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**Finding peace on the road to Emmaus:  
Religious education in the aftermath of Ferguson, MO**

*Abstract*

Public discourse in the US following the death of unarmed teenager Michael Brown at the hands of police in Ferguson, MO in the summer of 2014 makes clear the deep abyss which exists between many people carrying white skin privilege and those who do not. This divide must be confronted and transformed within Christian communities who seek to embody God's love and calling to justice. White religious educators can look to the Lukan text of the Emmaus story for hopeful sustenance in engaging systemic racism, and in doing so lean into transformative forms of religious education.

*Paper*

My response to the REA call for papers began in a quite different place than the paper in front of you now. A year ago I had in mind a way of thinking about religious identity development that might draw on emerging theological ideas from the realm of cultural studies to articulate a vision for shaping healthy religious identity amid systemic violence. I still want to write that paper, but on August 9<sup>th</sup> an unarmed teenager was shot to death by a police officer in Ferguson, MO.<sup>1</sup> Such an occurrence is becoming all too common in the United States. In the weeks that followed, as I worked on this paper, I was drawn deeply into a variety of solidarity rallies and public discussions that made my all too abstract and theoretical a paper seem increasingly irrelevant.

In the midst of that organizing I became acutely conscious of how far apart various communities are from each other in their experiences with and understanding of the US criminal justice system (the recent Pew poll noting that 80% of Black Americans believe the case raises important issues about race whereas only 37% of White Americans think so is but one documented instance of this gap).<sup>2</sup> I also became more and more aware of how much many of the religious people I know in predominately white communities are struggling to deal with our horror at what has happened. Even more so, the ugly fallout in social media and cable news from people who refuse to acknowledge the pain and legitimate concerns expressed by people of color about police brutality is a gaping wound in our social fabric. All too many white people do not know where to turn

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<sup>1</sup> A basic outline of the events can be found here:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting\\_of\\_Michael\\_Brown](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Michael_Brown)

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/08/18/stark-racial-divisions-in-reactions-to-ferguson-police-shooting/>.

in their frustration, and they are ill equipped to engage the issues. Given all of these realities, I want to speak in this paper from a personal location, one which is clear about my own white privilege,<sup>3</sup> but also about the ways in which Christian narratives can be helpful in this situation, rather than only or primarily problematic.<sup>4</sup>

*On the road to Emmaus...*

In the aftermath of Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, MO, largely because of the ability of social media to spread stories "in, with and under" commercial media, there are white people reflecting upon the reality of our criminal justice system who have never before felt any need or desire to do so. In this reflection I am positing that these people feel somewhat like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, devastated and overwhelmed at the ways in which their views of the world – views based on hegemonic narratives about justice, civil society, and due process – have been overturned.<sup>5</sup> They are disconsolate, unable to imagine a way forward.

At the same time, there are others of us who seek to remember and embody the end of the Emmaus story, the joy and energy of the disciples as they run back to their community and spread the news that Jesus is still alive. I have experienced some of this hope myself, in the large numbers of people who have rallied in solidarity with the people of Ferguson, in the widespread consciousness-raising happening in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death, in the ways in which some in religious communities have connected with the integrity and power of standing in anti-racist solidarity.

But of course, whether you are infused with hope at new awareness, or dejected at how painful the long road ahead will be, the reality is that all of us are walking into a future we can not see for certain, a future that holds enormous challenges around racialization, not to mention other forms of systemic violence. In many ways this is a time of great uncertainty in which we have been called, as the Lutheran prayer says, "to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown."

Why write about this experience while it is still happening, and why do so in the midst of an academic conference? Why risk invoking the pain and anger and divisiveness of the past months without the more formal and distancing conventions of scholarly writing? Because I am convinced that the dry and formal tones of academic discourse can serve to hide a deeper problem that we are facing in our lives together, a problem that communities of faith either engage and transform, or collapse into and sink under.

That problem is the challenge of finding our way to truth and meaning in the midst of competing understandings of reality. The last few months of response to Michael

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<sup>3</sup> For a description of white privilege and my own struggles with it, see Hess (1998).

<sup>4</sup> I will do my best in this essay to speak from my specific social location – that is, as a white, North American, able-bodied, straight, cisgender, Roman Catholic woman from the upper Midwest. When I speak of "Christian communities," for instance, I do so not to deny other religious communities who might hold similar beliefs, but more simply from a desire not to speak beyond that location. I hope my ideas are narrowly descriptive, perhaps evocative, but certainly not in any way intended to be definitive. I hope to subvert certain forms of disembodied academic discourse, not further inscribe them.

<sup>5</sup> The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is found in the final chapter of the book of Luke in the Christian Bible (Luke 24:13-35, <http://www.usccb.org/bible/luke/24>).

Brown's death have reinforced for me something profound about the world we live in: many of us perceive strikingly different realities. Even though we live side by side with each other, even though we inhabit the same physical spaces, the meaning we make in those spaces is often radically different, even profoundly incompatible. Indeed, how white people know the world is being fundamentally contested, and unless white people, in particular, find ways to reach across the numerous divides that keep us apart from our wider communities, those contestations will lead to violence rather than to healing and reconciliation.

I think digital media make that challenge more visible than ever before.

