

*the journey to Emmaus*

I want to take the time that we have right now to think more systematically about the chapel service we were just engaged in; but not so much from a theological angle, although theological reflection can be detected in what I'm about to say. More from the perspective of a religious educator trying to imagine ways in which this story might evoke a path towards more authentic and effective religious education amidst media culture.

The gospel reading we just heard is from the last chapter of the book of *Luke*. It tells of two of Jesus' disciples who were walking to Emmaus shortly after his crucifixion. During their journey they encounter a stranger who is all the more strange to them because he seems at first to be unaware of the world altering events of the past days. As they continue their walk, they discover that he is aware of their anguish and the events in question. Not only aware, but frustrated by their inability to believe in the words of the prophets. This stranger reinterprets their history and scripture for them. And in response, they invite him to join them for dinner at the close of the day. He joins them, and at this point the author of *Luke* uses starkly ritualistic language to describe the way in which this stranger blesses and breaks bread with them. Just as he does this, the disciples recognize Jesus and he vanishes. They then remark on the way in which they ought to have recognized him, because their "hearts burned within them" as he talked with them. The story ends with the two disciples immediately returning to Jerusalem and telling of their remarkable encounter.

There are, as with any scripture passage, multiple ways of hearing and interpreting this pericope, some of which are central to the Christian community's Eucharistic traditions. But for the purposes of this paper, I'd like to reflect upon the ways in which this story has come to function as a mnemonic for me of the ways in which media education tools can be integrated into religious education.

First, the story tells about the mundane way in which the disciples met Jesus — as they were walking along the road, in the midst of their daily practices. Second, the disciples engaged in conversation with this stranger on the road, a conversation that included their retelling of the events of the past few days, and the stranger's interpretation of these events and their stories as embedded in a community that stretched back over several centuries. Third, and finally, they quite literally “broke bread together” in the midst of community.

My research into how religious educators can and should integrate popular culture materials into religious education suggests a similar process.<sup>1</sup>

*moving through estrangement*

Let's start with the first step: how are we inviting strangers into our midst, and how are we open to reinterpreting our communal — and explicitly prophetic — histories/herstories/stories?

First: media objects often appear very strange to people... popular culture texts have an important role to play within religious education by making “strange” experiences accessible.

Ways of being in the world that institutional religious authorities prefer to

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this topic, see: Hess, M. (1998). *Media literacy in religious education: Engaging popular culture to enhance religious experience*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston College, Massachusetts. See also the findings from the “Religious Education and Challenge of Media Culture Project,” available on the web at: [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/acavp/irepm/challenge/mrcsource.html](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/acavp/irepm/challenge/mrcsource.html).

ignore, or to condemn out of hand, are openly represented and at least in part explored, in popular culture contexts. Indeed, this kind of representation has been identified by religious institutions as the central problem they seek to solve in relation to media.

In general such concern has centered around the sense that mass media communicate messages that are dangerous, and that if we could organize sufficient numbers of people to boycott the messages, we would go a long way towards easing the danger. But this strategy is only effective if you believe that it is possible for messages to travel in linear directions, from creator to receiver. If indeed media organizations create evil messages that vulnerable people receive, than boycotting the organizations as a way to stop the promulgation of the messages might work. But as I mentioned earlier, the process is far more complex than that.

By utilizing this opportunity I do not mean that we ought to give unqualified acceptance to any and all ways of being that flash across our electronic screens. To return to my earlier example, we need to probe beneath the rhetoric of hate groups to help people discern the underlying problems of poverty and structural oppression that exist in those contexts. But the point is that the conversation can begin, it can be opened up, through using a responsible imagination to engage the meaning-making systems in our midst.

*engaging media in order to make the familiar strange*

How else might pop media function as “strange” in our midst? Tied into the previous examples was my notion that we ought to engage popular media as initiators of conversations. One important finding of recent educational research is the utility of engaging difference as an element of helping students to embrace and

construct more complex frames of reference within which to engage their worlds.<sup>2</sup>

Media can be “strange” if we seek to engage them in settings where our own differences can emerge, and those dialogues make what is familiar appear strange. How can we do this kind of critical engagement? In part by heeding one lesson from Emmaus — that we must be open to the strangers we encounter in our daily lives. Here I mean to suggest not only that we ought to pay serious and sustained attention to media texts, but also, and perhaps more importantly, that we need to give ourselves over fully to questioning who and what is “strange” in our lives, and “estranged” from us. For people like myself, who most often inhabit the higher end of pyramidal structures of power, finding out from whom we are estranged often means that we must consciously and intentionally ensure that we are seeking voices from those who are oppressed by these same structures.

