seminarians, students, religious leaders, citizens, are now transformed in word and deed into consumers of creation. We have but inadequately resisted; our reductionism now threatens destruction of the creation, including ourselves. The created world is being uncreated with our tacit approval.

Part of the mission of theology and theological education is to be prophetic. And we are discovering in our day that being prophetic requires that we merely describe the present.

Upstream Against the Flow

How might theology and theological education respond to the reduction and uncreation of our world? Clearly it is to move upstream, against the flow of reductionism; it is to reclaim knowledge above the levels of our disciplines, sub-disciplines and specialties. It is to remove the barriers and make deliberate provisions that will move us upward through the systems of which our specialties are part—all the way to the very source of all things: the maker, integrator, and reconciler. We need to restore honor back to ourselves and the rest of humanity in ways that elevate us above the category of consumer of creation. We need to first to recognize, and then to realize, the honor of imaging God’s love for the world.

Two economies

A first important aspect of this upward movement to higher levels of integration is the need to recognize and understand the economy of the biosphere—the economy within which the human economy must operate. Even though our reductionism and uncreation of our world has brought us to believe that “the economy” is the human economic system we build and serve in our selling and consuming, we must come to recognize and realize that our human economy is but part of the greater economy. Our reduction and uncreation of our world has brought us to believe that we measure “the economy” by such things as the Gross National Product (GNP) much like we measure the temperature of an aquarium with a thermometer. We must now come to know and believe that we measure “the economy” in terms of the abundance, diversity, and the flourishing of all life on earth. English writer and poet William Blake describes the greater and lesser economies in his epic masterpiece, *Jerusalem*. His depiction of these as a big wheel and little wheel in relationship to each other can be depicted graphically...

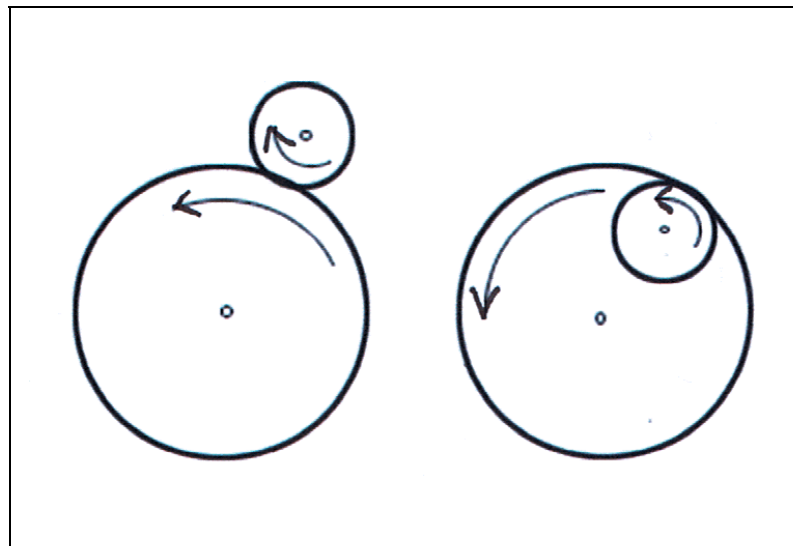


Figure 1. Depiction of William Blake’s “Two Wheels.” The smaller wheel depicts the lesser human economy; the larger wheel depicts the greater creation’s economy. On the left is the “wheel without the wheel” where the two wheels move in grinding discord. On the right is the “wheel within the wheel” where the two wheels move in harmony.