Cathy Davidson, a scholar who has spent a lot of time thinking about digital media and learning, and particularly the findings of contemporary brain science, argues that the widespread shifts taking place through the increasingly pervasive use of digital technologies help us to notice elements of our context that we had previously ignored (Davidson, 2011). She writes: "The science of attention teaches us that we tend to pay attention to what we have been taught to value and that we tend to be astonishingly blind to change until something disrupts our pattern and makes us see what has been invisible before" (243-244).

Digital media are enormous disrupters. They can make us see that to which we have been blind before. Many people in Christian communities worry that they are becoming disembodied by the amount of time they spend with digital media, the time they spend on Facebook for instance, or Youtube. Valuing the way in which Christians confess an incarnational faith, they urge fasting from digital media and working harder to be in physical spaces with each other.

While I agree with some of this critique – certainly fasting is a deeply spiritual practice – I am not convinced that our problems began with digital media.<sup>6</sup> In fact, I think it is possible that digital media might be capable of helping us to be more authentic, more physically present, more attuned to the differences and challenges of our physical embodiment than we previously have been – kind of a "now you see it" moment – if we choose to attend as fully as our consciousness allows.

I think that the very strangeness of some of our practices – sitting in a room with family at Christmas for instance, and having everyone in the room poring over a digital device – the very strangeness of such a picture can disrupt our "taken for granted" practices.<sup>7</sup> They can help us to "see" the communication challenges in front of us. But only if we choose to see, only if we value enough of our being together that we can "see" when we are *not* embodying such a commitment.

Unfortunately few of us are choosing to do so. And digital media can make it very easy not to see, very easy to create self-enclosed spaces. In the past two months I have been in conversation with many people who have been deeply affected in various ways by the national debate over the circumstances of Michael Brown's death. Many of these conversations have involved people struggling to figure out how to engage the conversation in their churches, where past experience has taught them the prevailing

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<sup>6</sup> For a thoughtful argument about the ways in which our shift from a more communal context to a more individualistic one can be traced to a shift from party line telephones and buses to individual phones and cars, and eventually a shift to "networked individualism," see Rainie and Wellman (2012).

<sup>7</sup> A lovely visual evocation of this concern -- and what happens when it is flipped -- is found in the November 2013 Apple iPhone commercial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v76f6KPSJ2w>

wisdom of “don’t ask, don’t tell” when it comes to divisive issues, rather than trying to engage differences directly. The experience of disagreeing in their congregations has not been seen as an opportunity for learning, for growth, for practice in seeking understanding, but rather as a threat to being, a threat to identity, an attack on people’s personhood.

I know I have just stated this challenge in stark terms, but I do not think I am exaggerating. For many people in predominately white and middle class Christian congregations, disagreements over sexuality, over racism, over economic inequality, are a cause of deep alarm and existential angst. One of the biggest challenges new media offer to us arrives as both an opportunity and a dilemma. That is, the representation of various kinds of identity-defining difference can become very present, very personal, very “in your face.” That same representation, however, can highlight conflict and oppressive silencing, rather than openness to understanding. How might we engage such differences in ways that are oriented towards learning? towards religious identity which is loyal but open?

This challenge lives at the heart of the Emmaus story. Perhaps not in terms of new media, but certainly in terms of what it means to have one’s understanding of the world turned completely upside down. Think about the two disciples walking down the road. Not going anywhere urgently, just walking along. They are heartbroken by the events they have just witnessed, and can make no sense of them. They thought Jesus was the Messiah come to lead them into a glorious future, and instead he has been executed in a horrific manner, hung up in humiliation, an act which has destroyed their hopes and dreams.

What happens next? They encounter a stranger on the road. A stranger who apparently doesn’t share their feelings – but clearly shares their stories and the core teachings of their community. This stranger proceeds to reinterpret these stories, to point out to them how what they were taught has indeed come to pass, how the events of the past days were indeed foretold, and how they might see this story from a different angle. Essentially this stranger is teaching them, he is confronting their understanding of their knowing, this stranger is upending all that they thought they knew, by interpreting their own stories, their own teachings back to them from a different perspective. My experiences with many people who carry white skin privilege in the last few months has been that they have had their entire notion of the world – a notion which includes fairness, equity, a belief in the power of law, reliance on policing and courts, and so on – overturned in a nearly inescapable brush with a reality that most if not all people of color in the US have had no choice but to endure their entire lives.

This kind of encounter, where people who are ordinarily quite blind to systemic injustice suddenly catch a glimpse of it, is something that I want to support and encourage.<sup>8</sup> But it is an encounter that requires both support and challenge. As Robert Kegan has taught us, simply encountering disruptions to our meaning-making is not enough for true transformation. Contradiction of meaning can be so unsettling to people that they retreat back into previous understanding, rather than making a move to a new frame. Transformation to a new frame requires what Kegan terms continuity, a form of holding space which allows for new structures of meaning-making to consolidate. Such

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<sup>8</sup> Two recent resources from the literature on the criminal justice system which I have found helpful in this work are Alexander (2010) and Stuntz (2011).

continuity can often be described as a larger community into which someone is invited, in which their previous form of making meaning is acknowledged and its origin respected, while at the same time the new meaning is cherished and nurtured (Kegan, 1982, 1994).

Here the continuation of the Emmaus story is what I imagine as a course of such continuity, for the Emmaus story doesn't end on the road, with the disciples having engaged a different interpretation, and now being ready to share a new perspective on their story. No, the disciples are still simply listening to the stranger, until they invite him to share a meal with them at the close of the day. It is only in the sharing of that meal, in the breaking of the bread, that they suddenly recognize – on some deeper level, in some form of knowing that wasn't yet clear to them on the road, although they sensed it in “the burning in their hearts” – that this is Jesus, raised from the dead. It is at that moment in the story that Jesus vanishes.