Media education tools are a crucial element of this kind of careful attention. In a world where billions of dollars are spent on “capturing” our attention for just a few seconds, “attention” is indeed a very precious resource. Just as historical critical textual tools have helped to focus attention on scriptural texts, and various kinds of spiritual formation practices have helped focus attention on interiority in the midst of community, media education tools help to focus our attention on a specific set of issues in relation to mass mediated popular culture texts.

There is yet another way in which it is important to think about how we encounter alternative interpretations brought into our discussions through an openness to strangers, and it is highlighted by the most often raised objection I encounter to this use of media elements within religious education. That objection

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<sup>2</sup> There is a growing literature addressing “teaching across difference.” See, for instance, the Bergin & Garvey series of books, *Critical Studies in Education and Culture*, edited by Henry Giroux and Paulo Freire, especially Kanpol & McLaren ((Kanpol & McLaren, 1995)) from that series. The *Harvard Education Review* has published a set of articles that address these issues from the standpoint of “whiteness;” see in particular (Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997), (Maher & Tetreault, 1997), and (Giroux, 1997).

is that bringing all of these other ways of viewing the world into our midst will inevitably relativize and thus make useless a religious perspective.

*multiple ways of knowing and constructing meaning in our midst*

This objection is powerful only if it is possible to believe that systems of viewing the world exist as so many options, complete in themselves, and in clear opposition to each other, so that in recognizing that other options exist one has to affirm that no system can hold preeminence in one's life. That perspective has a lot in common with the kinds of perspectives often held by adolescents, who are just beginning to think in systemic terms,<sup>3</sup> and certainly there are more than enough examples that I could draw from within popular discourse claiming this to be the case. But part of the strength of religious communities, part of their ability to remain vibrant and strong incarnations of religious vision century and century, rises out of their commitment to understanding beliefs as embedded in traditions, in ways of knowing, that stretch out globally and through time, and in the process are in a perpetual state of transformation. Religious educators know that we must teach not only elements of traditions as practiced today, but also teach about traditions and the process of traditioning, itself.

*the Emmaus journey and ritual*

What about the last element of the pericope, this story that I have chosen to use as a conversation partner? The disciples finally recognize Jesus in the “breaking of the bread,” a phrase with acutely important resonance in far more complex

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<sup>3</sup> See in particular, R. Kegan's *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

theologies them I can discuss here. Breaking bread together at the end of a journey was an essential part of the process by which the disciples recognized Jesus, just as it was an essential element of their humanness. In this pericope we are alerted to a practice that has both normative liturgical elements, and yet is at the same time a daily, quite ordinary element of being human. Both of these kinds of ritual practice need to be renewed if religious educators are to be effective in a media culture context.

What kinds of rituals can and do we participate in that shape our recognition of our “constitutive relationality,” to use Goizueta’s term (1995)? Contrary to what many institutional church officials might believe, the standard performance of the traditional liturgical rituals of our community, and here I will speak very clearly and specifically from my own location with the Roman Catholic community, is neither compelling enough nor accessible enough to vast numbers of people in the U.S. to be very useful as a means of religious formation.

The cultural databases, or the symbolic inventories to use Stewart Hoover’s term, upon which we draw to construct our life worlds are rapidly expanding into new digital universes, while at the same time the symbolic inventories of communities of faith are fading away, or being drawn into mass mediated contexts in which their root meanings are transformed. Communities of faith that are seeking to enlarge their repertoire, and in doing so draw upon mass mediated popular culture inventories, are finding themselves more capable of creating experiences that energize and challenge their participants. Communities of faith that fear these “databases,” however, are becoming more and more marginalized.

By pointing out this shift I by no means intend to suggest that communities of faith should drop their liturgical rituals. Instead, we need to think ever more carefully and intentionally about how to give people better access to them.

Indeed, good liturgy can be structured in such a way as to give people access to the experience with such ease that they can relax into it and “know” it in ways that stretch far beyond the cognitive. In our current cultural context, we need to help liturgists become more adept at translating and transitioning people from media culture contexts into church community contexts.

