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The PhD Dissertation as *Camino*

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Abstract

This work identifies some of the psychological, ethical, and spiritual undertows of the dissertation process in view of the following themes: the dissertation as discipleship and Christian vocation, psychological healing and shadow work, establishing a healthy work asceticism, strategic and spiritual facets to writing, and concluding remarks on research as self-appropriation and transformation, values which are characteristics of Jesuit higher learning. Is there more at stake than getting through the defense?

Theology is an intensely personal act and the authenticity of the theologian's religious experience and reflective appropriation of that experience provides the measure of the objectivity of his theology.

—William Loewe

The Word on the Street

A doctoral dissertation—and the conditions required to gestate it—is no more an amplified version of an undergraduate paper than a sprint to the bus stop is comparable to the Boston Marathon, or than a stroll on a beach is akin to hiking across the Oregon high desert. The project is incommensurate by an order of magnitude, a fact that finally hits home when one tries to explain it to family and friends who, although well-intentioned, fail to grasp the weight of the difference by making associations to more modest, circumscribed projects. This discrepancy with our former competencies has been rightly signaled by Noelle Sterne who, in writing for an admittedly “nonreligious” audience, nevertheless counsels for spiritual and psychological self-appropriation to see the work to completion:

Despite intelligence, career experience, responsible titles, and worldly common sense, most adult students are little prepared for the dissertation stage of advanced graduate school. You may really have no idea of what it involves and how very different it is from previous undergraduate and graduate study ... this phase of your higher education requires new self-discipline and dedication.¹

The ego (not to be mistaken for egoism) is the scaffolding for our sense of self which instinctually prefers to nestle into surroundings that are under a measure of control and predictability. Most pre-dissertation academic work is carried along by the familiar cycle—research, writing, submission, final mark received—and we then return to a semblance of equilibrium between semesters with the cycle beginning again with a new roster of courses. By contrast, the “P” that engages dissertation work is displaced by the absence of the previous productivity cycles. As the PhD candidate takes to the work, the need for new scholarly and personal wineskins becomes obvious, but it is as if one sets out to build a suspension bridge without seeing the abutment on the other side. This will change when the first chapters are being submitted for review, but for the most part a completed dissertation means weathering a vision.

The dissertation apprenticeship distanciates our *modus operandi* by exploring our guild's methodologies and consolidating our proclivity in the array, engaging with broader scholarly conversations, becoming familiar with academic culture, finding an academic voice or voices, networking and giving papers at academic conferences, migrating from the role of student to peer, keeping an eye out for a post-defense academic position, and establishing a future research trajectory. It is a moral and spiritual ecology that is radically conditioned by gender, ethnicity, economic and social background, ecclesial culture and its reigning ideological battles. It also hinges on whether one is a layperson or

clergy, has a seminary position in wait or is throwing in one's hat for a tenure-track position in a shrinking job pool. There are family dynamics, the sometimes-unpredictable ebb and flow of finances, and whether one is in his or her late 20s or somewhere on the other side of mid-life. One must also consider one's native energy levels and drive, psychological constitution, and the need for support. The program's accountability network with supervisors, mentors, and other students is an additional tipping point, for good or for ill. Any of these can be critical to our endurance.

These variables are moderated by the conviction that the thesis must be explored for its own sake and that God called us through our dogged wondering. Perhaps we are bolstered by a sense that the question dawned on us as grace. Like marriage vows the faith-dimension can get us through the rough patches, perhaps the last and lone thread that pulls us over the finish line.

Eventually it all comes down to the work. The initial enthusiasm and novelty wane and the project becomes increasingly kenotic. Owing to the necessary day in, day out focus with the need to compartmentalize blocks of time, sooner or later it will generate painful self-encounters that the centrifugal pulls of ordinary daily life usually keep at the periphery. The required perseverance and self-discipline can be maddeningly scandalous insofar as our goal-oriented focus waxes and wanes as it is jostled by the psychic phenomenon that surface in us. This, I believe, is common to all PhD students but signals in a particular way the responsibilities incumbent upon the Christian vocation (lest we become countersigns to the faith we publicly represent), no less than the seminarian doing course work is ethically obliged to engage his or her spiritual and psychological growth. Even though this article traces the general patterns of the dissertation experience, in the final section I will touch upon some of the implications for theological work as examples of the process.