What is this kind of learning which transforms them? What is it that we might say about it? How do we recognize it? How might we cultivate it? I would like to offer a few elements, and ponder to what extent these elements might help us in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death.

First of all, notice that the disciples were simply on the road, in the midst of their daily life. They were not at worship, they were not in school, they were not in any place where they were *on alert for new learning*, they were simply walking on the road. Perhaps in some ways they were even defended against new learning, because they were neither seeking nor expecting it there, and perhaps were even fleeing from it.

Second, notice that they were formed enough in practices of that time, that entering into discussion with a stranger on the road was a natural and typical thing to do. Strangers on the road were not to be feared so much as simply encountered.

Third, their hospitality did not end with a challenging discussion, but took on the tangible form of a shared meal. I'll return to this element of the story later, but notice now that they invited this stranger to share a meal with them and it was during that meal, in the familiarity of the practices that they had no doubt shared over and over with Jesus, that they finally *saw* him, that they *re-recognized* him.

How different this is from the contexts we inhabit today! Today our daily lives are filled with ways in which we not only do not offer hospitality to strangers, we actively find ways to barricade ourselves against them. Indeed, and here I will speak specifically from the perspective of a person who carries white privilege in the US context, listening to some of my white friends I wonder if they had ever had a real conversation with someone who does not carry that privilege.

I have been struck, over and over again during the past months, by how far apart our observations are. It is as if we are not living in the same world. On the one hand, perhaps I might be energized and encouraged by this range of responses, because it could signal a deep and complex response to a particularly thorny issue. Perhaps. But it also signals to me how vast the abyss is between the different perceptions of reality that white people and people of color hold in the US context. This is one point at which digital media become such a double-edged sword. Because you can – if you are thoughtful and intentional – find vastly divergent perspectives available by which to think about a specific issue. But you can also, if you are white, build a self-enclosed world in which everyone sees the same things and thinks the same things in response. Such a self-

enclosed world is the kind of space to which people retreat if they cannot find larger communities to offer them continuity in consolidating new insights.

So where am I going with this? What is it I am trying to say about learning, and learning in the midst of digital cultures, that might be helpful for religious identity formation in Christian contexts? I want to make four points in this essay:

- (1) First, Christian commitments to and understanding of the Trinity demand a commitment to and understanding of diverse and social forms of knowing and learning.
- (2) Second, the more diverse the knowers, the more robust the knowing – this recognition is an essential element for forming learning communities.
- (3) Third, digital tools can be engaged with spiritual practices that make them useful resources in the midst of these learning challenges.
- (4) Fourth, leading religious communities requires a form of gardening leadership – it is about tending to our *learning* and if we keep the Emmaus story in front of us we have a way forward through our uncertainties, a pathway to hope and engagement

Let me take each one in turn.

- (1) A renewed and renewing understanding of the Trinity, as a resource for a renewed and renewing understanding of what is demanded of us in discipleship, requires openness to diversity. As Daniel Migliore writes so compellingly:

Trinitarian doctrine describes God in terms of shared life and love rather than in terms of domineering power. God loves in freedom, lives in communion, and wills creatures to live in a new community of mutual love and service. God is self-sharing, other-regarding, community-forming love. This is the “depth grammar” of the doctrine of the Trinity that lies beneath all the “surface grammar” and all of the particular, and always inadequate, names and images that we employ when we speak of the God of the Gospel (2004, 73).

This is powerful language. But I wonder sometimes if we really mean it? At least, I wonder if we have really lived into it?

Willie James Jennings has written eloquently about the ways in which our Christian imagination has been shaped over the centuries – many of them deeply destructive and deforming of our witness to Christ (2010). As much as we care about Christian evangelism, for instance, we must always and everywhere be mindful of the ways in which a passionate commitment to sharing the good news has often, not just rarely, but *often* combined with human sinfulness to become horrific, brutal, violent, and systematically oppressive. One of the elements that Jennings points to, one of the ways in which Christian imagination took a wrong turn – over and over again – was in our forms of knowing and learning as they pertained to the social construction of what came to be known as “race.” He writes, for instance, that:

Europeans enacted racial agency as a theologically articulated way of understanding their bodies in relation to new spaces and new peoples and to their new power over those spaces and peoples (58).

Whiteness.... a way of organizing bodies by proximity to and approximation of white bodies ... a form of identity coupled with processes of identity formation emerges from the colonialist moment, the effects of which scholars have not begun to conceptualize.... That becoming is not simply assimilation, but more decisively a becoming facilitated by whiteness, an agency born inside the racial imagination (59).

The loss here is of a life-giving collaboration of identity between place and bodies, people and animals. The loss here is also of the possibility of new identities bound up with entering new spaces. Absent these possibilities people are invited into an ever tightening insularity of collective identity and collective narration (63).

Perhaps supported in part by way of the neurological mechanisms Cathy Davidson describes, orthodox Christian descriptions of God blinded people to the realities in front of them, rather than opening up relationship. Western Christians literally *could not see* what was right in front of them. Bondage to sin – particularly the sins of supersessionism, colonization, racism and dualist separation of mind and body – meant that many Christians could not see the native peoples in front of them as human. They could not believe the women whose visions spoke of deep relationality with God. They could not risk having their knowing transformed through learning from the diverse peoples they were encountering. I wish that I could remain “in the past tense” as I write about this blindness, but my recent experiences only highlight how deeply the attentions of people carrying white skin privilege have been directed away from seeing what is right in front of us when it comes to systemic racism.

