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Students Speaking Their Truth: Cultivating Critical Testimony in an Undergraduate Intro to Theology Class

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Introduction

Across the US, many Catholic universities and Protestant colleges offer course work in theology, religious studies, or the humanities designed to introduce students to the practice of serious conversation around faith, values, difference, and critical thought. With titles like “Faith and Critical Reason,” “Exploring Religion” or “Religion, Theology and Culture” these courses are often required as part of the core curriculum. The faculty who teach them are often deeply committed to providing students with important skills in critical thinking and in democratic, open-minded discussion. But the intellectual language and the approach to broaching these topics is foreign to the thought-worlds of most present-day US students.

This is problematic for at least two reasons. First, lots of study, class time, and energy needs to be spent getting used to the thought-worlds of philosophers, cultural studies experts, and theologians. Students spend much of the semester trying to master subject matter that often seems esoteric: acquiring the vocabulary and even the grammar to have rich conversations about serious questions, without much time left to use that language for understanding their real-life world. Second, for those students who are actually interested in the subject matter, mastering its content and grammar can present a troubling temptation: the trap of turning philosophy, cultural studies, or theology into a club for insiders and intellectual elites. There’s nothing wrong with geeking out over a favorite subject, but philosophy, cultural studies, and theology were all founded for a powerful reason: to use the tools of that particular discipline to address pressing problems in real life. Intro courses in theology and religious studies that are framed and organized as projects in practical, existential reflection are more likely to grasp students’ interests and to enhance their ability to use their religious or theological learning to positive effect in the future.

This essay introduces a practical and philosophical framework that can help students think more sharply; act with greater confidence and authenticity; and better cope with the broad range of diversity that they will encounter in classes like “Intro to Faith and Critical Reason.” That framework is “Semiotic Realism,” the branch of Classical American Pragmatism developed by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), Josiah Royce (1855-1916), and their intellectual heirs. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to this framework as “Pragmatism” for the rest of this essay.

You don’t need to adopt Pragmatism as your worldview to benefit from using the approaches I describe here; but if you do wish to explore it more deeply, you will discover a rich philosophical tradition whose founding contributors included scientists, writers, philosophers, educators, psychologists, and social workers; and whose roots dig deep into Greek, Christian, European, Native American, and Latinx intellectual history. Pragmatism has made important contributions to political and educational theory, philosophy of science, psychology, sociology, critical race theory, and modern-day theology and metaphysics (the list continues to grow).

This essay offers a Pragmatist blueprint for cultivating authenticity, testimony, and critical spiritual reflection in an undergraduate intro theology class. I begin with an introduction to the Pragmatist style of critical thinking and its underlying assumptions. The next section explores how thinking critically about personal authenticity in the context of religious differences can bring students closer together, instead of driving them further apart. The third section ups the ante by exploring how emotionally charged testimonies can build up (not blow up) the sense of classroom community. The final section shows how a Pragmatist understanding of personal moral and spiritual development can help students and teachers engage more thoughtfully in the study of the intersection between faith and critical reason.

I. The Pragmatist Approach to Critical Reason

The basic foundation of Pragmatism is that the *meaning* of an idea, is no different from the *impact* which that idea would produce: the impact that it has, or even might have, on people, actions, and future thoughts. Ideas which work out to have the same impacts, are in essence the same idea; questions, arguments, or distinctions that makes no real difference, are “paper doubts” with no meaning, and should be dismissed.

Pragmatists focus on real life. It can be interesting – sometimes even useful – to come up with questions that no one has ever asked, but Pragmatists find it more urgent to work on questions that arise from pressing crisis, problems, and doubts: a time of confusion; an experience of oppression; addiction, injustice, emotional pain. Pragmatist working on questions of faith and reason will ask, “What should be done? What skills and ideas from religion and critical thinking can help fix this situation, or at least make it better?”