Approximately 50 percent of doctoral candidates never reach the defense; some are listed as "ABD" (All But the Defense).² These are not typically failures of intelligence but lost battles of the spirit and sometimes abandonment of the work due to circumstances beyond our control. The task is ineffably personal, although from the uninitiated

distance we might have more generic expectations for a quasi-aristocratic existence of uninterrupted reading, reflection, and writing. But life continues in its normal passage with health problems, a relationship crisis, and financial cares, all of which call for strategic adjustments or putting the work on the backburner.

It is no wonder that the dissertation experience has been fittingly christened as a boot-camp, receding hallway, lonely climb up Mount Everest, proving ground, hazing ritual, getting your union card, a rite of passage, and intermittent dark nights. *Camino* is perhaps another apt metaphor, reminiscent of the valleys and peaks people encounter along the famous geo-spiritual trek, the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. As those with firsthand knowledge of the walk understand, the Camino includes hills and valleys, weariness and enthusiasm, fellowship and loneliness, and unpredictable weather. A pilgrimage is a representation of an inner quest that must be pursued for its own sake; for the pilgrim, the physical undertaking is linked to a hoped-for transformation. The pilgrim's progress does not, however, always feel like progress; as with any protracted physical journey expectations do not always match the experience. Much of it necessitates letting these go for new realities because an essential characteristic of any pilgrimage is that it requires discipline and should invoke some adversity. PhD candidates can take solace from this tradition.

But no matter what external obstacles we encounter, we will also meet our personal "demons"—the term comes up frequently in the literature—in stretches of mundane time no less than the desert fathers of early Christianity met theirs. What we do with these demons is, in part, the focus of this article. What is at stake is the scholar's *psyche* as the root and measure of discernment and methodology, theological or otherwise.

Doctor, Heal Thyself

The deepest insights into our selves are not clinical accretions drawn from the personality categories of Myers-Briggs or the Enneagram where the relationship to the self can remain empirical and objectified. These classifications are

differentiating thresholds to the deeper self-presence of *consciousness*, that is, how well we keep the breadth and depth of our own company is how others will experience *us*. In the episodic deserts of research the most radical self-revelations arrive as intrusive feelings, negative inner conversations, and emotionally-charged psychological complexes that distract, haunt, torment, and sap our energy. When our ego is displaced by the new liaison with time and space—some but not all of it from the daily grind—we ought not be surprised that the autonomous mechanisms of the self perhaps finally push into our awareness psychic red flags that have been ignored or suppressed. What do they tell us about ourselves? These feelings and images are harbingers of the unconscious shadow which by now has been stealthily spliced into the cognitive and affective patterns of our inquiry and externalized as readings of our environments through psychological projection.

The work comingles juxtaposed values and ends, and sometimes paradoxically so: our relationship with God, the work itself, job or teaching prospects, our connections to a faith community, and especially our interiority. Robert Doran rightly signals the latter a “battlefield” particularly for theologians since doctrinal reflection and general hermeneutic patterns “represent the eventual outcome of the battle within one’s own person.”³ His work on psychic foundations and conversion is a permanent fixture in the Lonerganian thought structure, meanwhile echoing Lonergan’s well-known mantra that “genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity.”⁴ Nevertheless Doran is well aware that the psychic dimension is not universally recognized as legitimate:

There is an entire realm of being, of what can indeed be intelligently grasped and reasonably affirmed, that is regarded as inaccessible at best and nonexistent at worst by mainstream currents in academic life and culture, and even by some theologians, who more than any others should know better.⁵

The autobiographical impetus for the dissertation is purified with research and writing. Some of these seemingly distracting inner movements and impulses are emissaries with transformative

purposes, but without sound moral and spiritual discernment a workplace asceticism driven by a white-knuckled work ethic will chase the angels of the moment away. The overall dissertation strategy is, of course, beholden to completing it; the *tactics*, however, require noticing how research and writing connect with our psychic life. “The world I am sore at on paper,” Thomas Merton once wrote, “is perhaps a figment of my own imagination.”⁶ His prolific writing and solid public persona never seemed to extinguish his willingness to interrogate the unfolding of his intentionality or engage with shadow work. It is why neglecting the shadow engenders the same sets of problems as we cross from one interpersonal, social, and workplace sphere of activity to another.