Jennings proposes that part of what we need to do differently, in confessing a deeply relational, deeply communicative, Trinitarian God, is to expand our knowing and learning, both in terms of its form and in terms of its substance – we need to be continual learners. When we are called to “go and make disciples” we are indeed called to go and make *learners* – and in that learning we must also risk being open to the Spirit, and the very real possibility that in sharing what we know we will find our knowing transformed. So how are we to do that?

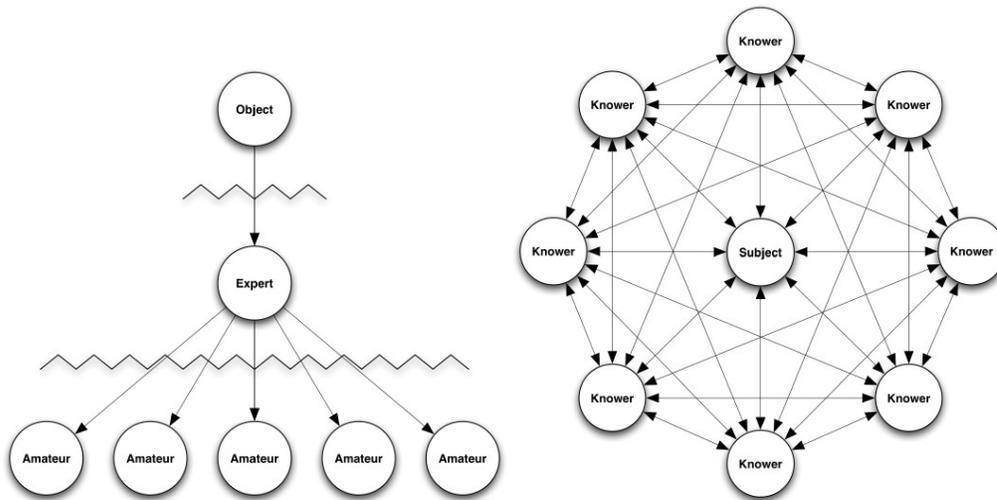
Here is my second point:

(2) One way to be more deliberately attentive to the Spirit is an insight that we are learning from certain digital communities – that is, that the more diverse the knowers, the more robust the knowing.<sup>9</sup> This is also an insight that comes from multiple sources, and as Jennings notes it is deep within at least some strains of Christian tradition. But it is not always an insight that Christians have been willing to live into, particularly in the parts of our Christian community dominated by white privilege, and particularly in certain forms of Christian theology which dominate the academy.

Parker Palmer has something very useful to offer in this regard. He wrote a classic little book many years ago entitled *To Know As We Are Known*, in which he criticized what he labeled the “objectivist myth of knowing” and called educators instead to reclaim the ancient wisdom of the desert mothers and fathers, and thus to enter into a “relational community of truth.” A decade later Palmer published a book called *The Courage to Teach*, and in that book he used visual diagrams to make his argument more accessible. Consider these diagrams, these epistemological maps, for a moment (1998, 103 and 105):

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Benkler, Thomas and Seely Brown, Rheingold, Shirky, Weinberger, and Zuckerman.



These are maps for considering whether knowing – and by extension, learning – is deeply relational. The map on the left, the “objectivist myth of truth,” depicts an epistemological stance which denies such relationality. This map draws straight lines which go in only one direction, focused through an expert who observes an object before transmitting such observations to amateurs. The map on the right, by way of contrast, draws relationships that flow from each knower to every other knower, and from each knower to and from the subject at the heart of the knowing.

Palmer argues that the map on the right, the “community of truth,” most adequately depicts the source of all knowing in relationship with God incarnate. He suggests that disruptions in that model can describe sin, and that the primeval example of such sin can be found in the story of Adam and Eve who: “failed to honor the fact that God knew them first, knew them in their limits as well as their potentials. In their refusal to know as they were known, they reached for a kind of knowledge that always leads to death” (1983, 25). Building on this insight, Palmer suggests that “In Christian understanding, the gap exists not so much because truth is hidden and evasive but because we are. We hide from the transforming power of truth, we evade truth’s quest for us” (1983, 58-59). And then, “to learn the truth is to enter into relationships requiring us to respond as well as to initiate, to give as well as to take.... Objectivist education is a strategy for avoiding our own conversation. If we can keep reality ‘out there’ we can avoid, for a while, the truth that lays the claim of community on our individual and collective lives” (1983, 40).

Such knowing demands that we recognize both how imperative it is that we bring diverse perceptions to the table fellowship of our learning, but also that we work very hard to create environments in which those diverse perceptions are held together with respect to their individual integrities. There is a lovely word for such a process, a word coined by architect R. Buckminster Fuller long ago: “tensegrity.” Tension + integrity = tensegrity.<sup>10</sup>

Fuller’s point was that in that kind of tension you build stable structures by holding opposing or competing forces together with respect for their individual integrities.

