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Gordon T. Smith

Ken Badley

George Fox University, kbadley1@gmail.com

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Called to Teach¹

Gordon T. Smith

Regent College, Vancouver

and Ken R. Badley

Edmonton, Alberta

Abstract. *During the 1996–97 academic year the authors conducted interviews with seminary professors known by their students, colleagues, and deans as teachers who had remained vibrant into the last decade of their teaching careers. The purpose of the interviews was to hear how these professors viewed the teaching vocation as they had given it expression in their specific institutional settings. From the interview transcripts, the authors have identified eight common threads among the participants, illustrating these with material quoted from the interviews. The last section of the article relates these threads to four orientations: to educational institutions, to the church, to vocation, and to one’s own spiritual life. (The surveys described in the article can be found at <http://www.web.net/~ccte/called2/html>.)*

“So you would teach for free, then?” one of us asked.
“We won’t tell the president of your seminary.”

He replied without even pausing, “You can, it doesn’t matter. No, I think I’ve told him that, and I’ve often said that my reward is that I am allowed to do this.”

Between September 1996 and May 1997, we heard scores of similar comments in interviews we conducted with twenty male seminary professors still vibrant in the senior years of their teaching careers. We interviewed them to learn what keeps some professors vibrant while others become ineffective or bitter, and in some cases even leave seminary teaching. What does keep professors vibrant? Based on these interviews, we now associate eight factors with late career vitality.

Background to the Present Research

Other researchers into academic vocations have examined mid-life and mid-career questions, job satisfaction, disillusionment and burnout, early retirement, commitment to mission statements, institutional loyalty and late-career vitality (Jellicorse and Tilley 1985; Boy and Pine 1987; Warriner 1970; Mathieu and Hamel 1989; Gill, et al. 1983; Entrekin and Everett 1981). However, among the abundance of material on these subjects, we found no work relating late-career vitality to mid-life questions and mid-career choices. Neither did we find research exploring connections between professors’ commitment toward their institutions’ mission statements and vitality in teaching, late-career or otherwise. Finally, we found no studies at all of late-career vitality among seminary professors. Related to this last discovery, we found few discussing the vocational and instructional development of the seminary teaching force compared to the current levels of discussion in other sectors of higher education. Of course, one can easily find material on instructional development and on careers and career development in higher education. But little research links the two. Further, little research examines the specific theme of vocation – of an individual’s sense of call to higher education and its implications for career and the task of instruction. Instead, the professional development conversation usually restricts itself to instructional development; it has suffered a kind of reductionism by the omission of the emotional, spiritual, and vocational identity of the individual who is doing this instruction.

These lacunae in the research literature caught our attention, both in light of the size of the seminary

teaching force and in light of the research available on other sectors of higher education. We discovered at the start, then, that we could carry out research to fill any of several gaps.

We planned to interview professors teaching at mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Roman Catholic seminaries from across Canada, with a maximum of three professors from any one seminary. Particularly, we wanted to hear how they approached mid-life and mid-career transitions in order to understand what responses to mid-life and mid-career questions, if any, relate to late-career vitality. With those goals in view, we sought out vibrant professors in Canadian seminaries. We began our study with three specific criteria. Our informants were to be in the final years of their academic career. They were to be still teaching and not serving primarily in administration. Their vitality as teachers was to be obvious to their students, colleagues, and deans.

Approach

We took both a qualitative and quantitative approach to our research. We conducted interviews that ran between 60 and 75 minutes. After transcribing the interviews, we read the transcripts, watching particularly for sources of late-career vitality identified by those we interviewed. We structured our interviews around a formal interview guide that encompassed most dimensions of seminary teaching.