...where the larger wheel represents the economy of the creation; the smaller one represents the human monetary economy. In the depiction on the left, the human economy operates outside of creation's economy (what he calls "the wheel without the wheel"). On the right, the human economy is depicted as operating within creation's economy (what he calls "the wheel within the wheel"). When operating outside of the larger wheel, the smaller one turns opposite, with grinding discord and contrariness. But operating within the wheel of Creation's economy, the human economy moves in the same direction, with accord and harmony. He writes:

I turn my eyes to the schools and universities of Europe.
And there behold the Loom of Locke, whose Woof rages dire,
Wash'd by the Water-wheels of Newton: black the cloth
In heavy wreaths folds over every nation: cruel works
Of many Wheels I view, wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic
Moving by compulsion each other, not as those in Eden, which,
Wheel within wheel, in freedom revolve in harmony and peace.

Recently at a conference on business, politics, and environment at Regent College in Vancouver I joined with a recent President and CEO of Shell Canada and a former member of the Canadian Parliament where each of us spoke on exploitation of the tar sands of Alberta as a source of petroleum for our "energivorous" society. During the course of this conference I learned that progress was being on the "oilfields" to produce this petroleum with no net release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere—a "carbon-neutral" production. However, the carbon exhausted from the subsequent combustion of the produced oil, however, was not included. "Carbon-neutrality" when it ultimately was achieved would apply only to the oil extraction process. When I learned this, I thought of Blake's wheels. As I puzzled over how I might respond, I decided to tell the story about the economic viewpoint of my son when he was a small child:

Gary at age five struck on an idea to create wealth. From a folding table brought by coaster wagon to the intersection of our driveway and our rural road, he sold oranges to passers-by for 10 cents each. Ruth and I supported this entrepreneurial enterprise by faithfully re-stocking the supply of oranges in our refrigerator from purchases from a local supermarket. In time he had amassed 5 dollars, then 10, and on to 15. His business enterprise was extremely successful. Until... Until it became necessary for us to explain to him the larger economy of which his smaller economy was part. I explained why oranges kept appearing in the refrigerator, how his increasing wealth came from diminishing our family wealth (albeit slightly). And also how sunlight and water were joined with soil nutrients to produce these oranges in Florida and California, and how costly it was to transport them from there to here. Regretfully, I had to explain that these same oranges cost the larger family economy about 20 cents each! It was a difficult lesson, and not one we wanted to convey. But he understood. Remarkably, he never asked the question we often hear these days from much older folk: "Why should I pay any attention to the larger economy within which I am operating, as long as it is profitable for me and the company I help to keep?"

The two economies are often difficult to discuss with adults; it is easier to do so with young children. We may argue, and no doubt some will, about the inadequacy of my story; even might hear why the economy of creation need not be considered. But this story of a child's economy might in time bring us to reflect on the relationship of our human economy to the greater economy of the biosphere. While it was easy to teach this to a five-year old child, it often is not so for adults. Something else may enter in.

For one thing, some simply do not wish to know whether their smaller economy is working in directions that counter creation's economy. And some might argue that this makes things too complicated. Yet stewardship, if it is to be truly responsible within its context of creation's economy, must not only be informed by knowledge and understanding of how creation's economy works, it also must welcome this knowledge and understanding. Some forward-looking business enterprises, of course, have developed the capacity to do this, and are responding appropriately. All seminaries, colleges, and universities have this capacity too and they can realize this capacity fully as they perform their role as leaders and in development of leaders for the church, society, and the wider creation.

Scientia, ethics, and praxis

A second important aspect of moving upward in theology and theological education is the need to integrate across understanding of the workings of the biosphere, the ethical underpinnings of a flourishing human society, and the applications of these toward right living and practice. One way of framing this need is simultaneously to address three basic questions: (1) How does the world work? (2) What ought to be? and (3) Then what must we do? This simple formulation can later be "unpacked" in as much detail as we would like. Here it is in its simple form—a Scientia-Ethics-Praxis Triad:

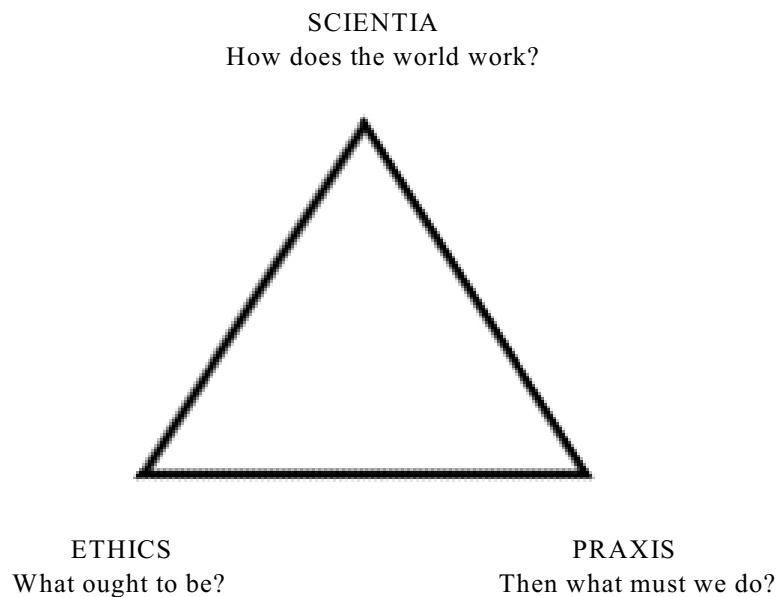


Figure 2. The Science-Ethics-Praxis Triad.

In order to live and act rightly in the world, knowledge of how the systems that sustain us and with which we interact is essential. Without such knowledge we might drown ourselves in a nearby stream, kill ourselves by crossing the street in the path of an oncoming car, or get sick from consuming foods with poisonous ingredients, for example. As human beings develop more things that impinge upon life, this knowledge must increase; as the reach of human actions take on larger regional and global dimensions, this must be extended accordingly. This knowledge is not limited to that gained from formal education, but includes knowledge conveyed by teaching and practice of family and friends and knowledge gained from experience and experiment. In order to live and act rightly in the world, we need to know how the world works. This is represented by the top corner of the triad.

In order to live and act rightly in the world, knowledge of what ought to be is also essential. In formal college education a century ago, this was addressed by the college president who gave a course for graduating seniors in moral philosophy—a course whose purpose was to convict students that they should

apply the knowledge gained in college for the pursuit of good instead of pursuing self at the expense of society. At my university, this aspect of college education is expressed in a phrase derived from Abraham Lincoln, “Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith dare to do our duty.” *It is carved in stone.* This statement of what ought to be is represented by the left corner of this triad.

Moving either from knowledge of how the world works, or from knowing what ought to be, directly to praxis is problematic. Going from knowledge of nuclear fission directly to producing and dropping an atomic bomb is an example. Going from belief that death is bad to removing dead wood from forests is another. Scientia needs to be informed by ethics and vice versa for responsible praxis. Moreover, praxis by itself, without being grounded in science and ethics, results in mere activism—activism that likely will do no good or produce harm. All three corners are essential, not by themselves, but through their interaction in a life-sustaining framework.

Theology and theological education have the capacity to engage all three simultaneously and interactively. Beyond what they share with the rest of the academy, they also have the unique capacity to engage this framework under the eye of the maker, sustainer, and reconciler of all things. This framework, coupled with recognition and respect for the two economies help meet the definition of theology given by the University of Athens: theology is “the rational fruit of the study and examination of the whole work of Divine Oeconomy, from the creation of the world until the last times... realized by the Church within history and time.”

Re-instating “The Creation”

A third important aspect of moving upstream against reductionism is the significance and need for re-introducing the phrase “the creation” into our vocabulary across all disciplines and throughout society. This phrase now has largely been replaced with “the environment”—a phrase that is by no means equivalent. Coining of the term *enviroming*, most likely by Chaucer, was the seed for our becoming able to talk and write about “the environment”—and this allowed us linguistically to separate ourselves from the rest of the creation. This also allowed creation of the word “environmentalist” with the possibility that people then could then be considered separate from the rest of creation. That separation did and does occur, contributing to one of the great divides that make it difficult to address “environmental” matters when they are perceived to be at odd with the needs and wants of human beings.