<sup>10</sup> For a more extensive articulation of “tensegrity” see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tensegrity>

Palmer follows on this insight by offering a credo of sorts, a framework for thinking through what he calls the “grace of great things.” It goes like this:

We invite *diversity* into our community not because it is politically correct but because diverse viewpoints are demanded by the manifold mysteries of great things.  
We embrace *ambiguity* not because we are confused or indecisive but because we understand the inadequacy of our concepts to embrace the vastness of great things.  
We welcome *creative conflict* not because we are angry or hostile but because conflict is required to correct our biases and prejudices about the nature of great things.  
We practice *honesty* not only because we owe it to one another but because to lie about what we have seen would be to betray the truth of great things.  
We experience *humility* not because we have fought and lost but because humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen – and once we have seen them, humility is the only posture possible.  
We become *free men and women* through education not because we have privileged information but because tyranny in any form can only be overcome by invoking the grace of great things (1998, 107-108).

These are practices by which we can avoid the two most common ditches on the road to Emmaus. The ditch on one side of the road is utter relativism. This is the ditch that would claim that only what I feel within myself is truth. It is my truth, and you have yours, but nothing is shared. On occasion people have read the Lukan story, with the line about “our hearts burning within us,” and seen only this kind of emotional relativism. That is *not* Palmer’s point. That is indeed a refusal to enter into the grace of great things.

The ditch on the other side, though, is a ditch that Jennings points to – a ditch that we are always teetering on the edge of in white western contexts, particularly in the theological academy – and that is the ditch in which we understand Christian doctrine only as a stable and static set of truths which must be transferred into the passive minds and hearts of people.

Instead we must walk down the center of this road to Emmaus. Mark Edwards has a way of describing this kind of stance from within his particular location of Lutheranism, but I think it holds true in wider Christian settings as well:

The Lutheran Christian believes that she is called to live faithfully and fully in a material, contingent world that was created and is sustained and ruled by God. She knows that she is a fleshly, fallible human being who has been given an almost divine gift of reason to do her part in understanding rightly and ruling justly within that world. She recognizes that there are boundaries, real but often hard to discern, beyond which her reason cannot go without great danger of error. She lives with the Lutheran dialectic of law and gospel, knowing that to negotiate the tensions she requires not only prudential wisdom but also unmerited grace (2002, 9).

The opportunity we face at the moment, this rich vital compelling opportunity to know in deep relationship can be found in digital media spaces. But as Michael Wesch notes, there is a paradox there. We can experience a deeply participatory, humble and open understanding of postmodern knowing in such contexts, we can even experience a deeply generative form of human freedom. But at the same time, paradoxically, these spaces also

provide room for us to practice, publicly, the performance of hatred.<sup>11</sup> Which leads me to my third point: how is it that digital tools can help us to stay on the generative side of that paradox? What are the spiritual practices that we can bring to our engagement with these tools, that will help us to keep the perichoretic dance of the Trinity at the heart of our knowing and learning?

(3) To start with, let's remember the dynamics that are changing in media cultures – dynamics of how we engage authority, how we experience authenticity, and what it means to have agency (Hess, 2013). Each of these elements of our knowing and learning are being challenged in digital media spaces. The disciples on the road to Emmaus knew how they felt about what had transpired. They knew their core religious teachings. They had lived and worked and loved with Jesus – but they did not recognize him. They did not recognize him until the combination of new learning and a deeply shared practice (breaking bread) opened their eyes and their hearts to who was teaching them. All three of these elements – a new vision on the authority of what they had been taught, an authentic response to that teaching etched in their hearts, and the agency, the *doing* of hospitality, of breaking bread, opened them up to knowing Jesus.

Parker Palmer talks about whole sight, about knowing with the eyes of the heart and the eyes of the mind. He describes that knowing as grounded in love – and not just any love, but the love which pours out from Jesus Christ, the love which is intimately bound up in the relationality of the Trinity – God communicating within God's very self, and God communicating with and through and for and within God's Creation (1983, xxiii). We need to see with whole sight, and that whole sight requires that we engage authority in new ways, that we inhabit authenticity in more full and whole ways, and that we enter into practices that shape us to receive God's agency.

I want to say something hard here: we have to submit to God's agency. Yes, those of us trained in the white male western world of individual autonomy and knowing have to learn what it means to be obedient in the deep sense of that word. We have to be willing to be “acted upon” rather than solely be actors (Palmer, 1983, 128 ff). We need to be consciously reflective about our epistemological practices, and the ways in which our commitments lead us to shape our knowing when we enter environments shaped by digital tools. Palmer's “whole sight” demands that we seek diverse knowers.

The apostle Paul wrote to the community at Corinth:

When I came to you, brothers, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified (1Cor2:6).

When Christians confess our faith in Jesus Christ we are confessing that we *know* in a way that is a bedrock upon which all else is built, from which all else flows, through which all can be known. But in that same confession we must recognize that we are called to risk our own knowing, we are called to risk transformation – and that call frees us to engage without fear or doubt.

How do we do this?

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<sup>11</sup> The best articulation he has made of this paradox is embedded in his 2008 lecture at the Library of Congress, “An anthropological introduction to YouTube,” at 29:13 minutes in: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-IZ4\\_hU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-IZ4_hU)

Consider the example of systemic racism. It is not enough that I have examples in my own life of relationships with people of color. It is not enough that I have learned how to shape my speech and my interpersonal interactions so that I am not openly displaying ugly bigotry. I need to move beyond my own experience, an experience which is inevitably marred by socialization into a system of white privilege. I need to do the hard biblical work, the complex theological engagement, the holistic systemic analysis, that makes thoughtful discussion with close friends who have differing experiences an opportunity that really opens me up to the Spirit's leading – and that leads me to action and change in resistance to systemic racism.