We asked about mid-life issues and whether our interviewees underwent any noticeable mid-life transition or crisis, especially as it may have related to the vocation of teaching. Our participants had, on average, served their respective seminaries for about two decades. Recognizing that, we asked whether and how they had approached the possible shift into academic administration, particularly in view of two implications. That shift might, first, have removed them from classroom teaching and, second, the shift might have come during their middle years. Knowing in advance that our interviewees loved teaching, we invited them to talk about specific aspects of teaching they enjoyed. Tied to this, we asked how they would teach differently if they could and what changes they saw in their own preferred ways of teaching over their decades in the profession. We asked our interviewees to assess their professional development activities as well, including the role of sabbaticals and study leaves.

Our participants answered questions about their institutional relationships, including their view of their seminaries' mission statements. We asked questions about their relationship with their local church, their denomination, and the global Christian community. In both these cases – seminaries and church – we worded

the questions with reference to their sense of calling to teach: how did these relationships foster or hinder their sense of calling?

Naturally, we talked about relationships with students and colleagues, again asking how those relationships affected our participants' sense of calling. We asked also about their spiritual journey, probing both the sense of call with which they had originally begun teaching and how their spiritual journey had influenced that sense over their years of teaching.

The participants in our study also filled out (and then mailed to us) a single-page questionnaire that repeated some questions from the interview and asked a few additional questions. Answering these thirteen questions required our informants to indicate whether a statement had "Very Low," "Low," "Moderate," "High," or "Very High" application. A couple of examples from this questionnaire follow:

#1 How would you describe your commitment to the mission statement of this institution?

#10 To what degree do your relationships with your colleagues now affect your sense of joy or vocation as a seminary professor?

Tabulating the responses to this questionnaire provided us with a quantitative snapshot of our participants' views to complement the qualitative picture apparent in the interview transcripts. Because that snapshot consistently confirmed what we had seen in the transcripts, we concentrated on the transcripts in our attempt to determine the themes of the interviews.

Findings

A range of factors emerge from the transcripts of our interviews that lead to and characterize vocational vitality. Of course, the factors vary from professor to professor, and they differ in significance between our interviewees. But clear patterns emerged; common threads appeared.

We have classified what we heard. Despite our launching the research with our own suspicions about late-career vitality, the schema emerged from the interview transcripts. Immediately following is our listing of threads we identified from the interviews, with a selection of quotations from our participants that illustrates these strands much better than we could explain them. Following this listing, in the next section of the article, we seek connections among the threads, searching for some manageable number of themes. There we collapse what we have heard into four clusters or "critical dimensions" and discuss the implications of the interviews for the academic vocation. We begin then by listing here eight threads

that emerged from the interview transcripts. The vibrant seminary professors we interviewed:

1. find joy in teaching itself,
2. love students,
3. have vital spirituality,
4. have a strong orientation toward the church,
5. have connection to community,
6. are aware that they have been through painful and disappointing times and that these have not been incidental to their development,
7. have become settled in their institutions,
8. value their colleagues.

Some of the above threads came as surprises; others are exactly what one would have expected. We began our research assuming the truth of several commonplaces about seminary teaching. One must enjoy students, for example, or one must enjoy such activities of teaching as leading discussions, preparing lectures, and hearing students' ideas. These are perhaps commonplaces, even truisms, but our research led us to conclude that no one in theological education should take these elementary observations for granted. Professors as well as administrators need the constant reminder.

Though each person expressed their sentiments differently, some captured the thread especially cogently. What follows is a sampling from the interviews, with particular reference to several of these eight threads.

First, we heard many comments about loving teaching and wanting to work with students.

- “When [my wife and I] began to analyze what I do, we found I am not an academic, I’m in the ministry.”
- “I think to do my job, I need to be in vital relation, a pastoral relation, with my students.”
- “It’s not a job.”
- “I feel [God’s] pleasure when I teach.”
- “What do I enjoy most? It’s . . . giving the course It’s being in class with the students [They have a] thirst for learning, so I enjoy being with them.”
- “I’d almost always go into classrooms wondering, ‘Why? What in the world am I doing here? They really need younger people to teach them, not me.’ But the give and take in the classroom has always been – well not always – but most of the time it’s been very good, and I go away elated.”