Re-instating the phrase “*The Creation*” is necessary for rebuilding the bridge that once connected people with the rest of creation—the bridge that had inspired pastors to be among the best students of the Creation, the bridge that assures us that human beings are creatures too, even as we have a special role in caring for creation. It is particularly significant that the necessity of this re-instatement is recognized not only in theology but also in science. The title of Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson’s, *The Creation*, attests to this. In selecting this title for his letter to an imaginary Southern Baptist pastor, he is not returning to his religious roots, but seeing the necessity to bridge the divide. Despite his being a largely secular scientist, he is expressing the vital need “to save the Creation” in this time of crisis.

Coherence and the “Two Books”

A fourth important aspect of going against the flow of reductionism and its accompanying secularization and disciplinary fragmentation is re-instatement of the powerful metaphor that can continue to foster development of coherence within and between understanding the nature of the world and the nature of the Word.

Peter Kosso in his *Reading the Book of Nature: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* makes the important contribution of considering the development of scientific knowledge much like one develops an understanding of an unfamiliar written text. He observes the scientific enterprise as it seeks to understand

how the world works, and concludes that it operates with a hermeneutic that takes more familiar parts of a text, utilizing these to develop the meaning of less familiar texts. The aim of scientific endeavor he concludes is continual working toward coherence across all scientific understanding of the nature of the world. Kosso, then, consciously adopts the metaphor of nature as a book whose content we are working to understand, whose text we are working to read coherently across the whole of the text. While correspondence between nature and our representations of nature remains important, the more significant test of the models, equations, and text with which we represent nature is the test of coherence. Interestingly, perhaps to the surprise of many in theology who acknowledge a Creator, he maintains that the book of nature need not have an author, but this does not change his argument that nature is best regarded as a book.

Of course his recognition of nature as a book is not a new idea. This is a long-standing metaphor that goes back to Romans 1:20 and well before that, and is represented widely in the writings of theologians and scholars through the ages, for example in the Confession of Faith of 1561. What is a fresh contribution of Kosso is that this metaphor is one that taken fully brings into play a hermeneutic that always interprets the more familiar with the less familiar text in the book of nature, every driven by seeking coherence. Interestingly, the principle of coherence is a long-standing principle in the interpretation of the Bible in theological scholarship. The Westminster Confession gives one such expression of this hermeneutic principle when it states, “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”

Addressing Creation Whole: the Domain of Theology

All of this leads us to ask, Do theology and theological education in our day fill and fulfill its unique capacity to address Creation whole? Do they address our imaging of God’s love for the world in our care and keeping of the creation? Are our theology and theological education grounded in an ecological understanding of the biosphere and ecological sustainability?

If theology and theological education in our day would fill and fulfill their capacity to address Creation whole, would celebrate our privilege and responsibility for the care and keeping of Creation, and be grounded in the biosphere while rising to embrace the Sustainer of all things, what appearance might they have? In part, the answer comes from looking at ourselves in the places we inhabit in the biosphere. What are these places? How do they relate to the whole? These places anchor our stewardship even as we envision the whole world and our global stewardship responsibility within it.

Our places may be the city, villages, forests, prairies, long-standing agricultural landscapes, and any number of biomes and ecosystems. Our own local and regional ecosystem level help define, refine, and shape our global stewardship; our stewardship is “tuned in” to where we are in the biosphere. Yet it also operates within an understanding of the biosphere and its stewards world-wide: stewards of cities and villages, of tropical rainforests and montane ecosystems, lakes and streams, prairies and steppes, estuaries and oceans. While ‘tending the garden’ on a local scale, the reach of our world-wide impact also requires our ‘tending the creation’ on a global scale. Our stewardship necessarily operates locally, regionally, and globally to establish the conditions for safeguarding creation, healing and restoring integrity of degraded ecosystems, and caring for the global ecosystem—the biosphere. And it necessarily operates within the opportunities and constraints of the economy of creation—the big wheel of William Blake.