But what if I don't have any close friends with opposing views? How do I live with sufficient hospitality to invite such views into my awareness? How do I encounter these biblical interpretations, these theological frameworks, these systemic analyses? Digital tools can help me to do this. They can give me a space to engage differing ideas without first experiencing them as a personal attack. They can also give me room to hear, watch and read these ideas with a degree of freedom from anxiety that would not be the case if I were to engage them first in person in a debate mode. I can read thoughtful pieces by people on different places in the theological spectrum, in different faith communities – even in different faith traditions. But my practices matter here. I need already to have set up a framework for getting to these ideas, a pattern of practice that puts those ideas in my vision, that places them in front of me, from people whom I respect and to whom I am accountable. So it is not simply a consumption of ideas, or a “take what I want and jettison the rest” kind of place, but a relationship in my daily life, with strangers on the road, and a hospitality to learning that invites real relationship.

It is an epistemological stance which demands that I see truth as obedience to more than my own knowing:

knowing of any sort is relational, animated by a desire to come into deeper community with what we know.... Knowing is how we make community with the unavailable other, with realities that would elude us without the connective tissue of knowledge. Knowing is a human way to seek relationship and, in the process, to have encounters and exchanges that will inevitably alter us. At its deepest reaches, knowing is always communal (Palmer, 1983, 54).

It is a stance that recognizes that we find truth in its most robust forms when we have the most diverse array of knowers.

(4) So how do religious educators do this in the midst of digital environments? What could or should it mean to be a white religious educator in in the US in the late autumn of 2014?<sup>12</sup>

Scott Cormode argues that pastoral leaders are builders, shepherds, and gardeners. I think it is this latter posture – the leader as gardener, as meaning-maker, as cultivator of a biblical imagination and nurturer of theological identity – leader as teacher/ learner – that is most pertinent now (2002). I think we can use the Emmaus story as a mnemonic – a memory hook – to help us in the active practice of tending to our meaning gardens, in

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<sup>12</sup> I should note that I have tried to think about and write about these issues for many years, and you can find more scholarly examples of my arguments in the references attached to this essay.

our leadership of learning communities. Think of it in three ways: daily life, stranger/estranged, and practices of hospitality and table fellowship.

First, we have to be present with people in their daily lives. Far more has been written about the “Sunday/Monday” divide than I want to read, but the underlying point that God is working in the world, that we need to find ways to be open to meeting God in the daily, in the ordinary, fairly screams out of the Emmaus story. That recognition has to include the dailyness of digital environments. Being active in digital environments is no longer optional for pastoral leaders. Even in parts of the world where access to digital tools is most difficult, we need to be there. Indeed, it is a justice issue now that we work to help people access these environments.

Social media, for instance, is first and foremost about *relationality* (Drescher and Anderson, 2012). Christians confess that our God is an intimately relational, communicative God. That equation means that God is woven into social media spaces, too. How will we hear God in those spaces if we are not even present? So, first, the Emmaus story reminds us that we need to stay present and attentive in daily life.

Now let us think about strangers – and even more to the point for me, that from which and those from whom, we have been estranged. I mentioned Jennings’ work earlier, and I bring it up again here because I think he is by far one of the most eloquent theologians working today at the intersection of Christian identity and estrangement. How is it that so many Christian communities in the US remain so segregated? How is that Christianity became a force through which racism was built? How is it that structural, institutional racism remains such a potent and deadly force in our churches today? How is that white privilege still so thoroughly permeates the theological academy? Jennings offers keen analysis of these questions, and lifts up for us some of the stories from the underside, some of the stories of resistance within our tradition to this colonizing, violent, brutal epistemological commitment. What can we learn from that resistance? More than I can state here, of course, but I would highlight his conviction that

Christianity is a teaching faith. It carries in its heart the making of disciples through teaching. Yet its pedagogical vision is inside its Christological horizon and embodiment, inside its *participatio Christi* and its *imitatio Christi*. The colonialist moment indicates the loss of that horizon and embodiment through its enclosure in exaggerated judgment, hyperevaluation tied to a racial optic. Pedagogical evaluation in the New World set the context within which the theological imagination functioned. Theology was inverted with pedagogy. Teaching was not envisioned inside discipleship, but discipleship was envisioned inside teaching (2010, 106).

I want to emphasize that last sentence: “Teaching was not envisioned inside discipleship, but discipleship was envisioned inside teaching.”

He is resisting this destructive practice, he is arguing that rather than assuming that only disciples might know what is to be taught, what needs to be learned, we all learn through participation. Ancient processes of the catechumenate invited people to journey with a community into ever deeper participation in the mystery of God together. Jennings’ argument is deeply resonant with that made by Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown in their recent book *A New Culture of Learning* (2011). In that book they note that digital environments are teaching us that we participate in order to learn, rather than learn in order to belong. The very act of participation draws us deeper into a desire to learn. That is very different from being positioned in such a way that first you must learn what the

community is about before you can join it. Instead, you enter into engagement with the community and in the process learn and are drawn ever deeper together.