Pragmatists focus on about habits and actions. Thinking, feeling, loving, and hating are mental habits. Working, playing, business, law, sex, war, and religion are habits that combine mind, movement, and materiel. As we go about life, we tend to do things *habit*-ually, based on our settled beliefs and expectations. If we get some unexpected result, an *irritation* develops; if that irritation is strong enough, it turns into a *doubt*; if that doubt is grave enough, it leads us to question, reflect, and *investigate*. Eventually, our inborn creativity produces some hunches; the hunch that tests out to our best satisfaction is incorporated into a new set of *beliefs*, which leads to a new *habit*.

habit → irritation → doubt → investigation → new belief → updated habit

This is how Pragmatists describe the process of thinking.

Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of American Pragmatism, was a working scientist and a creative philosophical thinker. Pragmatists still need the courage of a scientist: to pursue doubts and follow hunches; to ask the next question; to go where the evidence leads. Pragmatists still need the creativity of an artist: the willingness to brainstorm, to try out new possibilities, to see how different pieces might fit together in order to express something compelling and create something true.

The Pragmatist approach to truth is already familiar to most of us. There is first of all a reliance on other people and on “common knowledge” to guide most of our habits and settled beliefs.

Second is personal experience: on many issues, especially life decisions, the voice of experience often has the last word. When and if these two fail, there is rigorous inquiry. This means “scientific method” and various versions of “evidence based argument”: gathering relevant data, coming up with a possible solution, and testing out how it works.

But Pragmatists argue that some common ways of thinking make rigorous inquiry much more difficult than it needs to be:

- “Everyone is entitled to their opinion, as long as they are not hurting anyone else” (which only begs the questions, “What’s hurtful?” and “Why should I be allowed to hurt myself?”)
- “I have discovered the one true answer (the Bible, the Qur’an, the Free Market): can’t everyone else just agree?”
- “You are not Black / Female / Queer / White “ or “I am the child of a police officer / from a hard-working middle-class family / a survivor of trauma.” You’ll never understand; we’ll never see eye to eye.
- More strictly philosophical, but no less of a stumbling block, are various types of “dualism”: “distinguish[ing] two interrelated realities in such a way that their real relationship to one another becomes subsequently” incomprehensible.¹ For example, dividing the world into “spirit” and “matter” makes it much harder to account for many aspects of human experience. “If love and freedom aren’t a material objects, aren’t they just ideas in our heads? Trying to *study* love or freedom is like arguing over the science of Harry Potter.” Pragmatists argue that dualism undermines our ability to seriously investigate urgent realities. It’s a *failed solution* which critical thinkers should reject.

Pragmatists take all aspects of experience equally seriously:

- Facts and data (objects and forces, texts and testimonies, stories and dreams) have an impact, and we must take them seriously.
- Feelings and qualities (colors and textures; joy and anguish; health or neurosis). Of course they are the result of photons, atoms, and neurons, but they also have an impact, and we must take them seriously.
- Patterns and tendencies (laws of physics, biological processes, trains of thinking, commitments, personalities, persons) have an impact, and we must take them seriously.

Pragmatists are committed to rigorous inquiry into *all* aspects of reality – not only facts, but qualities and tendencies as well.

Of course, taking something seriously does not mean we have gotten it right. We can never be certain that our settled beliefs are correct; we can never predict the next unexpected result! In this way, Pragmatists are consummate scientists. They are willing to question, hypothesize, and re-evaluate *any* belief or behavior when a serious doubt has been raised. They rely on a community of fellow inquirers (scientists, reporters, academics, concerned citizens) to identify sloppy data and inaccurate thinking. As Peirce says, our human tendency is “to compare notes,” and if we never do compare notes, and no third party talks with both and makes the comparison, it is difficult to see what meaning there is in saying we disagree.²

¹ Donald Gelpi, *The Divine Mother*: (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 11.

² *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. by Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958), 4.26.