Dynamic Stewardship and Con-Service

In a dynamic earth and biosphere, our stewardship of Creation from local to global scales is necessarily also dynamic. It is appropriately responsive to the positive, benign, and negative effects of our actions on our gardens, our habitats, and our world. Our responsiveness as dynamic stewards brings us to change

and adjust the continuing stream of our actions in order rightly to return the service of the garden and creation with service of our own. “Stewardship of the creation dynamically shapes and reshapes human behaviour in the direction of maintaining sustainability for ecosystems and the biosphere over the generations in biophysical and covenantal context” (DeWitt, 2006).

And this, most appropriately for our topic, brings us to a related and highly significant contribution from Genesis 2:15. From this ancient text we learn that Adam is expected to *serve* the garden and to *keep* it. In my little book, *Earth-Wise* (DeWitt, 2007) I explain that while the Hebrew word for *serve* (*abad*) is often translated as “till,” “dress,” and “work” it also may be translated “serve” as it is in *Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible*. The Hebrew word *abad* (which occurs 290 times in the Hebrew Bible) is most often translated as “serve,” as in Joshua 24:15: “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” We already know that the garden, and the wider Creation serves us with “good food, beauty, herbs, fiber, medicine, pleasant microclimates, continual soil-making, nutrient processing, and seed production.” The garden and the larger biosphere provide what ecologists call ‘ecosystem services’ such as water purification by evaporation and percolation, moderation of flood peaks and drought flows by river-system wetlands, development of soils from the weathering of rocks, and moderation of local climates by nearby bodies of water. Yet Genesis addresses *our* service to the garden. The garden’s service *to us* is implicit; service *from us* to the garden is explicit. Like Adam, we are expected to return the service of the garden with service of our own. This is a reciprocal service, a “service with”—in other words, a *con-service*, a *con-servancy*, a *con-servation*. This reciprocal service defines an engaging relationship between garden and gardener, between the biosphere and its safeguarding stewards”. This “Con-servancy or Conservation Principle “ can be given as, *We must return creation’s service to us with service of our own.*

The word *conservancy* and its companion word *conservation* are often used to identify organizations and agencies that conserve forests, fisheries and wildlife. In theology and theological education that is rooted in the Abrahamic traditions, this also is true, and here these terms might also be hyphenated to draw attention to the root meaning of reciprocal service—“serving with.” Stewardship and conservation then are active and interactive. They involve more than simply acting in and upon the world. Instead, both are sensitive and responsive to the world; both give back in response to what has been given. Stewardship responding appropriately to the consequences of human action or inaction in the world.

A scholarly lawyer who also helped administer the city of Geneva, Switzerland studied this same passage, about which he gave this interpretation: “The custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which God has committed to our hands, on the condition that, being content with the frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain. Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence, but let him endeavor to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. Let him so feed on its fruits, that he neither dissipates it by luxury, nor permits it to be marred or ruined by neglect. Moreover, that this economy, and this diligence, with respect to those good things which God has given us to enjoy, may flourish among us; let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abuse those things which God requires to be preserved” (Calvin, 1554). Given that this interpretation was made in the year 1554; stewardship, and conservation, clearly are not new concepts. One can even say that “The idea of stewardship and conservation is as old as Adam.”

Field Trips and the Example of Jesus

The president of Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Austen Kennedy de Blois (1933) advised professors and students of theology, and others, to “consider the Master’s example.” He writes, “The gospel was not born in a musty library, nor in a laboratory, nor in a surgery, nor in a schoolhouse, nor

even in an oratory, but in the open air and under the blue vaulted sky. Christ prayed and preached and taught and worked miracles chiefly in the open air... Christ gave to the world and open-air gospel.”