All of our participants spoke about how they participated in their church communities. We repeat here three such comments.

- “We have a significant community, a small group involvement. For me, church has always been a place of being ministered to, not ministering . . . the local church has always been a wonderful place for me. Part of my rest is to worship with God’s people. I just love to gather [with other believers].”
- “I am blessed by being there with them.”
- “[I recommend to other professors that they commit their] life to a community as we do in our small group, because I think that is a very important issue We made the choice to commit time to relationships, sacrificing some of our publications.”

These three typical comments catch what we repeatedly heard in our interviews: the importance of the faith community to those professors who have remained vibrant into their last decades of teaching.

Our participants’ manners and words both pointed to a connection between their own local-church involvement, the chapel and devotional infrastructure of their seminaries, their spiritual vitality, and their academic vocation. Not all who speak about their spirituality use the same language, of course. But we quote several here on this thread, beginning with a comment given in response to the question, “What do you think younger professors today most need to hear?”

“First of all, [I am concerned about] their spiritual life, their own walk with God. I guess I would come along beside them over and over again and ask, ‘Where are you? How is it going being still and knowing God, that He is God?’ Everything else is going to flow out of that I would rein in [some younger scholars because] they are too ambitious; they really believe they have to publish or perish. I would like to come alongside and help them to find out what motivates them and what drives them.”

Not as advice-giving, but in answer to the more general question of the connection between vitality and spirituality, another described spirituality as “the engine that [had] driven everything.” Another answered this way:

“One of the things that I’ve deliberately cultivated, as I’ve been here, has been to participate regularly and in a disciplined kind of way in our [campus] worship life, so that I have seen that as a part of my life I have personally found that the worship and the whole teaching and the whole community go together for me . . . my own devotional life has continued to improve over the years, rather than get weaker . . . which undergirds [my work in the seminary].”

As even these few comments make plain, not all our participants use the same language to express their concern for vital spirituality. Nevertheless, the theme becomes clear: these vibrant professors consider the devotional life essential to their vocation.

We found startling the amount of pain some of our informants had faced. They also had freedom to speak about it, not as something about which they were angry or bitter, but as something on which they were able to reflect with grace, peace, and some measure of humor. In the course of one interview, a professor noted this reality but added a comment that warrants inclusion here:

“[T]here’s been a lot of pain there, but because I don’t [dwell on it] it’s in isolated moments. Now that you mention it, I can give you a litany [catalog of injuries], but the [events] don’t come to mind.”

We observed a pattern of leaving the past in the past; these persons responded with grace and forgiveness to their experiences of pain, disappointment, and setback. We also discerned a sharp awareness that this very pain was part of what it meant to identify with the cross of Christ. For many of our participants, this connected closely with the development of their spirituality.

All of our participants but one felt at home in their institutions. One said that he felt at home not only as a “person or scholar or professor,” but he felt at home because for him teaching in a theology faculty was a ministry. This comment represents what we heard repeatedly in the interviews: that vibrant professors are happy with the direction and mission of the institutions in which they teach. Perhaps this finding should not surprise anyone. After all, we talked to the professors who stayed. Although we did not attempt to compare vibrant professors with any other kind of professors, we are aware that institutional satisfaction is not universal in theological education. We therefore want to underline and recommend that deans and professors take seriously what we all might otherwise dismiss as an obvious and thereby unimportant observation: if someone is not happy in the setting in which they find themselves, and cannot change the institutional ethos, the wisest course of action may be to leave.

Because we asked, all the professors in our study spoke about their colleagues. And all valued their colleagues. One provided us with a particularly sharp image of collegial relationships, albeit with reference to a point in his early-career:

“[As new faculty], we all had three kids, we were all moving from house to house, there were paths worn in the grass between our houses....”