For a Pragmatist, truth is not an *idea* which allows us to say, “Now that I’ve found it, my work is done.” Truth is a *relation* which moves us to question: “Am I being true to the data? Am I being true to my own experience? Am I being true to you, and to my own best ideals?”³

II. Authenticity

Being true to oneself, being authentic, is an important value to many present-day young adults. Authenticity fits well with the general tendency of many young adults to want more independence from their families of origin, and with the growing tendency of American youth to move away from strong affiliation with religious institutions, and to adopt a personalized, individual view of spiritual.⁴ Charles Taylor, a Canadian Pragmatist philosopher, argues that this contemporary ideal of “authenticity” can actually help students articulate a robust vision of their responsibilities to each other and to the broader society – what philosophers have traditionally called a vision of “the common good.”⁵ If Taylor is right, cultivating the quest for greater authenticity can be an important element in building a “faith and critical reason” classroom community where students learn to value the challenges of exploring and reflecting on tough moral and spiritual questions *together*.

Taylor builds his argument on an analysis of the history of an important concept within Western society: the idea of the person or – more specifically – the “self.”⁶ Taylor argues that society has experienced several conceptual “turns” that have enriched, but also endangered, the quality of personal life in the West:

- a turn from arm-chair theorizing to the close study of nature,
- a turn from outward behavior toward individual, inward experience,
- and a turn from the lives of set-aside, special people (kings, nobles, heroes, priests, monks, and nuns) toward the value of ordinary people and secular, everyday life.

Each of these turns can be celebrated for the new moral “goods” they have brought to our lives and to our common attention. The rigorous study of nature has given us technical advancement, scientific method, and enhanced public health. The turn toward interiority has given us an appreciation for personal growth and psychological healing, and for the pleasures of expressing our individual identity. The turn toward the common person has given us democratic governance, human rights, social mobility, and a whole infrastructure designed to enhance the lives of people at large.

But each turn also presents a dangerous flipside. Technical success has given us a blind confidence in the technological “fix,” a sense of ecological arrogance, and a “cost-benefit” form of analysis that reduces everyone and everything to an exploitable resource. Increased

³ To learn more about Classical American Pragmatism, check out Richard P. Mullin, *The Soul of Classical American Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), and the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, William James, George Mead, and Cornell West. To learn more about semiotic realism and how it can help clarify our thinking about religion, faith, and critical reason, check out the late (post 1900) writings of Josiah Royce, and the following: Donald Gelpi, SJ, *The Gracing of Human Experience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007) and Andrew Robinson, *God and the World of Signs* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010).

⁴ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵ Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1991).

⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

individuality slips easily into self-centered individualism and painful forms of isolation. The massive organizations that facilitate our democracies, economies, media, and cross-cultural flows make us ever more vulnerable to massive exploitation as their tentacles reach into more and parts of our lives.

To address these challenges, Taylor adopts the ideal of “authenticity” as the key good for thinking about our moral and personal lives in contemporary culture. In Taylor’s view, authenticity is the key that can orient and adjust all our other ideals. Without it, our different ideals can clash and derail us; with it, we can organize our priorities and keep on track toward a truly good life.

Authenticity means becoming my best self; identifying and pursuing my deepest hopes and dreams. It means taking care of my friendships and my emotional health; taking charge of my own learning and my own future career; taking up my rightful share of political power; taking full charge of my life. Authenticity cannot be achieved in isolation: it requires human connection, collaboration, and careful consideration of the impacts that my decision will have on the lives of others and on the society and ecosystem I hope to enjoy.

Some scholars insist that students do not have a concept of the common good, and that they must acquire it by studying religions, philosophies, and cultures where the common good was frequently discussed. Taylor would embrace the idea that studying religion, philosophy, and ancient cultures can enrich our lives, but he would insist that students will grasp a concept like “the common good” more firmly, and explore it more deeply, if they have come to construct and understand it through the language and ideals of their own present-day life.