Another way to give people access to our traditional rituals is to take elements that are particularly evocative in non-church settings and bring them into liturgical ritual. Just as slide technology made it possible to project the lyrics to hymns on a screen up and in front of the worshipping community — thus ensuring that voices were raised up and outward, rather than down and into one’s lap — emerging technologies have unique gifts to bring to worship.

Religious educators can learn from media educators’ experience here: we ought to teach about liturgy not only by “telling about it” and even by immersing students in it (both of which are important elements of the teaching process), but also by helping them to create liturgies that reflect their own concerns, and that draw upon their own cultural databases.<sup>4</sup> Symbols are far more evocative when people are allowed to experience them and use them for meaning-making, rather than when people are told what a particular symbol must mean. Music is an especially important resource in this context; both because it brings meanings, quite literally, “into” people (it is an internally located sense that accepts stimuli from external sources), but also because music evokes images, rather than supplying images.

### *daily practices*

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<sup>4</sup> Every year I have graduate students who take my course in “media literacy and religious education” who put together liturgical season reflections (Advent reflections, for instance), and other kinds of educational experiences that utilize popular culture texts. Popular music has been a very important part of these projects. Some of these projects are accessible online, at: [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/acavp/irepm/media/resources.html](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/acavp/irepm/media/resources.html).

In addition to transforming our liturgical celebrations, we need to think carefully and intentionally about our daily practices, about the ways in which we can perform our beliefs in settings and ways that make us consciously aware of them, even if the settings in which we are acting are not themselves explicitly religious. To return to the work of Daloz, et. al. which I cited last night:

It is said that faith is “meant to be religious.” Faith seeks language, a *shared* system of symbols with which to interpret the whole of life. If imagination is the process of “shaping into one,” religion may be understood, in part, as the distillation of shared images, powerful enough to shape into one the chaos of our experience. In other words, stories, habits, and the rituals of everyday are the content of the imagination by which people know who they are and what they are to do in the world. It is the work of religion, in concert with the whole life of the commons, to do that well (Daloz, et. al., 1996, 142).

One of the more useful resources available for thinking through practices of faith in a daily context is the “Education and Formation of People in Faith” project based at Valparaiso University that I spoke about last night.

Here my emphasis is not so much on bringing religious meaning-making into popular practices, as it is in bringing popular practices into religious meaning-making. There might not appear to be any distinction between the two, but the difference I am trying to highlight has to do with the perspective from which one approaches popular practices. Rather than having religious communities make films with explicitly religious imagery, for instance, I would rather have them work on engaging the religious yearnings present in popular culture. Rather than condemning media culture and providing alternative texts, we ought to be discerning transcendence in that context, and helping people connect their fledgling, fragile moves toward accepting God into rich and deep embeddedness in religious community. Given the ubiquity of mass mediated popular culture, versus the distribution and creative difficulties present in the “religious media” realm, we

might have a far greater impact on people if we could help them to enlarge their daily attention to encompass a transcendent dimension to all that they engage.

If indeed mass mediated materials are raw elements in the repertoire from which we construct our sense of our selves and our relationality, than we can and should approach the making of communication ritual from a variety of vantage points. If what we are trying to do is influence the shape of religious action, not simply cognitive belief, and if that action is lived out on a daily basis, than we ought to be seeking to engage the materials that are present on a daily basis, and shaping the attention and focus that people of faith bring to those materials.

This kind of religious education will have to be far more improvisational than previous conceptions. Meeting people where they are, helping them to articulate their vision, and then challenging it; ultimately, helping them connect it to religious community is not something that can be done in predetermined or formulaic ways, at least not in our present, chaotic and rapidly changing media culture context. Indeed, this kind of education is highly contextual, which ought to be evident from the success or lack thereof of the chapel service. To the extent that it “worked” for people, it was because it drew on a common cultural conversation, and brought religious insight to bear on that conversation. To the extent that you were unfamiliar with the images and sound I used, or with the kind of prayer we engaged in, it was because these references were not from your context.

Preparing to educate in this framework will require that religious educators themselves have a deep and expansive fluency in religious beliefs, practices, and locations.

To return to the Emmaus story: we need to walk along the road, conscious all the time of encountering God, remaining open, even embracing of strangers, and present to our own embodiedness in practice. Popular culture media are a

wonderful way in which to engage that journey, particularly as the road meanders through the jumble of music, images, and sensations that pour in ever increasing floods throughout media culture.

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**Media literacy as a support for the development  
of a responsible imagination in religious community**

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