



# Learning as We Teach

| *Christian education is about teaching mysteries.*

## Introduction

From beginning to end the teaching ministry of the church is about paying attention to mystery, the holiness we sense pulsing throughout the universe, in the light of stars unimaginably far away and in the beat of our own hearts so near, so steady. We can only marvel that life is, rather than not.

The hope of teaching and learning in the life of faith is that our ears can hear the rhythm, that our eyes can perceive the presence of holy love. Through the lessons and discussions, beneath the words and ideas, above the aims and frustrations, around the glue sticks, construction paper, marker boards, and room setups, there is a Spirit breathing life—urging ways of life that dance to grace and delight in the depths of God’s passion at work throughout creation. Christian education is about teaching mysteries.

But what a tall order! Where does a thoughtful teacher even begin? Any subject matter relating to God runs too deep. The students are too unpredictable. I—the teacher—am too inadequate. Stepping into any classroom I feel the same butterflies that most teachers know, further complicated by the temptations beneath them: to believe that we must have all those mysteries thoroughly figured out first; that we have to have our own faith and life thoroughly figured out before we could be teachers of anything that matters. As a professor of Christian education, I feel these same temptations whether facing a seminary classroom full of future ministers and church educators or facing a Sunday school room spotted with teenagers who may just be trying to get through the week. And though I teach teaching itself, I assure you, even knowledge of the best techniques and educational theories do not alleviate the temptations or the fears driving them.

“How shall we ignore the mystery,” asks Abraham Heschel, this mystery “in which we are involved, to which we are attached by our very existence? How shall we remain deaf to the throb of the cosmic that is subtly echoed in our own souls?”<sup>1</sup>

Even so, here we are anyway, trying to teach, hoping to faithfully pass along some scrap of meaning, or hope, or at the least do no harm.

## What Helps?

First, it helps to recognize that these are in fact temptations. In the book of Genesis, in the garden, it was eating the seductive fruit of the *tree of knowledge* that got the first couple in trouble. Ann Ulanov calls it the “know-it-all tree”<sup>2</sup> and I have found the biblical warning helpful for tamping down the tempting belief that to teach we have to be wise like God, on the one hand, or on the other, for placing a check on self-conscious insecurities that also create their own problems. Temptations, like the snake in the tree that whispers them, twist the truth all around and lead down a dry and dusty path east of Eden. So it helps, as we hear those whispers, to remember they are temptations, distortions of the true nature of faithful education and of our nature as teachers.

Of course, teaching involves more than not yielding to temptation.

More positively, I share some thoughts from my own professor of Christian education—a thoughtful teacher—that I have found particularly meaningful through the years, reflections upon the nature of the mysteries themselves at work in the teaching ministry of the church. “A mystery” writes Craig Dykstra, “is not a problem that goes away once figured out. Instead,”

he says, “mystery is an enduring reality that we know only through a glass darkly and never exhaustively.”<sup>3</sup>

So what does he mean by this and how is it helpful?

Often, in everyday speech, when we speak of “mysteries,” we are indeed speaking of problems that we would

In one sense, perhaps the most obvious, whenever we teach in religious settings we are exploring subjects and texts and practices that are rightly called mysteries, *holy things*. The Bible, sacraments, theological ideas, rituals and practices, sacred music, ethical concerns, history, ways of being with others, and all that we would possi-

bly engage in the name of the educational ministry are to be handled with the care and respect anything deep deserves. This may well involve doing some homework, finding out some background, utilizing good lesson and resource materials. The prep work of teach-

ing is something like setting the table—whether our own dinner table or a church’s Communion table. The setting provides a place to eat, while the power is in the meal itself among those gathered.

So at its best, the opportunity to educationally engage these mysteries feeds our ability to see in depth. A Bible passage challenges us to see strangers and enemies or even ourselves in fuller ways. The doctrine of creation breaks open our imaginations for the scope of God’s overflowing love in the universe. Learning of tragic conditions in town or across the world spurs a wider sense of the neighborhood and inspires mission.

This is not to say that as we explore and learn, we will all agree on everything or that we cannot question what we study; not at all. The biblical prophets themselves teach us otherwise, that is, they call us to raise critical questions, to confess the harm done in our name and history, and to challenge hurtful ways of being. But this too is seeing in depth—looking beneath the surface of practices, ideas, and policies that serve idols of destruction and death.

Ultimately, we study and teach mysteries because they reveal life.