Figuring out what it means to be an authentic self includes a process of sorting out different ideals both within ourselves and within the ever-widening networks of friends, classmates, and fellow humans among whom we will share our lives. This inevitably involves “comparing notes.” If we all shared a common ideal (e.g., “We should all act like Jesus” or “We must all devote ourselves to the success of our Glorious Cause”) comparing notes would be rather simpler: which values fit best with that common ideal? But modern life requires us to *construct* a sense of common purpose and a vision for genuine authenticity. In this case, it makes no sense to try and “prove” your moral point to those who disagree. Only conversations which are *suggestive* can open up the possibility of building a new, shared vision of the common good; only those kinds of conversations can open other people to the possibility that their present settled beliefs may need some adjustment.⁷ Effective moral conversation will begin by helping people to understand their own desires and their own values more deeply. The first goal is to help people *express* their different values, whether through the artistry of words or through some other compelling and communicative form of art. In short, Taylor would celebrate the fact that self-expression and creativity are a natural part of the young adult conversation in modern times.

Once we have expressed these different values, once we have come to know our own minds more clearly, we can engage with each other, and try to seek common ground. Taylor suggests that we engage here in a kind of “practical reasoning” which focuses on the *transition* from one position to another, arguably better position. These transitions, Taylor argues, should be made

⁷ Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 23.

on the basis of what he calls “epistemic gain.” Conversation partners experience epistemic gain when they come up with a new way of thinking that resolves a contradiction, illuminates a previous confusion, or accounts to everyone’s satisfaction for a detail or piece of data that previously did not fit, or was being ignored.⁸

“This form of argument,” Taylor says, “has its source in biographical narrative,” because honest conversation partners must “live” through the eye-opening transition. Some classes introduce students to new conceptual frameworks and world-rocking “big” ideas; a Pragmatist class on faith and critical reason brings conversations back down to reality – to the nitty-gritty, where communities of inquiry can be built up face to face. In this kind of classroom, our understandings about what is most important get reconstructed piece by piece through particular, specific conversations – through the give and take of trying to articulate our different experiences, and of trying to square our testimonies about those experiences with each other. As Taylor argues, “You will only convince me by changing my reading of my moral experience, and in particular my reading of my life story, of the transitions I have lived through – or perhaps refused to live through.”⁹

As a partner in this conversation, I should be neither too strong-headed, nor too quick to give my own well-thought-out arguments. I cannot judge whether my ideals are more valid than your ideals, whether my goods are more compelling than the goods of your cultural or religious tradition, until we have actually sat down and talked through our histories, our beliefs, and the reasons why we hold them. If such a conversation is successful, it will create a new situation and a new way of thinking that did not previously exist. In this new framework, we may discover that our vision of the common good has converged, or we may discover that our individual visions are indeed incompatible. But we will certainly have learned more about what we both think – and more about how to seek the truth together in thoughtful, illuminating ways.

Practical reasoning means moving from one’s old way of thinking to new way of viewing reality, a way that is more comprehensive, more explanatory, or less confused than before. The new approach may explain problematic or anomalous data better than the old one; it may solve a conceptual impasse that seemed unsolvable in the previous theory; it may point out and overcome blind spots or implicit contradictions in the previous point of view.¹⁰ These types of arguments aim for the best description of reality that is available in a given conversation. A “bad model of practical reasoning” tries to establish universal guidelines for what is “rational,” outside the universe of a particular conversation.¹¹ A good model grounds roots the expressions of moral goods and values in the cultural and personal terms that resonate with the participants in that conversation.

III. How Testimony Works

In this section, I shift the discussion from conversations around differing moral values, to conversations where we give and receive powerful personal testimonies. Working with

⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 72.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 43-55.

¹¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 73.

testimonies – our own and each other’s – blows past paper doubts and keeps our conversations very real. This kind of work can also be difficult and explosive, which is why many students are very skittish about “getting personal” in context of college classes in general, and the context of college religion classes in particular.

