Parker Palmer’s seminal work, *The Courage to Teach,* introduced the provocative notions of vulnerability and personal narrative into discussions around pedagogy. In many respects Palmer directed attention away from technique toward teacher self-awareness and courageous self-giving; qualities that in themselves call out a deeper, life-giving learning in others.

Beginning with Jesus, the Christian tradition has always held teaching to be a charism. As such, it is a vehicle of Spirit for both teacher and student. Using the spiritual ‘Infusion’ and ‘Effusion’ principles of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), who succinctly wrote, “First be filled then control the outpouring,” (Sermon 18, *Song of Songs*), I intend to suggest that pedagogical formation begins with the teacher, that is, in and through their own spiritual attentiveness. This also raises the question as to whether teaching can be offered and received as a spiritual practice.

**ANZATFE Biennial Conference, Sydney December 5-7th 2017**

**Pedagogical Practices for Formation**

*‘First be filled then control the outpouring…’*

At the conclusion of the Uniting Church’s National Conference on worship in July,[[1]](#footnote-1) an opportunity was given to its participants to ask anything of a summarising nature of its three keynote speakers.

Rev Professor Ruth Duck (Illinois, USA), Rev Dr Stephen Burns (Melbourne) and Rev Mark Pierson (Auckland) are all teachers and practitioners of Christian worship, well published and highly respected in both local and broader contexts. The final question from the floor was prefaced by an observation that each had exhibited a discernible humility and love of God. “What, therefore, were their spiritual practices, and how did they sense that their unfolding relationship with God continued to shape their ministry?”

Significantly, each speaker welcomed the somewhat unusual question and in turn gave energetic responses to it. A common thread emerged; that being a continual seeking of renewing grace within their calling. Indeed, none felt that human agency or proficiency would suffice. Rather, they sought to be conduits of Spirit, thus an embodiment of God’s redemptive love.

One could reasonably argue that spiritual disciplines, however integral, do not necessarily equate to effective or formative pedagogical practices. After all, they occur in very different spheres of influence, if not life. However, with a contemporary stress on competencies, outcomes and benchmarking, one could be forgiven for thinking that even in theological institutions, the saving activity God rarely seems to be factored into educational process. Practical theology, at least in my working experience, regularly displays an ironic lack of practical *theology*, in that the primary points of educational reference are reflective, virtuous (excellent) practices and their measurable outcomes.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Andrew Root argues in *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross,* that this neo-Aristotelian trend within practical theology, well-meaning as it may be, remains incongruous to the *way* of gracedencounter with the God of Jesus Christ who comes in surprising fullness [the foolishness of the cross] *despite* human agency, not because of a due diligence within it.[[3]](#footnote-3) He writes,

The praxis of God, Christopraxis, stands in opposition to the actuality-to possibility framework by asserting that all divine action encounters humanity not in the actuality of human beings or structures but in the possibility of God’s ministry as being as becoming. Then, because God’s being is becoming, we encounter God never as a frozen actuality but as possibility, as the one who transforms our nothingness into life, who takes what is dead and makes it alive…[[4]](#footnote-4)

Root’s analysis is suggestive, experientially *and* professionally, that the spiritual attentiveness of the Christian teacher *is* related to the educational formation of students. This anthropological and theological principle – the teacher as a person in spirited relation – being, in major part, the premise of Parker Palmer’s seminal work, *The Courage to Teach.* “Good teaching,” he suggests, “cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Such relationally orientated teaching thus being the ability (and joy) to lead others out into their own truth and congruent paths of vocation. So for Palmer, the teacher’s creative and potentially transformative power is a, “capacity to awaken a truth within us, a truth we can reclaim years later by recalling their impact on our lives.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

In the context of this conference, I would propose that the identity and integrity of the Christian teacher is best understood as a spirited ministry of the crucified and risen Christ. In other words, to seek the formation of ministry students for the sake of good and fruitful practice (John 15) first of all means to pay close attention to one’s own life and calling in relation to the redemptive actions of God. From that place of graced vulnerability – even a disturbing sense of emptiness at times – a substantive and expressive shape of being has both the space and an encouragement to arise for the sake of others. Mary’s consensual, “Let it be done to me according to your word,” (Luke 2:38) is a paradigmatic example of this radically open and expectant disposition for those who teach within the mystery of faith.[[7]](#footnote-7) Attraction to the subject matter – ultimately the Triune God - not performance *per se*, is key to such a potentially transformative pedagogy.

