Welcome to Theological Field Education!

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WELCOME TO
THEOLOGICAL
FIELD
EDUCATION!

Matthew Floding, General Editor
A new subject can seem more graspable when it is presented in precise bullet points than when it is subtly described in poetry. Most of us like certainty more than possibilities, answers more than questions. We want to know how to do something, and we want to learn it step by step—and quickly. We seek efficiently packaged information and sound bites just interesting enough to capture our fleeting attentions. Yet, most of us who engage the realm of the mysteries of life, beauty, pain, and death—namely, ministry—know too well that neither a dictionary of terms nor a manual of procedures is sufficient for substantively describing the dance of discerning and living faithfully into one’s call.

Rather than following a prescribed linear progression, being and becoming a minister entails gliding, stumbling, circling, dipping—swirling in and out of hope and despair, struggling between belief and doubt, living in the borderlands of an unyielding faith and a desperation to rediscover truth. This being and becoming cannot be neatly explained or taught with systematic guidelines. The complex process of formation requires a language that allows space for un-systematic yet authentic representations of experience.
What you will not find in this chapter is a methodology for supervision or an outlined program for facilitating the formation of interns. What you are invited to consider, however, is a way of being and becoming that recognizes the mystery and reverence of the task with which you are entrusted as a supervisor-mentor. The chapter is an invitation to consider an aesthetic approach to the forms and moments of life in ministry. It is an invitation to consider ministry supervision as one might engage works of art: with a posture of receptivity.

A Poetics of Ministry

Poetry, a communication that attends to and nuances the affective, aesthetics, forms and meanings of the concrete, provides a helpful heuristic lens for observing the contours of ministry, just as it helps ministers consider the responsibility of supervising the formation of others in ministry.

Creative freedom and intentional restraint are found in the artful strokes of a poet. Both spontaneous effect and deliberate technique are at work in composition. This process also includes being prepared for the dawning of new contours between an initial vision and the finished form. The final form, in actuality, is unfinished, because its words carry on beyond the author, weaving in and out of the interpretations drawn by those who experience the composition in different places and times.

Artful supervision looks something like this. You bring your unique perspectives and wisdom to the formation of an intern. Yet, these will converge with the particular histories and gifts an intern brings. At times you will provide an intern with theological rationales and hermeneutical groundings for the sermon you have preached the past week. More often an intern will simply experience your preaching voice and be shaped by what she glean from the experience itself. At times, an intern will need your feedback and even correction. At other times, an intern will simply need some space to try things out without the fear of hearing from you, “What I would have done is . . .”

The interaction is never the same because of its creative, constructive nature. Every engagement is a new thing that always begins with constructive act as the task that a supervisor-mentor enters into each internship year.

We meet awkwardly.

I invite you to dance.

I find you dancing.

Two individuals engage. As they bring their own and other's sensibilities into contact, that is, a gestalt is formed at the beginning of the experience, expectations and transfer from the other; and the end of the internship, which have been challenged and given along the way, are not quantifiable. Art is difficult because for the context of the learner.

Walking together, we engage in supervision. I tell my students how I ask students to think about supervision.

One student brooked that the walker's side and helps bring. It does not go along the walker's weight.

I find you dancing.

Two individuals engage. As they bring their own and other's sensibilities into contact, that is, a gestalt is formed at the beginning of the experience, expectations and transfer from the other; and the end of the internship, which have been challenged and given along the way, are not quantifiable. Art is difficult because for the context of the learner.
The interaction between supervisor and intern is a sacred one because of its creative and relational dimensions. Creation is at work in every engagement of learning: something new is formed, or something that always was is re-formed. The following haiku conveys the constructive activity of teaching and the experience of formation that a supervisor-mentor and intern encounter together during an internship year:

We meet awkwardly.  
I invite you to walk.  
I find you dancing!

Two individuals meet. In that meeting, a congregation is also introduced. As they begin their work together, unfamiliarity with one another's sensibilities or "the surprise of the recognizable self" in the other, that is, a glimpse of yourself in another, a connection, marks the beginning of the shared work. Each enters the work with ideas, expectations, and motivations that sometimes overlap but often differ from the other person's. What is certain is that, by the final day of the internship, initial visions of the internship arrangement will have been challenged, reshaped, and revisioned. Much is received and given along the way. Most of what is learned and taught is not quantifiable. Articulating the content of this interaction is often difficult because formation relies less on content and more on the context of the learning: the relationship.