Rebecca Chopp, a Feminist Pragmatist theologian, helps us understand this tension by analyzing the history of another important concept within Western society: the idea of a conflict between faith and reason.¹² Many students have learned from experience that faith is a personal, internal, emotion-based matter. They know that religious arguments can lead to violent situations (from the religious battles fought on cable news and at Thanksgiving dinners, to the “wars of religion” they have read about in history and watch daily on the Web). They have also been taught that critical thinking must remain rational, objective, and disconnected from excessive emotion.

These perspectives are rooted and reinforced in common knowledge and in students’ education. In many descriptions of Western intellectual history, religion is connected with the words of Scripture, official church doctrines, personal spiritual stances, and even popular superstition. The rational rebellion against blind faith freed us from unthinking obedience and outdated ideas. By applying critical thinking and scientific method, the story goes, we can even today achieve objectivity, make up our own minds, and emerge from mental childhood into adult ways of life. In this history, testimony (a Biblical text, a personally held belief) is the mother of confusion; rational thinking “is the clearheaded judge” who sorts out fact from fantasy and truth from illusion.¹³ Chopp and other Pragmatists argue that this conflict between faith and reason is a dualism which should be rejected.

Chopp argues that “rational thinking” really means making judgements based on our prior experience. Consider the idea of “walking on water.” Whenever I see someone in the water, they are either swimming, or floating, or sinking; it’s unlikely that anyone could actually walk on a lake. When I read Gospel stories about Jesus walking on water, as a “rational” person I presume that they could not be factually true. They are perhaps appreciative legends, or ancient metaphors about how faith can achieve anything, even what seems like “the impossible.” In this line of thinking, rational thinking uses common sense and prior experience to sort out which testimonies are reasonable and which ones are not; which testimonies should be considered, and which ones should be thrown out of court (or at least gently set aside and politely ignored).

But this line of thinking cannot be correct. Consider the question of identity. I am a white, middle-class, cisgender gay man. How can I judge the testimony of a transgender person? On the basis of my own prior experience? On the basis of popular “common sense”? I have never been black or poor; I have never been a woman or rich. Is it my job to decide whose testimonies are reasonable, and whose can be thrown out of court?

Chopp argues that when dealing with testimonies, it is not reasonable to declare ahead of time which can and cannot be true. In daily life, we rely on habitual thinking and settled beliefs to

¹² This section on testimony is drawn mainly from Rebecca Chopp, “Theology and the Poetics of Testimony,” in *Converging on Culture*, ed. by Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney and Kathryn Tanner (New York: AAR / Oxford, 2001), 56-70.

¹³ Chopp, “Theology and the Poetics of Testimony,” 61.

determine what does and does not make sense. But testimony stands out and asks us to consider whether our settled habits and beliefs have missed something – something important. If I’m not a Christian, and I’m not likely to meet one, the question of Jesus walking on water is neither here nor there. But if this story represents an important testimony in my religious tradition, or in the tradition of my peers or my classmates, as a pragmatist thinker I need to pay attention. In essence, testimony sets up the courtroom “in reverse,” so that the judge (“rational thinking,” prior experience, common sense) is now put on trial.¹⁴ In a kind of practical reasoning, data which was previously unknown, or hidden, or ignored is now presented and backed up with emotional heft, and the listener/witnesses stretches his previous thinking to see if it should accommodate this new information. Pragmatists do not reject testimony out of hand; they give testimony the opportunity to reshape their sense of possibility, to reshape their sense of what is reasonable.