The Rhineland pastor and theologian of the thirteenth and fourteenth century, Meister Eckhart confesses the vocational principle of a grace-bearing creativity when he prays,

*My life is like a page on which*

*so much is already written:*

*hurts and joys and the tumble*

*of fears and uncertainties.*

*What You want of me, God, is*

*that I clean the slate, emptying*

*it of all this to make room for*

*the freedom of nothingness*

*where alone You, my God,*

*have room to grow*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

For my purposes then, the above pedagogical and theological principles of Palmer and Root offer a way into a cursory exploration of a more ancient, yet strikingly *mellifluous* voice, namely that of Saint Bernard of Clairvuax (1093-1153).[[9]](#footnote-9) As an Abbot and overseer of the burgeoning monastic Cistercian Order steeped in the Rule of Saint Benedict, Bernard preached and taught a way of faith formation within “a school for the service of God,”[[10]](#footnote-10) the monastery being an intentionally literate or ‘lettered’ learning environment.[[11]](#footnote-11) That being said, its primary purpose was not acquiring knowledge for knowledge sake, but to intentionally create or *workshop* a formative path fuelled by a desired (*quaerere Deum*) union with God.[[12]](#footnote-12) Therefore, the experiential pedagogy intrinsic to Bernard’s charism was not simply a Greek notion of *theoria*, nor was it an Aristotelian form of *phronesis*.[[13]](#footnote-13)Rather, its epistemological content, shape and telos arose out the pursued embrace *(amplexus)* of the Divine*,* not by an obligatory sense of religious contract or abstracted intellectual endeavour.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Over the course of some eighteen years, Bernard wrote 86 highly allegorical yet biblically soaked ‘teaching’ sermons, around the first 3 chapters of the *Song of Songs*. His audience was primarily the Clairvaux monastic community but due to polished editing and eager distribution, his classroom became Europe wide. And as suggested, Bernard sought to impress upon his listeners that the Christian life, and by extension all Christian ministries offered in the name of Christ, were born (and sustained) of relational union wrought by the Spirit, in loving cooperation with the sending Father and the incarnated, eternal Word. They were not human constructs.

Indeed, as a mentor of the Trinitarian theologian, Richard of St. Victor, Bernard brought to their theological discourse an experiential emphasis on the Spirit as the dynamic and unifying relational bond of love (*caritas*) existing within the household (*oikonomia*) of divine persons.[[15]](#footnote-15) Bernard writes, “If, as is properly understood, the Father is he who kisses, the Son he who is kissed, then it cannot be wrong to see in the kiss the Holy Spirit, for he is the imperturbable peace of the Father and the Son, their unshakeable bond, their undivided love, their indivisible unity.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Through such a ‘fertile kiss’ between the Spirit and the believer alienation from God (the old dispensation) is transformed to a vital participation *within* God who by nature is love in perpetual action.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In Sermon 18, entitled ‘The Two Operations of the Holy Spirit,’ [[18]](#footnote-18) Bernard poetically expresses the spiritual principles of ‘infusion’ and ‘effusion’ of the Spirit by drawing on the metaphor of a reservoir that gives life-giving water without loss to itself. Relevant to the calling of Christian teaching he purposely writes,

The man (sic) who is wise, therefore, will see his life as more like a reservoir than a canal. The canal simultaneously pours out what it receives; the reservoir retains the water till it is filled, then discharges the overflow without loss to itself…Today there are many in the Church who act like canals, the reservoirs are far too rare. So urgent is the charity of those through the streams of heavenly doctrine flow to us, that they want to pour it forth before they have been filled; they are more ready to speak than to listen, impatient to teach what they have not grasped, and full of presumption to govern others while they not know how to govern themselves.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