Relational Formation

Walking together is a useful poetic image to transpose to the art of supervision. I teach a class on transformational pedagogy in which I ask students to propose metaphors for the ministry of teaching. One student brought a rustic wooden walking stick to class and explained that the minister is like a walking stick as she supports alongside and helps balance the one who is walking. The walking stick does not go ahead. It stays beside, sometimes behind. It absorbs the walker's weight when needed and serves as a physical symbol of...
support for the one walking, who gains more confidence just knowing that the stick is there.

Similarly, an invitation to walk is an invitation to walk with. In many African cultures, a parent will often call a growing child to go on a walk. They have no destination or an agenda. Sometimes they talk, sometimes they are silent. Always, the relationship is reinforced. The child grows by knowing he is loved and through understanding the ways of his father. A parent’s attentive care isn’t literally verbalized: it is experienced, then known. This walking together is an intimate activity.

Applying these images of walking together and the metaphor of a walking stick to the relationship between the supervisor-mentor and the intern, one can see that the supervisor-mentor has a posture of receptivity in the relationship. The interaction between a supervisor and an intern is open and mutually dependent. The supervisor relinquishes control while remaining ready to “see what is there and let what is there speak.” While some people might think the lack of control reflects passivity, to stay beside and sometimes slightly behind a student takes great strength and self-understanding.

A walking stick serves quietly, but it must be strong. A supervisor embodies the strength of gentleness and restraint when carefully attending to an intern as he takes strides, helping when he stumbles and remaining in the background as he finds his own strength and self-understanding. Lao Tzu, father of Taoism, offers wisdom for understanding this kind of leadership posture: “A leader is best when people barely know she exists, not so good when people obey and acclaim her. A good leader talks little when her work is done. When her aim is fulfilled, they will say: We did it ourselves.” Therefore, the student who is found dancing has not learned the intricacies of the steps from his teacher. Rather, the teacher created a welcoming space in which the student could join the teacher in the dance. Over time, from the hospitality and freedom of the space, new ideas and new movements emerge—expressions that surpass the original vision.

Conventional understanding of performance, manages or distributed tasks. These roles of a minister are lived and maintained between the supervisor and an intern. A helping role is making rounds (literally, a supervisor does) than by her presence.

A supervisor or a student is not defined by her person than by the roles of a minister. The roles of a minister is not fulfilled by the presence of the supernatural duties of the week. A supervising pastor meditates on Scripture, celebrates communion, comforts worshipers, comforts office staff, and keeps parts of supervision; it is living. How is an intern provided glimpses for an intuitive understanding of ministry but more...
Embodyed Supervision

Conventional understanding is that a supervisor oversees performance, manages operations, and directs others to carry out delegated tasks. These perfunctory roles create a relational distance between the supervisor and the supervised. A picture of a supervisor walking across a factory floor with a clipboard comes to mind. She is making rounds to be sure that people are doing their jobs. Typically, a supervisor is understood more by her functions (what she does) than by her person (who she is).

A supervisor of a ministerial intern must be understood more by her person than by her functions. It is impossible to separate the roles of a minister from who the minister is. Likewise, it is impossible to lead others in discerning a vocation in ministry without having contemplated and continuing to contemplate one’s own sense of call. There is, then, very little distance between a teacher and a student, between a supervisor and an intern, and between one’s responsibilities as a supervisor and one’s responsibilities as a minister.

A supervising pastor supervises by the very act of ministering. He does not put on the supervisory hat when he sits with an intern for weekly meetings or when he observes an intern making her first pastoral care visit or preaching her first sermon. The supervisory role is not fulfilled when a supervisor completes evaluation forms or explains to the intern the life of a particular congregation and the pastoral duties in it. Rather, active supervision takes place when a supervising pastor engages in ministry: when she leads worship, meditates on Scripture, prays for congregants, moderates meetings, celebrates communion, teaches young people, visits the sick, greets worshipers, comforts the mourning, expresses appreciation for the office staff, and keeps sabbath. All of these ministry acts are vital parts of supervision. Supervision is more than modeling, however; it is living. How the supervising pastor lives offers substantive glimpses for an intern who is seeking not only to know the how-to of ministry but more so to understand life in ministry.
Educators and supervisor-mentors alike often mistakenly think people are interested in the information we can offer them. In the case of technical training, this may be true. But when formation is involved, people are much more interested in who we are than in what we do. I experienced the distinctions between technical training and formational learning as a piano student.