With the changes that accompany maturity in an academic career, our participants presumably no longer rely on their colleagues for the same kinds of support, but several mentioned in our interviews with them the valued help their colleagues give both in clarifying and sharpening ideas and in reminding them of their involvement in extending Christ’s reign at times when they become swamped with work.

Four Implications for Professors in Theological Education

How can we respond effectively in theological education to the wisdom and experience of these vibrant, senior professors? Recognizably, each of our participants tells a different story and those different stories color the answer to this question of response differently. In the midst of those differences and nuances, however, we detect identifiable themes in these professors’ posture toward their life and work as well as toward their personal and professional development. The discernible pattern we detect in the fundamental inner posture of those who have remained professionally vibrant into their senior careers can be captured in three words: they were and are intentional, responsible, and multi-dimensional.

They are intentional rather than passive. They did not merely respond to their circumstances and the initiatives and overtures of others, they took initiative. More particularly, they took responsibility for their own lives, their careers, and their reactions to their circumstances. They refused to become victims amidst the setbacks and disappointments that inevitably arise in any career. Third, their development as persons and as professionals was as whole persons. They were multi-dimensional people.

These facets of their basic posture display themselves in each of four critical dimensions of their vocational development: institutional orientation, church and Christian community orientation, vocational orientation, and spiritual orientation.

Institutional orientation

Christians in higher education fulfill their vocations within institutions that provide the infrastructure or wineskin. These academic institutions enable those of us who teach to contribute to something bigger than we are and that will probably outlast us. Our institutions also serve the practical function of providing paying work, colleagues who serve as partners in our vocations and, of course, students to teach.

Our interviews made clear, however, that those who thrive in late-career in their vocations as professors understand and embrace the mission and culture of the

institutions where they teach. Rather than fighting – emotionally and in other ways – the fundamental values and mission of the institution, they manifest a high level of commitment to the institution itself. We believe that personal and institutional values should never be coextensive. But anyone wanting to thrive into late career should sense enough overlap between their own values and their institution's values that the broader institutional mission sustains them, encourages them, and increases their sense that they are contributing to something bigger than their own identity and calling.

For some, finding this overlap required the courage to resign from a tenure-track position at one seminary in order to accept a post at another seminary that reflected more closely their fundamental values. A few of our participants helped write the initial mission statements at the seminaries where they still teach. Several have helped revise mission statements at least once. We heard from our participants – in all these cases – that by late career their own vocational vitality has become linked to a high degree of resonance with the institution in which they are teaching. This identity with the mission and values of the institution was virtually unanimous, the one exception being the youngest person interviewed. If anything, the exception confirmed what we were discovering: that those who have a high degree of vitality in late career are those with a strong level of affinity with the institutions where they teach.

Church and Christian community orientation

A second clear and definable characteristic of those who remain professionally vibrant into late-career is their connection to the community of faith. While the form or expression of this will vary significantly, in each case they are persons of the church.

Some embody a deep connection to a particular spiritual or theological tradition; their work as scholars and teachers clearly flows from and serves that tradition. Their theological or spiritual heritage and tradition are not incidental but are integral to their identity and their sense of call. One professor left a relatively comfortable post and accepted a teaching position at a Baptist seminary where the future was far less certain. He went because he was a Baptist, and felt a commitment to his own tradition. The commitment to his own tradition outweighed the concern for career security. While this particular career move may have been unique, the value that drove it was common among almost all those we interviewed.

Some show their commitment to the community of faith in their regular practice of parish ministry. Others show their commitment by their regular participation in small group activities designed for spiritual encouragement and support.

Vocational orientation

Third, without exception, those functioning with vitality in the classroom in late-career are individuals with a clear call to teach. They love teaching; they love students. And the love of teaching and students has grown and deepened through the course of their careers. Many of those interviewed were scholars with a high degree of commitment to research and publication. But we found a common bias towards the scholarship of teaching. For all, their research arose out of their teaching and sustained their teaching. And they were committed to teaching the students in their respective schools. That was their focus and commitment.