For Bernard, the infusion of the Spirit is a renovating grace that radically impacts the most resistant parts of the human experience in relation to God. With our focus on pedagogy in mind, this might even mean professionalized aspects of the [Western] Christian teacher. E.g., the highly qualified, competent and knowledgeable. Akin to Eckhart, Bernard calls for ‘an empty slate’ before the mystery of God. Obviously this does not mean a disavowal of structured learning. It is rather another way of knowing, illuminated and sustained by divine love;[[20]](#footnote-20) an experiential conviction succinctly summarised by Bernard Lonergan, faith being “knowledge born of religious love.” [[21]](#footnote-21) Therefore, the teaching of theological knowledge – an effusion of Spirit - ideally stems from interior places of fullness (*plenitudine*), not from a *caritate vacuus* (a vacuum of love). Whereas the former creates a [salvific] space for mutual learning to occur, vacuousness only gives rise to an inner density of restlessness (Matthew 12:44-5); the very antithesis of what makes for open and conducive learning environments.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Significantly, such self-forgetfulness within divine love is not an abnegation of responsible, rigorous learning or creative teaching practices. Far from it! For Bernard, it is simply a receptive state of liberation into generative *being*. To first *‘be filled (flooded – effundere) in order to control the outpouring’* means to be regularly immersed in the divine flow of self and other-directed mercy. Indeed, the infusion (*infundi*) of God’s love is a saving from dryness of soul, a state of spiritual diminishment that is arguably endemic within Christian leaders and faith communities at present.[[23]](#footnote-23) Driven by institutional survival strategies worked up and delivered in the midst of Christendom’s social demise, ministry practitioners of all varieties are showing the strain, many to breaking point. Without great cost to their well-being (and those in their care), few can raise the bar of ‘missional best practice’ any higher.

To briefly illustrate this point, at a recent professional supervisor’s forum in Adelaide, and in breathtaking moments of honesty, many senior Uniting Church ministers admitted to deep and troubling feelings of fraudulence, despair, incongruity and shame. The expression of shame is particularly germane to this discussion, as it was related to a felt lack of personal spiritual practice and/or experience in the midst of leading others in worship and through other aspects of Christian discipleship, such as teaching the faith.

In light of this growing spiritual malaise, it occurs to me that institutional strategies for renewal do not even begin to touch existential, internal maladies. Indeed, the institution would rather not know that these painful realities exist. Predictably, it defaults to the language of professional agency and sloganized aspirations within the cure-all, yet theologically denuded term of “mission.” [[24]](#footnote-24)

Possibly, then, the ‘first be filled’ premise of Bernard does have an immediate and pastoral applicability. And when carefully explicated, at least in my recent teaching experience, its promise of an embracing grace engenders discussion notable for the yearning of other ways of creative ways and means.[[25]](#footnote-25) Highlighting the hope-filled affective (anxiety-diffusing) essence of divine love, Bernard says,

It fills the soul’s capacity, grows heated and brims over, gushing into streamlets. This is the love that cries out: “Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is scandalised and I am not inflamed?” Let such a person preach, let them bear fruit, let them show new signs and do fresh wonders, *for vanity can find no toehold in the one whom charity totally possesses* (emphasis mine)*.* A total love is the law in all its fullness, it can effectively fill the heart’s capacity. Finally God himself is love, and nothing created can satisfy the one who is made to the image of God, except the God who is love, who alone is above all created natures. The one who has not yet attained to this love is promoted to office at the gravest risk to themselves, no matter how distinguished he be with other virtues…[[26]](#footnote-26)

This is a hopeful biblical and *theological* reminder, I would contend, about charism, faith and ministry in Christ’s name. It is in fact, a prioritising of *being-in-relation* over and beyond a pedagogical or ecclesial functionality. As Bernard contends, the infusive grace of God can never just be a *notion* to describe or a state of being to attain by virtue of repeated, ‘best’ practices. Rather it is a Gift of replenishment to the open and desirous heart. Many centuries earlier, Origen – a literary teacher and mentor of Bernard – put it this way:

For there is a great difference between someone who speaks from grace and one who speaks from human wisdom. For it has often come about that some eloquent and learned men (sic), outstanding not only in speech but also in insight, even though they spoke a great deal in the church and drew great praise to themselves, still did not by their words move any of their hearers to contrition of heart or progress in faith…but only sent them away with something pleasant in their ears. And on the other hand, it often happens that men of no great eloquence, with little care for fancy speech, with simple uncomplicated words convert many of the faithful to faith, bend the proud to humility and plant in sinners the impulse to conversion. And that is certainly a sign…that they are talking from grace.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The questions raised in this short presentation have sought to shift the focus from pedagogical delivery *per se* and redirect our attention [back] toward the primary Christian (*en Christou*) identity and calling of the teacher in graced relation to their students. That is not to say that one’s own spiritual formation will guarantee a desired outcome in the classroom or on line! I am not proposing a causal framework at all. What I am advocating is that the charism of teaching within the Christian Church needs to repeatedly pay prayerful attention to the converting way, truth and life of its namesake in order to teach from fecund places of discovery. In that participatory *modus operandi*, the present dominance of human agency has a needed counter-point, that is, a locale of self-giving transcendence in the crucified and resurrected Christ, who ultimately is the catalyst for genuine knowledge about God and the hope of transformation for all God’s people.[[28]](#footnote-28)