## “Mystery is an enduring reality that we know only through a glass darkly and never exhaustively.”

like to figure out. The car won’t start: It’s a mystery to me. The checkbook mysteriously won’t add up. Or perhaps we are absorbed in a whodunit movie or novel: “The Mystery of the Missing Gold.” Somebody knows, somebody could figure it out, someone with enough knowledge can solve the mystery. Mysteries here, in the everyday world, are problems that can be figured out.

When Dykstra refers to mystery, however, he is doing so in a religious context, and by doing so winds up turning our everyday notions on their head to make room for realities much deeper, irreducible, in fact, to any problem-solving techniques or deductive skills. Mysteries are always more. Just as the New Testament speaks of “abundant life,” mysteries are fuller, greater, wider, more enduring, more real even, than our best understanding can grasp. Mysteries are ever deeper than the words we say or the know-it-all minds we employ to explain them, and when we try, we teeter on the edge of turning a mystery into a problem, that is, “refusing to encounter it in its fullness and depth.”

Mysteries, in this sense, do not invite solutions. Instead, they invite us to pay attention, to listen carefully and to explore with respect. They ask that we open our eyes to see in depth. And the good news is that mysteries themselves help us to do so, help us to see the world around us in ever-deeper ways.

## Teaching Mysteries

In Christian education we are “teaching mysteries” in several senses of this phrase, and through all of them, I believe, we can find the grace that helps us see with greater depth and clarity, including ourselves as teachers.

## Students Are Mysteries

Another way we are teaching mysteries has to do with the students we are in a position to teach, whether young children, older adults, or anyone in between. “People are mysteries,” writes Dykstra, “there is always more to them than we can comprehend.”<sup>4</sup> As we teach people, we are teaching mysteries. The more power or position we hold in the lives of others, for whatever reasons,

the easier it is to forget and the more important it is to remember this ultimate truth about one another. Each person is a reflection of the Holy Creator of the universe, made in “the image of God,” says the book of Genesis, irreducible, and ever more than our notions and impressions of them could ever capture.

People are mysteries just by virtue of the fact that we cannot get them taped down, secured, and under control. There is always more to them than we can comprehend. There are depths to them that, as we come to know them more fully, are opened up to us—often in surprising and delightful ways, but also at times in frightful and disorienting ways.

As people of faith, we do our best when we realize that to be a teacher is to teach mysteries. To do otherwise is to approach people as problems, that is, to narrow them into a role or category or stereotype and treat them accordingly, as if they are only this or that and not a reflection of the Holy. This is sin, always “lurking at the door,” as God told Cain.

One of the greatest reasons we create educational opportunities and ministries in the church at all is to learn and to practice approaching one another, not as problems, but as reflections of God. Children, older adults, and everyone in between need to learn how God sees them and how God sees others. The same attentiveness and respect we show holy things can be shown holy people, and the good news is that we can all, teachers included, reflect grace. It may be the best teaching we can do.

## Teachers Are Mysteries Too

A third way in which we are teaching mysteries is closely related to the last. We who teach are mysteries. We too are irreducible, have depths that frighten and delight us as well as others, can only be known through a glass darkly and never exhaustively, and are reflections of the Holy One who made us and loves us more thoroughly than we can fully know. We are mysteries who teach, that is, we are teaching mysteries. Knowing ourselves in this way, as thoroughly and deeply loved, offers the

greatest resistance to the temptations that will plague any teacher. And the beautiful truth is that knowing God’s love directly for one’s self has a way of catching on with others, and may be why we find ourselves teaching at all.

## Conclusion

We are teaching mysteries in at least these three senses, and if any of this is true, there is certainly more to the matter. But this is a start, a place to begin reflecting upon some of the hopes and challenges of teaching when faith is at the heart. Knowing subject matters in depth and having our own faith and lives straightened out are of course good and helpful things. But they are never com-

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plete; they cannot be, given their natures. We can only explore mysteries, see where they lead us, and let them transform our ability to know them.

The irreducible depth at the heart of life is rooted in the inexhaustible grace of the Ultimate Mystery, the Creator, the one whose love is deeper, wider, fuller, greater, and nearer than we can ever fully know. But we can live by it, work and play by it, care and celebrate by it, and even learn and teach by grace.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2000), 16.
2. Ann Belford Ulanov, “The Gift of Consciousness,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, n.s., 19, no. 3 (1998).
3. Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 34–35.
4. *Ibid.*