How beautiful and resonant that assertion is with the central work we do in religious education, where we affirm that Christian education is not about “giving faith,” but rather about helping people to explore the relationship they are already called into by God. When I argue from within a Christian space that making disciples is about making learners, please note that I mean that in this way: God makes disciples, God makes learners – and for each of us, in responding to that invitation from God, for each of us that very act of being a disciple involves risking our own knowing. Every time I listen to another person’s story I am inviting transformation into my life. Every time I share my own story with someone I am inviting them to help me learn more with it. It is an invitation, a form of hospitality. It is an openness to the stranger on the road; an openness even to those from whom we have been estranged.

I think perhaps the most important question white Christians in the US can ask in this season in which we find ourselves is from whom are we estranged, and why? From whom have we been estranged in the midst of the debates over violence and racism in our churches and in our culture? From whom have we been estranged in the vicious cycles of economic inequality which we regularly experience?

How is it that a people whose convictions ought to drive us toward the stranger, toward the powerless, toward those who are widowed and orphaned and imprisoned and hungry – how is it that large segments of Christian communities find themselves instead refusing to engage each other through polite silences at best, or ugly violence at worst?

Digital tools can give us access to profound and interesting responses to these questions. But in order to access those tools we must first be able to ask the question. We have to have a desire that draws us into engagement with difference. Over and over again throughout the religious education literature you can find references to the need to engage difference.<sup>13</sup> But far too often, in our actual, physical, embodied practices we are still isolating ourselves.

There are many, many limits to this. As we become more and more familiar with the tools, we can build practices that help us to widen the community of knowers and learners. I am the first person to claim that we will have far more failures than successes with these tools. But as Clay Shirky notes, a thousand little failures can lead to a gigantic success (2008). And as the author of the Gospel of Matthew once noted, “with God all things are possible.”

Digital tools can extend both access and participation. They can invite engagement with many from whom we have been estranged, if we are only open to the Spirit’s leading in doing so. There will be dangers – in our sinfulness we no doubt will create new opportunities for estrangement – but again, we can trust that God will be working with us. To reiterate my point here, the Emmaus story reminds us that when walking along the road in our daily lives, we need to be about doing the hard work of confronting and transforming estrangement.

What about the final piece of the Emmaus story, that part of the story which highlights breaking bread together in hospitality? There are, of course, many deeply

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<sup>13</sup> Simply by way of an introduction to the literature, consider Conde-Frazier (2007), Court (2007), Dalton (2003), Irizarry (2003, 2008), Miedema and Roebben (2004), Parker (2003 and 2006), Selçuk (2008), Smith (2004), Tran (2010), Turpin (2010), Wimberly (1994), and Wright (2008).

theological elements to this part of the story and the ways in which Christians have drawn this text into our liturgical practices. Others have written and spoken about those elements very eloquently. I want to note here only that the disciples were open to this encounter because they had already been deeply practiced in the hospitality of breaking bread.

The more we get drawn into the collaborative participatory processes of digital environments, the more we are also drawn into deeply physical embodied practices. It is not an either/or. Rather, the very act of participating more fully in one space draws us into desiring more participation in others. This is a reality that those of us in Christian community ignore at our own peril.<sup>14</sup>

I will state this bluntly: a desire to be active in worship, to be engaged by music and movement and story, is not only or even most often about consumerism. Arguing that people's desire to be moved in worship is a negative symptom of consumer commodification is too easy. Of course our sinfulness will draw us into desiring things which are not healthy for us. But deep listening to the Spirit and healthy practices which hone that receptive posture can draw us through and even beyond such desires.

There is an important analogy to be made explicit here. Our practices with food have much to teach us about our practices of communication. We need food to survive, we need communication to survive. We live in cultures that often have unhealthy food practices, and we live in cultures that often have unhealthy communication practices. Yet just as we have learned much about shaping more healthy food practices, we can shape and reshape our practices of communication. Practice matters with food, practice matters with communication. A healthy diet matters with food – and a healthy diet matters with communication. Where is our food grown, and how? Where does our meaning grow, and in what ways?

What does your media diet look like, for instance?<sup>15</sup> How are we as pastoral leaders breaking bread in digital media? Are we sharing our faith in that context? What are our practices of communication? We get an awful lot of practice in the wider culture with shouting at each other. Indeed, I noticed during the last few weeks of pain over Michael Brown's death, that people who were stressed and anxious and in some ways hurt by toxic practices of communication in digital media simply fasted from the process all together. Fasting is not a bad mechanism – indeed, fasting is an ancient and well regarded spiritual discipline. But there are others as well, and I fear that many of us as pastoral leaders have grown unfamiliar with them.

I could go all of the way back to Martin Luther's small catechism for instance, and note the good advice he offered in his explanation of the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment. What does it mean to "put the best construction" on someone's argument, for example? Or even further back in our community's tradition, I could remember that Paul urged the community at Corinth to remember:

... we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Campbell (2012) and Thomas and Seely Brown (2011).

<sup>15</sup> When I work with this issue in parishes, I often use an handout which is available online here: <http://meh.religioused.org/newsdiethandout.pdf>.

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies (2Cor4:7).

We know that our meaning-making will be broken, we know that we will err, but we also know that God's deep love will sustain us and knit us together in spite of that sin. So how are we open to that love-making?