1. *Transforming Worship,* July 27-30, 2017, Burnside, South Australia. The conference was planned and run by the National Assembly Worship Working Group based in Adelaide, SA. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. When grounded theologically, that is, when excellence in practice seeks to be reflective of the redemptive being/action of God, such a term does have the ability to inspire. See, L. Gregory Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006): “Ministry whose excellence can be measured by the breadth and length and height and depth of God’s love combines a vulnerability to human tragedy and deep persistent hope that enables resistance to evil and celebration of grace and new life.” 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, John Swinton’s working definition of practical theology as that which is, “…dedicated to enabling the faithful performance of the gospel and to exploring and taking seriously the complex dynamics of the human encounter with God.” John Swinton and Harriot Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 11. One might also recall the wonderful witticism of C.S. Lewis in regard to his own surprising encounter with divine Joy: *“All this was given me without asking, even without consent.”*  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life,* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 21. ‘Truth’ in this framing is obviously not of a propositional nature. It has an affective quality and power. To be led out fully into life and vocation is to welcome and ‘will the change’ (Rilke). Good teachers create learning spaces and offer inspiration - by virtue of their own transformation being - for such changes to incrementally unfold. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press): “All contemplation must take its directions from Mary if it is to keep the twofold danger at bay: on the one hand that of seeing the word as something merely external, rather than the deepest mystery within it, that in which we live, move and have our being; and on the other hand the danger of holding the word to be something so interior that we confuse it with our own nature, with a natural wisdom given to us once and for all, to be used at will. The first danger is that of Protestantism…” 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jon M. Sweeny & Mark S. Burrows, trans., *Meister Eckhart’s Book of Heart: Meditations for the Restless Soul,* (Charlottesville: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2017), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A disclaimer is needed to be made here: The very culture of monasticism precludes easy translation or contemporary application and yet the spiritual and indeed biblical principles at play in the vision of the Christian life – inclusive of teaching and leadership – are striking for their potential relevance. Bernard of Clairvaux needs to be read critically and yet he and others like him, need to be read with an openness or respect of mind.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. St. Benedict, *The Rule,* trans., Cardinal Gasquet, (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture,* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982): “St. Benedict…insists only that the following constants be maintained: on the one hand, letters are necessary and ordinarily the monks life would include them; on the other hand, they form no part of his vocation, nor of his nor his monastery’s ideal. They are but a necessary and accepted means, always subordinated to the search for God.” [21] [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. St. Benedict, *The Rule:* “In living our life…and by the growth of faith, when the heart has been enlarged, the path of God’s commandments is run with unspeakable loving sweetness; so that never leaving His school, but persevering in the monastery until death in His teaching, we share by our patience in the sufferings of Christ, and so merit to be partakers of His Kingdom.” [3] [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Practical wisdom being the emphasis of many contemporary practical theology writings. See for example, Christian Scharen, ‘Learning Ministry over Time: Embodying Practical Wisdom’ in Dorothy C. Bass & Craig Dykstra, eds. in, *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 265-289. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of St Bernard,*  trans. A.H.C. Downs, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 144-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See, Constant J. Mews, ‘Bernard of Clairvaux and Richard of Saint Victor on the Pursuit of Ecstasy and the Development of a Mystical Theology’ in, *A Not-So-Unexciting Life: Essays on Benedictine History and Spirituality in Honour or Michael Casey, OCSO,* ed. Carmel Posa (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs 1,* trans. Kilian Walsh, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid, 133-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. That is, a knowledge born of divine love with love as its sustaining *telos*. It is not a knowledge for knowledge’s own sake. It is derivative, dependent and integrative of the speculative and the spiritual (*integre cognoscere*). It is not a dressed up form of Gnosticism but concrete in its expression of infused (Romans 5:5) charity. First found in Augustine in West and built upon by St. Gregory the Great, this epistemological principle is critical to a working understanding of Christian spiritual / educational formation. Paraphrasing Gregory, Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God,* writes, “This adhesion of the spirit is not the result of striving; it is a taste, a relish, a wisdom and not a science.”[32] [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 237-244.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. It seems paradoxical to suggest that a vacuum of love actually creates a restless clutter within a teaching space, this being the opposite of a formational learning environment. However, the security of baptismal identity (“beloved”) in Christ frees the teacher to ask searching questions rather than giving definitive answers and trusting in other’s faith experience, rather than imposing a definitive template of their own. In other words, an unformed teacher in divine charity, as Bernard suggests, is totally counterproductive. ‘Help me out of your abundance if you have it;’ he writes, if not, then spare yourself the trouble.’ (18: II,28) In the chapter, ‘The Exciting Life of Being a Questioner,’ Manuela Scheiba, OSB, following a thorough survey of the questions posed by Jesus in the gospels, states, “To remain a questioner seems to be a fundamental Christian attitude. It includes critically scrutinizing the ecclesiastical, socio-political, and economic positions and events of our time and simultaneously indicating our readiness to enter into a true dialogue. As persons who dare to ask questions, we actively involve others in a dialogue. We show our interest in the other, and we show how much we care for the other. We listen and let others truly express themselves.” From, *A Not-So-Unexciting Life: Essays on Benedictine History and Spirituality in Honour or Michael Casey, OCSO,* ed. Carmel Posa (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), 51.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Song of Songs*, Sermon 18, III.44: “See how precious the graces that must first be infused, so that when we venture to pour them out we may dispense them from a spirit that is filled rather than impoverished.” [138] [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In my own ecclesial and vocational context, the Uniting Church Synod of SA, this has taken the form of *‘Generate 2021’*; “… a bold, hope filled approach to enhancing the life of the UCA in South Australia. The purpose of Generate 21 is grounded in the Presbytery and Synod strategic plan which outlines the need to “prepare for the regeneration of the church by exploring diverse models of church planting.” Generate 2021 is focused on both exploring and implementing diverse models of church planting through: Generating 10 new congregations / Regenerating 15 congregations.” *2017 Synod and Presbytery Papers and* *Reports* (S1 1.3). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. A recent interaction with a graduate student who is commonly seen as a high pastoral achiever was notable for the tears shed over a lack of prayerful, integrative practice. The minister’s bright persona (most things related to the ministry of the church are ‘exciting’) clearly represents one thing, the deeper reality of alienation and struggle, quite another.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Origen of Alexandria, *Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings,* ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 202-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Martin Luther, as quoted by William Placher in, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996): “He (sic) who wants to ascend advantageously to the love and knowledge of God should abandon the human metaphysical rules concerning knowledge of the divinity and apply himself first to the humanity of Christ. For it is exceedingly godless temerity that, where God has humiliated Himself in order to become recognizable, man seeks for himself another way, by following the counsels of his own natural capacity.” [47]. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)