For one year before beginning grammar school, my parents sent me to a piano conservatory every day. The first words I learned to read and write were terms from music theory. I practiced running my fingers through Hanon's scale exercises and checked off the boxes the teacher had drawn to indicate the number of times I was to practice the exercises. During lessons, the teacher would sit on a chair at one end of the piano and watch me. Many hours of my childhood were spent on the piano bench, often with a metronome ticking above, where I learned the techniques of maneuvering my fingers according to the printed music notes. Obediently following the dizzying array of black dots on paper, I matriculated over time from beginning level books to more technically challenging pieces.

Many years later I realized that the formation of a piano virtuoso was about far more than training. One teacher, instead of simply watching me practice, allowed me to watch her practice. Before I learned a new piece, she would bring her own copy of the music, which was full of penciled notations, the edges of the sheets rolled and frayed. She would sit at the center of the piano bench and begin to play the piece. Sometimes her eyes were closed as if she were in a dream, sometimes her eyes focused intensely at the measures of the printed music. Her body would sway as if to dance, and her face expressed something inward she could not hide. I watched my teacher interact with the text of the music; she would then watch as I tried out my own interactions with the text. I discovered and rediscovered that the activity of pressing wooden keys with my fingers was more than merely this. It was remembering the composition, creating sound, and evoking interpretation.

While good technique is valuable, ministry is about more than skills. Indeed, acquiring and practicing the skills of active listening, critical exegesis, planning, leading, hospital pastoral care is important for a lifelong vocation. However, wanting to ensure practice skills such as planning, leading, and hospital pastoral care is important. And so the interrelationship is checked. However, we want a lifelong vocation and a formula for a lifelong vocation. The classical establishment has a proven record of being effective and efficient, but we need to acquire the necessary skills. Pieces requiring careful order. Such a formula is a proven record of effective for formal outcomes are reached. Through very different means.

Formation is effective for formal outcomes. However, it is at the center of effective form, as it is lived. The process presupposes that an individual's experience itself, is at the center of effective for formalizing, and it is lived. The process becomes explicative activity.

While training manuals, ministerial poetry into a structure, formation is fluid. It is unpredictable.
critical exegesis, public speaking, and effective administration is important for a pastor. As supervisors, we are eager to teach those preparing for pastoral vocations to do these tasks properly and well; we want to ensure that an intern has every opportunity to observe and practice skills such as preaching, assisting with wedding and funeral planning, leading a Bible study for youth, following along on three hospital pastoral care visits, observing a session or board meeting. And so the intern completes the items on the list, . . . check, check, check. However, if doing all of these tasks ensured one’s readiness for a lifelong vocation in ministry, then they ought to be analyzed and a formula generated to guarantee ministerial effectiveness.

The classical training I received on the piano followed a regimen established long before I sat at the piano bench for the first time. An effective and efficient method for teaching the correct conditioning of hands and fingers was already in place. So that students would acquire the necessary technical skills in a cumulative progression, pieces requiring certain techniques were introduced in a particular order. Such a formula tested over time is appealing because it has a proven record of meeting set objectives. There is safety in adhering to a formula for teaching and learning because it presupposes that outcomes are reproducible. Indeed, in room after room at the conservatory, students diligently and impressively moved their fingers through very difficult musical compositions.

Formation is different from training, however. Formation presupposes that an outcome cannot be known in advance because an individual’s experience in the formation process, not the process itself, is at the center. In addition, relying on sets of lessons is ineffective for formation because its “curriculum” is created organically as it is lived. The course for formation is actively composed by the explicative activity of individuals, their interactions with others.