One of the practices that I have seen bear good fruit in these past few months has to do with learning how to seek understanding, instead of how to proclaim righteousness. We have lots of practice with debates, with arguments, with looking for the holes in someone's argument, with seeking to change people's minds, with proclaiming our own righteousness. But we have much less practice with seeking to believe, with seeking to first understand how and why and what someone else believes, with respecting them enough to be genuinely curious. This is what Parker Palmer means when he speaks of "healing the heart of democracy," a kind of stance which invites genuine and respectful curiosity, which seeks to "soften hearts" rather than to "change minds" (2011).

This is the kind of knowing which white Christians need to practice when our brothers and sisters of color speak to us of their pain at systemic racism in the US, of their nearly constant experiences of suspicion and distrust from police. We need to allow our hearts to be softened, and our minds quieted enough to hear what they have to say.

As I noted earlier, love is at the heart of our knowing, and love must be at the heart of our learning. But what kind of love? I think we need deeply *agapic* practices. *Agape* is the form of love which draws us to care about others with whom we have no biological ties. It is a form of love which is a commitment to the best interest of others while expecting no return oneself. It is a form of love that is not so much a consistent feeling as it is a consistent choice. And that makes it a choice which we can practice.

When the disciples broke bread with Jesus they recognized him in the very breaking of the bread. Was it just the kind of bread they broke? I have a hunch that it had far more to do with how he broke it, with the physical, embodied way in which his voice and his hands and his movement invited them into a practice in which they had already been formed that made the difference. How are we practicing engaging difference? How are we helping our communities to practice being alert to learning in any moment? How are we helping them to listen for the Spirit's whispers no matter the context?

In the last two years I have been involved with the Respectful Conversations project here in MN, which is an attempt to enter into the public conversation around the various divisive issues by helping congregations to host conversations that were about just that, respectful conversation, rather than debate. Our tagline was that we were aiming to "soften hearts, not change minds."

Over and over again in that project I watched people enter a highly structured process and have deep conversations in which they learned to value their own positions, but to do so while respecting the personhood of someone who held a different position. One of the most damaging things about some of the recent media commentary on our criminal justice system has been that rather than helping people to engage ideas and to have thoughtful discussions about our disagreements, they actually evoked and built upon our primitive impulses to experience disagreement as an attack on our personhood, as an invitation to revenge.

I have seen the same thing happen in church circles. Not so much through blatant speech, although I suppose I could point to some examples there, too, but more through

subtle and even more painful forms of toxic communication. What we have called “MN nice” here in my part of the country is actually often a form of micro-aggression, rather than an open invitation to hospitality. Imagine a pastoral leaders’ disdainful rolling of the eyes, or someone’s rapid clicking of “like” on a Facebook post without thinking about the implications that ‘liking’ might have for people in communities beyond their immediate circles. I have done that myself. It is all too easy to click the “like” button, and much harder to think about how to invite disagreement into a Facebook stream. How does one tend a Facebook news stream, for instance, so that you can practice hospitality for differing voices?

Gardening leadership demands that we cultivate a garden, that we nourish and feed and tend and weed and water. But also that we recognize that it is God’s work in which we are participating. To speak in Christian terms, we are neither the Creator nor the Redeemer nor the Sustainer. How do we help our communities to practice communication in ways that support transformative hospitality, hospitality that eases estrangement? By exercising our muscles of communicative practice. By being genuinely curious about those from whom we are estranged. By being present with integrity in daily ways. By participating deeply and fully in all that swirls around us. By being open to learning in the midst of difference, rather than retreating into a posture of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” By learning to bake the bread that we share – by learning to create and produce in digital modes of communication.

I love doing digital storytelling with people in specific contexts. It is a method for helping people not only to listen to their own stories, but put them into digital formats which help them to continue to reflect upon them, and also – importantly – share them in ways that invite further community. I run these workshops with people as diverse as teenagers in urban churches, and faculty at scholarly meetings.

Here is one important aspect of digital story telling of this sort: it is a practice. It is a practice that invites you to slow down and attend to the story you are seeking to share. As you narrate and create your digital story, you must first listen for what it is before you can begin to create a storyboard, let alone the digital elements of the story. This is storytelling as a practice that helps you to notice, first, your own story and then – in the sharing – be present to other stories. I have seen digital storytelling put at the heart of confirmation classes, and then expanded into weaving together multiple generations in sharing stories (McQuiston, 2007). I have seen digital storytelling make a congregation’s stories come alive for people separated from each other through distance, and I have seen it help people whose fears blocked them from each other find ways to connect.<sup>16</sup>

I quoted Cathy Davidson at the beginning of this essay. She writes of the ways our brains are wired to pay attention to that which we value. Learning to value our own stories is a good first step in learning how to value other people’s stories. But we have to find ways to hear our stories in their fullness – in the hope and in the brokenness, in the mythic and the parabolic; and then we can practice that attending, that listening, that hospitality to learning, with others (Anderson and Foley, 1998).

My hope for all of us, but particularly for white religious educators, is that in the process we will find ways to keep our feet on the road to Emmaus. That we will listen to our hearts but seek knowing with our minds (the whole sight of Parker Palmer). That we

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<sup>16</sup> For more examples, view entries tagged “example” at <http://www.storyingfaith.org/>

will look for those from whom we have been estranged, seek out strangers, make ourselves open to knowing for *understanding*, for seeking in ways that provide hospitality to new insights. And finally: that we will seek to make disciples, which is to say, make learners, which is to say, risk our own knowing in learning. In doing so we might engage in a form of learning leadership on the road to Emmaus which cannot help but make Christ known.

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