“Testimony” is not merely something that I heard about or that I happened to say. It’s what I know from my heart and my history; from the life of my friends and the people. Testimonies can come in many forms: the stories of African-Americans, of rape survivors and survivors of genocide, of LGBT people; the arguments of liberation theologians: all of these are testimonies that speak of life and survival.¹⁵ Testimonies can be verbal or written, in the shape of words, actions, music, performance, or visual / plastic art. Sometimes they are polished, sometimes raw, partial, and still undigested. If the pain or the memory is too strong, sometimes fragments and pieces are all we can offer.¹⁶ When we welcome raw and fragmentary expression, or art, or songs, or improvised dramatic performances into the classroom, we make an important step forward in democratizing academic spaces and in taking the language of non-elites and non-academics more seriously.¹⁷

As Chopp argues, testimony calls on us to “remember what [we] have forgotten, denied, [or] ignored. . . . One testifies not only so the truth will be told but . . . so that the future might be lived differently in light of the history of suffering.”¹⁸ Testimonies seek to “convert” our common imagination so we might start to see, think, and do what we can’t yet imagine. Especially when presented in religious or theological contexts, testimony takes on a prophetic dimension. It says, “This is what happened, this is what I hope for, as God is my witness.”

Testimony frequently generates conflict: “Have you been a hypocrite? Which memories have you chosen to recall, and which ones have you chosen to repress?”¹⁹ We might try to deflect these challenges by questioning the legitimacy of its form of expression: “You have not presented a rational argument. Is that kind of language appropriate? Why so angry? Why so confrontational?” We might become angry at the speaker, or avoid their challenge by obsessing over fact finding, or looking for distractions; we might feel overwhelmed, or go totally numb.²⁰

¹⁴ Chopp, “Theology and the Poetics of Testimony,” 61 - 65

¹⁵ Cf. Chopp, “Theology and the Poetics of Testimony,” 63.

¹⁶ Megan Boler suggests that testimony is the “genre” of trauma. *Feeling Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 166.

¹⁷ Rebecca S. Chopp, “Reimagining Public Discourse,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 103 (March 1999): 41.

¹⁸ Chopp, “Reimagining Public Discourse,” 37, 44.

¹⁹ Cf. Chopp, “Reimagining Public Discourse,” 36-7.

²⁰ Boler, *Feeling Power*, 168. Citing Dori Laub in Shoshana Felman, *Testimony* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 72–3.

Minnie Pratt describes how her reaction to the musical testimonies of racially different “others” shifted over time: from sympathy toward the other, to a process of coping with her own feelings through the other, and finally to a commitment of solidarity with the other. A white Southern woman, she was for many years deeply moved by her experience of listening to African American church songs and spirituals. After a while, however she realized:

I was using Black people to weep for me, to express my sorrow at my responsibility, and that of my people, for their oppression: and I was mourning because I felt they had something I didn't, a closeness, a hope, that I and my folks had lost because we tried to shut other people out of our hearts and lives. Finally I understood that I could feel sorrow...yet not confuse their sorrow with mine, or use their resistance for mine.... I could hear their songs like a trumpet to me: a startling...a challenge: but not take them as a replacement for my own work²¹

Faced with a powerful testimony of Black suffering and liberation Pratt moved from feeling vaguely connected, to the insight that she was mainly managing and deflecting her own feelings, to making a conscious commitment about undoing racial oppression. As Megan Boler says, testimony calls on to respond “with [our] own testimony, rather than using the other as a catalyst or a substitute” for ourselves.²²

Samara D. Madrid, like Boler a Feminist educator, explores how to handle testimony without becoming intimidated, numb, or defensive, and without falling into shallow forms of empathy.²³ In classroom settings, they argue, the process must start with the teacher. Before asking students to face uncomfortable testimony, teachers must themselves practice how “to hear and hold the stories of students who have experienced injustice and emotional pain.”²⁴ Teachers must practice the discipline of temporarily putting aside their own thoughts and reactions, in order to pay close attention and imagine themselves in others’ shoes.²⁵ The teacher can then model and “hold” other group members as they struggle to give and receive each other’s testimonies.