While training can be likened to adherence to an instructions manual, ministerial formation through an internship is like injecting poetry into a structured program. This form of learning and becoming is fluid. Poetic forms are movements that inject disorder and unpredictability into a program concerned only with reproduction.
In the risky yet creative space of a course open for exploration is an opportunity for every student to authenticate his identity, speak with her own voice, and interpret the forms and meanings of ministry through his own contextual reality.

As a student experiences the course of learning typical of a formational internship, dialogue that both complicates and illuminates the learning process arises. This dialogue contains questions, ponderings, imaginations, hopes, and fears now named and considered. Such dialogue often leads to incomplete and awkward understanding, yet is necessary for education that is formational: this learning invites a student to explore self-identity and to contemplate self in ministry. The dialogue, then, is the authentic interaction between the learner and the learning experience. Madeline Grumet, professor of education at the University of North Carolina, writes, "Education emerges as a metaphor for a person's dialogue with the world of his or her experience. ... To delete dialogue from this experience would be to relegate learning to a series of reactive, conditioned behaviors best described as training."

Perhaps what is needful for supervision is space for dialogue, for interaction; space where not everything is explained, told, corrected, and taught; space where dialogue—both shared publicly and reflected on privately—is encouraged and sustained.

As One Being Taught

The natural question that follows, then, is how does a supervisor encourage and sustain dialogue? What must a supervisor do and not do so that the internship is formational rather than training-oriented? What techniques create a welcome space for questions? How does a supervisor maintain a receptive disposition when a student is impatient to receive a supply of answers? The response to these good questions about methods remains nonmethodological; rather than delineating a set of techniques, what follows is a consideration of a posture of being and becoming.

I will return to my experience as a student of classical piano. Watching my teacher practice awakened me to the exquisite complexities as if she had simply practiced on sheets of music behind her piano, or explain to me at times she played was not, after danced with improvisation; I witnessed this "dance of being and intention, my own way.

Supervision and discipleship, and always in discern our choice to intentional presence. For the ministry, faithfulings and render in the world.

Indeed, a being formed of formation pastor who learned skills larger than the to cultivate a is a mark of a capacity to required abilities, social concepts, emotions, and able to super...
The Art of Supervision and Formation

exploration is an entity, speak with careful thought and intention were behind her playing. Occasionally, she would miss a note. She would sometimes stop to correct herself but she did not stop to apologize or explain to me why she made the mistake. She was learning each time she played. She was not afraid to show the learner in her. She was not, after all, a perfect master of technique. She was one who danced with the text of the music as if having complicated conversation; I witnessed this conversation. Eventually, I would emulate this “danceful” conversation, except with my own discovered forms and intentions, following my own notations on what would become my own frayed and thin sheets of music.

Supervision that encourages and sustains dialogue for exploration and discovery also recognizes that the supervising pastor is also and always in formation. Formation is ongoing for all of us who discern our place in the mystery of the infinite God who would choose to incarnate holy love and compassion through our humanness. For those who understand God’s radical act of incarnate ministry, faithfully living into one’s vocation means seeking new meanings and reminders of one’s identity in the scope of God’s activity in the world.

Indeed, a supervisor-mentor is being and becoming, formed and being formed. One does not ultimately arrive or finish the course of formation after a certain number of years in ministry. While a pastor who has walked through many seasons in ministry may have learned skills for handling issues that at an earlier time seemed much larger than they do in retrospect, years of ministry experience ought to cultivate a posture of humility, not a mastery of skills. Humility is a mark of wisdom, a better understanding of our true selves, and a capacity to see ourselves as we really are. We often mistake our acquired abilities to speak eloquently in public, expound on theological concepts, plan and lead creative liturgy, offer prayers that evoke emotions, and so forth as marks of a good pastor who is ready and able to supervise others who want to become good pastors.
When ministers adopt a posture of humility, they recognize that their capacity for ministry depends on their receptivity to continuous formation. They also recognize that they do not and cannot fully know or substantially explain the vastness of God. Humility is cultivated when we recognize the "unfinishedness" of our knowing and being. It is cultivated when we grapple with the humanness of our inward being and the divine call of God upon our life. By authentically engaging this dialogue about our human limitations and simultaneous propensity for living into a holy vocation, a supervising pastor creates space for others to contemplate, explore, discover, and release their own expressions of being and becoming.