This quality came as no surprise to us; we were, after all, interviewing teachers considered vibrant by those who worked with them and those who took their classes. But we believe the observation bears repetition. We will thrive vocationally if we have a clear sense of call and if we follow that calling. Those called to teach need to nurture a vital sense of call. The mid-career years are critical, of course, from the perspective of both the professor and the administration. Specifically, for those we interviewed, nurturing the call and the capacity to teach took three forms. First, these teachers had adapted their teaching to students. Each could describe how their teaching had changed or developed since they had begun their careers. Interestingly, the change most of them suggested they had made or should have made sooner was to respond more openly to students' directions of conversation and show less concern with getting through the planned material. Second, many noted how they liked to develop new courses as a way to stay fresh. For one of our participants, this desire had led to the development of twenty-two courses in as many years. Third, we commonly heard that their learning as scholars had expanded beyond their own disciplines – the disciplines in which they had originally trained and been appointed to teach. In virtually every case they had become more interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary in their approach to their research as well as to their teaching.

Spiritual orientation

Finally, those we interviewed had a well-developed spiritual life, with a routine of prayer and spiritual discipline. The spiritual life was not incidental but essential to their identity as teachers. They teach as individuals with a clear sense of divine call; they work in the classroom as a direct response to a divine imperative. And for our participants, a deep spirituality nurtures this sense of call. Consistently, our interviews challenged our own spiritual lives; we were in the company of individuals whose love for God

was evident both by their practice of prayer as well as in their devotion through service to their students and to the church.

Further, we must note that our participants are individuals of emotional maturity. This is most evident in a recurring theme – the capacity to suffer with grace. With rare exception, our interviews made clear that these professors had experienced significant set-backs, disappointments, and pain, perhaps the most unexpected of all our findings. In some cases this pain related directly to their work: the school where they had been teaching released them; their doctoral committee had evaporated; they had encountered some other significant stress in their work. For others, their relationship with the church had become painful, most notably in facing rejection or shunning within their own spiritual tradition. And others had deep pain in their personal lives – either in marriage or regarding their children. But we were struck again and again that these were individuals of serenity, not of bitterness or anger or resentment. They had closed the painful chapters of their lives in favor of writing newer chapters. Yet, the interview transcripts make clear the bi-directional relationship of pain and spiritual life for these professors. Their responses to their pain and disappointment have become a vital dimension of their spiritual lives and were, at the same time, made possible by the quality of the inner life they have always nurtured. And many of those interviewed would agree that the most critical factor in the professional development of those called to teach is the nurture of the spiritual life. Spiritual life is the central and defining element that enables them to remain vibrant in late-career.

Conclusions

We believe that much more research is needed into the instructional and vocational development infrastructure in theological education, and into professors' own thinking about instructional and vocational development. For the most part, the lacunae we originally identified in the research remain. An open field awaits anyone wanting to carry out research on some of the themes we pursued.

Seminaries need to attend much more carefully to the professional development of their faculty, defined as we have done here in a sense broad enough to include not only instructional or career issues, but emotional, spiritual, and vocational development.

Further, our research serves as a reminder that faculty are much more likely to thrive in their teaching if they have a high level of commitment to the mission and values of the institution where they work.

Finally, professors themselves need to take charge of their own professional development, again, defined broadly as we have done here. We both periodically hear professors complain that their institution has no program for professional development. This research shows that professors wishing to remain vibrant professionally had best not wait for those around them to provide formal, institutional structures. As we discovered, professors who remain vibrant into their late career are intentional, responsible, and multi-dimensional. We suggest that professors need to view their own vocational and professional development as their own responsibility, not their dean's or their institution's. Any program developed at their institution will obviously become part of their professional development, but the primary push must come from the individual.

Note

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