VII. Religion and Personal Growth

Religious experience has been a focus of interest in Classical American Pragmatism since the work of its founding contributors.²⁶ For example, the early psychologist William James (1842 – 1910) explored in great depth the more extraordinary forms of “religious experiences” (moments of awe, feelings of connection to the universe, hitting “rock bottom,” sudden conversions). In response to James’s work, his close friend and colleague Josiah Royce reflected on the way in which religious and moral insight unfolds naturally over time in the majority of modern people’s

²¹ Minnie Bruce Pratt, “Identity: Skin/Blood/Heart,” in *Feminist Theory Reader*, ed. by Carole McCann and Seung-kyung Kim, 3rd edition (New York: Routledge, 2013), 285-291 (originally published 1984).

²² Boler, *Feeling Power*, 171.

²³ Sandra D. Madrid, “Care as Racialized, Critical, and Spiritual Emotion,” in *Engaging Culture, Race, and Spirituality*, ed. by Cynthia B. Dillard and Chinwe L. Ezueh Okpalaoka (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 81-88.

²⁴ Madrid, “Care as Racialized, Critical, and Spiritual Emotion,” 87.

²⁵ Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Subjection and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 33, in Chopp, “Reimagining Public Discourse,” 44.

²⁶ The material in this section is drawn from “The Religious Insights of Josiah Royce” in Mullin, *The Soul of Classical American Pragmatism*, 103-115.

spiritual lives.²⁷ Royce spoke of “religious” insight, but I will use the term “spiritual” in this essay since members of many religious traditions, or none, can experience all these changes in their thinking. Royce believed that our spiritual development was driven by a deep human need for “atonement” or oneness: a quest for reconciliation with ourselves, with other people, and with our sense of justice and right in the world. What he called the need for “salvation,” I will call in this essay a hunger for “healing and meaning,” again because these two ideas express the gist of Royce’s meaning for many modern-day teachers and students.

Royce names seven sources of spiritual insight; I name them (1) personal experience, (2) other people, (3) inquiry, (4) commitment, (5) loyalty, (6) tears, and (7) the “Beloved Community.” He describes how these experiences can build on each other if we pay attention to them and their effects on our lives. Personal and group experience awaken inside us a hunger for healing and purpose; serious inquiry and personal commitment move us toward healing and purpose, but cannot take us all of the way; loyalty, tears, and loving community make our commitment, healing, and sense of meaning more complete.²⁸

Royce argues that James’ “religious experiences” are better understood as profound *personal experiences*. These are the most basic sources of spiritual insight: undigested glimpses of our desire for healing and purpose, vague hunches that it can somehow be fulfilled. We can visit the mountaintop or the pit and catch these brief glimpses, but we cannot live there – we have to unpack the insights and cash them out in daily life. We miss someone; we wish we had treated them better. We get excited about a vision or project; how can it fit into our busy lives?

In order to follow up on our spiritual hunches, we need to factor in our relationships with *other people*. This is, of course, a key goal of the college experience. University life (like all social interaction) exposes us to people who are different. It challenges us to learn how to live with them, or to escape back into old, comfortable thoughts and behaviors. Shall we grow, or shall we dig in? We make mistakes: do we try to reconcile, or do we leave the problem / issue / person behind? We make friends: do we stay superficial, or dive deeper and risk sharing our different testimonies?

Choosing reconciliation and depth does not solve the problem – it simply highlights the hard work ahead. *Inquiry* and *personal commitment* are the next steps in working these challenges out. For Royce, inquiry means becoming more “reasonable.” To be reasonable is to think broadly, to understand the important connections. To be unreasonable is to be fixated on my own narrow interests or my own personal point of view. The more reasonable we become, the more we can balance divergent interests and understand how our commitments do (or do not) fit together. Becoming more reasonable, making more insightful connections, helps us get a handle on realities that are more complex and less obvious or concrete: relationships, families, organizations, values, social causes. Practicing inquiry helps us navigate these kinds of entities: when it’s time to play ball, to contribute, to step back, to resist, or to leave. Making commitment turns the results of our inquiries into concrete decisions and actions.