This dialogue shuts down quickly when a supervisor satisfies the impatient need and desire—to provide clear-cut explanations, to supply pat answers, and to present only a posture of confidence and clarity about what it means to stand with and for God in the gap between brokenness and redemption. When a supervisor invites others to observe and join the ongoing dialogue with which she herself is engaged, she shapes the formation of interns who will likewise grow in humility and wisdom.

In biblical Hebrew, the words for "to teach" and "to learn" share the same consonantal root. This root is used in a description of leadership found in Isaiah 50: "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught" (v. 4). The Hebrew word for "teacher" translated in English is limmudim: עֵמֶדָהּ לִימָּעָד Limmudim literally means "those who are taught." The same word is used in Isa. 8:16 to refer to Isaiah's disciples. In Hebraic understanding, the teacher is essentially a learner. The writer of this text is describing how God is teaching him to minister, giving him words to speak and forming him to stand with those who are weak. The responsibility of the prophet to lead others is beyond his expertise. He can only lead as he is being taught. He can only teach as one who is receiving knowledge. The reception of knowledge does not grow progressively to reach a point where one has full understanding. Growing as a teacher requires ongoing receptivity to being taught.

One who has teaching as his calling, also has learning as his calling." This idea of teacher as learner is one that conventional wisdom sometimes demarcate. Of Old Testament wisdom, expert or as the "wise fool." Mary Douglas portrayed in two different ways. To make a connection of "teacher" (or learner) who is engaged.

As one who has received the supr

A Buddhist teacher once said: "A teacher is like a letter carrier. He is an experienced person who has found the most useful metaphors he can find.

Training is the art of making unthing didactic. Training is not like etching on a hard stone; it is like delicate toy that is unchartered and can't be strictly appli

And finally, in terms of ministry is he is being taught. And as one who is receiving knowledge. The reception of knowledge does not grow progressively to reach a point where one has full understanding. Growing as a teacher requires ongoing receptivity to being taught.
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One who leads others must be taught daily, “morning by morn-
ing.” This idea blurs the boundary between teaching and learning
that conventional North American understandings of education
demarcate. Our understanding of the teacher as a subject-matter
expert or as the keeper of knowledge awaiting transmission is dif-
ferent from the disposition of the teacher as humble and wise, as
portrayed in the Isaiah text. The biblical translators, I imagine, had
to make a contextual hermeneutical jump and place teacher (instead
of learner) where limmu
d is used in the original language.

As one who supervises others in formation, the internship su-
pervisor must recognize that he is in need of formation, too. For-
mation is a necessary activity for all who are responding to God’s
call: both the one who has just recognized the call and the one who
has been discerning the shape and meaning of that call daily for
perhaps thirty years or more.

As One Writing Letters

A Buddhist teaching describes three ways of being in the world:
like letters carved on a rock, traced in sand, written on running wa-
ter. Mary Doll, a curriculum theorist, draws from this teaching to
describe phenomenological pedagogy (study that attends to one’s
experienced perception of the learning structure and its process). I
have found this Buddhist teaching and Doll’s use of these insightful
metaphors helpful for imaging the art of ministry supervision.

Training is like carving procedures onto a rock. There is some-
thing didactic, rigid, and even forceful in such a metaphor. Engraving
on a hard surface infers permanence. Knowledge that is perma-
nently carved assumes its objective and universal nature; knowledge
that is unchangeable presumes certain information as more useful
and applicable to all contexts. A training handbook on how to do
ministry is helpful only when information is desired. When formation
is desired, and necessary, offering training—disseminating informa-
tion as if carving it onto a rock—is inadequate, because such ways
of teaching ignore the creative and relational dimension of transforma-
tional learning experiences.
By contrast, writing letters on running water is an apt metaphor for transformational teaching and learning. There is fluidity, movement, and even uncertainty in this image. The moment the ink touches the water, it seems to disappear. Yet, while the diluted ink cannot be seen, the writing, though momentary, does inject change. The water’s composition and nature are changed by the ink.