And of particular relevance for a theological education for ecological sustainability, he advises that “The gospel is real and deals in realities. Its message is vivified by the sunshine of heaven, invigorated by the pure breezes that blow from the everlasting hill slopes and mountain summits, beautified by the exquisite blossoms that grow in the garden of God... He did not sit within stone walls, summoning people to indoor conferences... The spirit of the open air is consonant with the freshness and freedom of His redemptive message.

This should be inspiring to us and should lead us to know that it is difficult—no, it is impossible—to love, uphold, and care for a world that we really do not know. As I relate in *Earth-Wise*, we can envision a progression toward stewardship: from awareness (seeing, identifying, naming, locating) to appreciation (tolerating, respecting, valuing, esteeming, cherishing) to stewardship (using, restoring, serving, keeping, entrusting).

My own approach, developed now over several decades, is to have every student engage with me locally, in the field, with a specific set of field trips in the city, and another specific set in the ecosystems that sustain life on earth. I call these “integrative sessions,” because they are much more than simple excursions to see this and that in urban and natural landscapes. At their heart, these sessions seek to root my students and colleagues in wonder gained from examination and understanding the metabolism of life in the human community, humanity’s habitat, and the ecosystems that locally help sustain the biosphere. And each of these sessions go beyond observation to beholding, and beyond beholding to reflection. The reflection, finally, is entered into a reflective journal that is maintained by my professor colleagues and our students, for subsequent out-loud reading. Each of these integrative sessions takes three hours, including travel time and serve no more than 15 people each. I find that these integrative sessions fit into two categories: metabolism of the city, and local ecosystems.

Metabolism of the City and Local Ecosystems

During integrative sessions on the “Metabolism of the City” we observe, behold, and reflect upon our visits to: (1) a sanitary landfill, (2) sewage treatment plant, (3) electrical generation plant, (4) natural affordable house, (5) community supported agriculture farm, and (6) a town or city hall of the nearest community that is best known for responsible stewardship. During integrative sessions on “Local Ecosystems” we observe, behold, and reflect upon our visits to: (7) a forest or woodland, (8) prairie or meadow, (9) wetland, (10) pond or stream, and we take (11) a serious “sidewalk safari” that includes the life in sidewalk cracks and adjacent lawns.

It is inexpressible how deeply these integrative sessions, both individually and as a full set, affect faculty and students to bring them through the sequence from awareness to appreciation to stewardship... and very much more. For theology and theological education in particular, I can best recommend this as deeply vital—so vital that Austen Kennedy de Blois considers this to be following “the Master’s example.” These integrative sessions, and the additional ones you might develop to fill out a semester, provides an inspiring and substantial rooting that has one fully appreciate why “Christ gave to the world and open-air gospel.”

As I write this evening I have returned to my Wisconsin home on the great marsh. I have come back down from the thin atmosphere of our 8000-mile diameter planet, grateful to be back in my habitat. I continue to ponder theology and theological education—wondering about vocations and invocations. In checking my mail, I find a copy of the book prepared for the once-in-ten years Lambeth conference of the

Anglican Communion. My chapter in this book, “To Strive to Safeguard the Integrity of Creation and Sustain and Renew the Life of the Earth,” inspires me. In this chapter I conclude:

“With the now clear and abundant scientific evidence of adverse restructuring and transformation of Creation’s Oikoumene by adverse human actions in the world, there is the clear and vital need for gaining substantial knowledge and understanding of the biosphere and for developing moral and spiritual courage and resolve to examine the message of the Christian church in the light of our global biospheric and covenantal context. The Church needs to do what it can do best: “to proclaim the full truth about the environmental crisis in the face of powerful persons, pressures and institutions which profit from concealing the truth;” and to strive for reform and replacement of practices and institutions that degrade God’s creation (WEF, 1996). The joyful task and honourable privilege of the Church and of every member is to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth—meeting creation’s eager expectation for the coming of the children of God.”

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