²⁷ See Josiah Royce, *The Sources of Religious Insight* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1912).

²⁸ Cf. Mullin, *The Soul of Classical American Pragmatism*, 105

When we commit ourselves head, hands, and heart to a certain purpose or value, we develop the habit that Royce labels *loyalty*. You need to be loyal if you want to be a good parent, a good spouse or lover, a good soldier, first responder, scientist, or political activists. Being loyal means being willing to sacrifice something lesser (sometimes even your own life) for something greater than your own narrow self-interest. Loyal people do not value their lives or their happiness any less; they perceive how their commitment makes life more worthwhile. With open eyes, they run toward the fire, toward the strife.

While loyalty brings purpose, it does not necessarily bring healing. Healing comes through embracing and digesting the hurt, through owning and crying the *tears*. Christians tell how Jesus' resurrected body still bears the marks of his wounds. Buddhists insist that enlightenment (buddha-nature) leads us to compassion for our own suffering and for that of others. Compassion (*cum passio*, "suffering with") is not pity, but feeling for, with, and in support of another. Healing comes from incorporating our wounds into our life practice in a meaningful and sustainable way. Buried wounds fester and become infected; as Freud observed, the "repressed" always returns in uglier, more insistent, and less manageable ways. Healing brings us to tears and carries us through to the other side.

Loyalty and healing come together in what Royce called "unity of spirit" and what Martin Luther King, Jr. – one of Royce's intellectual heirs – called the "*Beloved Community*." As people work out their individual spiritual journeys, hurting and reconciling, building a shared space in which each one can grow into fullness of life, they must develop a certain unity-in-diversity, without which their common work will fly apart. Royce called this the Spirit of the Community – a spirit he found within the Christian story of Pentecost (one Spirit plus different languages amazingly equals shared understanding, Acts 2). This Beloved Community exhibits "loyalty to loyalty" – its members cultivate relationships and social settings which nurture the personal, social, reflective, committed, healing experiences that lead to others' spiritual growth.

Royce offers a philosophical outline of the human quest for healing and meaning. He shows how one source of spiritual insight can lead naturally into another, as our experience becomes broader and our personalities become more mature.

There are clear echoes here with the insights of scholars who have studied young adulthood from a developmental psychology point of view. For example, William Perry, a researcher and college teacher, describes how moral and interpersonal thinking develops among college students: from "black and white" thinking, through various forms of open-mindedness ("It all depends on where you're at;" "It all depends on your point of view") to a sense of personal commitment towards other people and towards values greater than ourselves.²⁹ Erik Erikson, the famous therapist and developmental theorist, focuses on the human life cycle in its social context. Erikson argues that as our experience becomes broader and richer, we encounter one challenge after another, driving us towards deeper relationships, more responsibility, and greater wisdom. If we do not grow into those challenges, we inevitably find ourselves stuck, less and less able to cope.³⁰

²⁹ William G. Perry, Jr. *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970).

³⁰ Erik Erikson, "Eight Ages of Man," *International Journal of Psychiatry*, 2 no. 3 (1966): 281-300.

As these and other developmental theorists underline, young adulthood is a time of roiling transitions: a period of greater independence mixed with excitement, bravado, and lingering insecurity. Young people know they are supposed to be their own persons, but they don't have much practice doing so in a world where the safety nets and training wheels have begun to come off.³¹ They can use mentors – real people who can model how to be authenticity and how to testify in healthy ways. They can also use roadmaps for the journey, like the one that Royce has provided. Lucky is the student of faith and critical reason whose class gets to visit each key stop on that map: personal experience, interpersonal connection, rigorous inquiry, human commitment, a vision of idealism, participation in healthy a community, and the practice of healing tears.

³¹ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

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