The kind of learning experience a supervising minister extends is determined by how she images the intern student. A rock is solid, stationary, formed. Its contours are defined. Running water is always forming. It has been somewhere and it is going somewhere. Sometimes it flutters by, sometimes it moves formidably. Water flows through shallow brooks and reaches deep crevices. Its contours are not bound.

A supervising minister who images the intern student as running water understands that she plays a supportive role in the Creator’s ministry of formation and transformation. Something is already happening to and around the intern and minister even before they knowingly enter into the learning situation. Even before a person enters a classroom or steps into a church or receives the preached word, formation has begun. And formation will continue to be authored by our Creator and Caller. With such an understanding, a supervisor has little anxiety about giving a conclusive report or assessment of an intern’s readiness to face the challenges of life in ministry. The supervisor is less preoccupied about teaching correct methods and more intentional about living faithfully into the call of ministry.

Viewing supervision as writing letters on already forming interns is a freeing and humble approach. The supervisor does not have information, answers, and explanations to impart. Rather, the supervisor writes a letter simply as a faithful witness to compassion clothing brokenness, mercy restoring unfinishedness, Holy God calling foolishness. The apostle Paul describes the Christian testimony this way: “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on stones (2 Cor. 3:2).” It seems obvious about how our very lives are the daily transformation of shalom in the world. We extend hands of shalom in the world. We extend hands of shalom in the world.

A poetical description recognizes the aspect of living in the spiritual middle ground between God, between commitment necessary to act and when the foolishness of each one(s) of us departs this world. It is our responsibility to cultivate care for one another.

This describes supervision to internship: an approach to dialogue: an approach to possibilities, perhaps somewhere by dedicated conversations.

So we enter into our intern’s life, we look to us to obtain clarity. In the midst of...
is an apt metaphor: is fluidity, movement, the moment the ink dilutes the diluted ink does inject change. The minister extends the ink. A rock is solid, fixed. Water is always somewhere. Somewhere, a rock is fluid. Water flows, changes. Its contours are student as running water on which letters are written by those who teach us and by the One who teaches us. God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor. 3:2). It seems as if Paul and Buddha are having a conversation about how one might faithfully live in the world with others. Our very lives are letters written to others. The letters we write describe the daily transformations that enable ordinary people to offer life-giving words to the weary, to ordain blessing upon the meek, to extend hands of healing upon the weak, to prophesy radical hope of shalom in a world made lopsided by greed—not that we have become expert in these acts of ministry, but because we are recipients of them. For we too are like running water on which letters are written by those who teach us and by the One who teaches us.

**Supervision as Conversation**

A poetical description of ministerial supervision and formation recognizes the art of being attentive to the realm of the divine while living in the seeming flatness of the ordinary. It recognizes the palpable middle space between lucid theology and the unknownness of God, between answers and question. It recognizes the quiet discernment necessary to know when to speak and when to listen, when to act and when to remain in reflection. It recognizes the unfinishedness of each one's participation in the grand movement of God in this world. It also recognizes the need for pastors and pastors-to-be to cultivate capacities for ministry that express thoughtful practice.

This description of the nature of ministry informs an approach to internship supervision that requires artistry for sustaining dialogue: an approach to supervision that creates space to stay with possibilities, permission to be without the preoccupation to arrive somewhere by a certain time in a certain form. It requires complicated conversations.

So we enter into a complicated conversation about faithfully living into one's ministry even as we "supervise" those who urgently look to us to supply them with information and eagerly seek to obtain clarity about the meaning of ministry and a vocation in it. In the midst of conversations complicated by dialogue rather than
simplified by answers, what we soon find is that inviting others to walk with us as we navigate between unspeakable joy and undeniable helplessness creates space for authentic conversations about the shape of faithful ministry, not about the procedures for successful ministry.

A crucial part of this complicated conversation is our willingness to present ourselves as learners who continue to seek understanding and discovery. The teacher who is unsatisfied with flighty answers to deep questions participates in the formation of a student who will contemplate the questions of ultimate meaning. The teacher who perceives the unknowness of God participates in the formation of a student who stands before truth with reverence. The teacher who creates space for others to interact with the living text of the Divine participates in the formation of a student who extends hospitality to the spiritually homeless so prevalent in our midst.