How does my emotional disposition shape the quality and direction of my inquiry? Is the dissertation moving me closer to praying about my thinking and thinking about what I am praying? Do I esteem above all the primordial vocation of discipleship among the activities of research, writing, networking, giving papers, and legitimate concerns about my future? What is the workplace asceticism I need to impose that strikes a balance between the ego strength needed to push the project forward and the courage to face my demons?

“Do not hurry, do not rest” (Goethe)

The notion that “I’m a lowly instrument for the muses” worked well for the late, great Leonard Cohen. For most of us time is an entropy that must be seized and managed, like a natural resource. The incomparable wordsmith Annie Dillard describes the task this way: “A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time.”⁷ This scaffolding, it seems, has several interlocking parts.

Our desires and focus are implacably nomadic, but somehow in this bundle of contradictions we learn to marshal our wandering selves into a coalition. We cannot eliminate our wanderlust, restlessness, and psychological distractions, but we can acknowledge them, befriend them, and integrate them. A healthy ego develops through “willing the one thing,” which is a traditional way of

understanding purity, by prioritizing one's emotionally besotted intentionality. The ego is strengthened by choosing the duty of the moment notwithstanding other compulsions and desires. For some of us, and for a variety of biographical reasons, the ordering of desire comes more naturally. For others *this* is the hill we will have to die on, for in desperation over our chronic procrastination we cry out with Saint Paul: "what I want to do I do not do" (Rom. 7:15b). We will need spiritual and moral wisdom with *acedia* (sloth) from colleagues, and sometimes sustained psychological work with a therapist. Sloth is not laziness, which is an aversion to work; it is about doing the *wrong thing* as a detour from the duty of the moment. It is understandable why distractions are welcome diversions from self-confrontation; workaholics are by definition slothful if it is their way to avoid the self-knowledge that leads to transformation. As an aside, *akerasia* is a subfield of ethics concerned with human weakness (*kratos* = power) and is also the goddess of distraction.

Testimonies about the creative process are widely available, and there is much to be said about a community of fledgling scholars with platforms to share the burdens of the journey and to disseminate their wisdom with their fellow sojourners, even if at times this means "misery enjoys company." Among the many testimonies about the creative process, Henri Poincaré's personal account seems to best speak to some of the perennial questions PhD candidates raise about the work-life balance. The famous mathematician describes one occasion when he finally cracked a particularly tenacious problem (Fuchsian functions) that he believed disclosed the discipline's creative soul:

Most striking at first is this appearance of sudden illumination, a manifest sign of long, unconscious prior work.... Often when one works at a hard question, nothing good is accomplished in the first attack. Then one takes a rest, longer or shorter, and sits down anew to the work.⁸

This "sudden illumination" paradoxically required the antithesis of the conditions one typically associates with academic productivity: a night of insomnia (the consequence of drinking coffee too late one evening), meanwhile another occurred as

he stepped onto a bus for a short trip, and again on a leisurely stroll along a seashore during a stint of mandatory military service. *Anything* can cross-fertilize and occasionally release the tension of academic inquiry: taking a shower, rigorous exercise, visiting a museum, playing with or chauffeuring children, socializing, listening to public radio. What we incorrectly judge to be unproductive, non-academic activity needs to be safeguarded as much as we shield blocks of time for research and writing. Several years ago in our faculty's doctoral seminar a colleague spoke about his research for an article—which others in the room said afterward had gained unusual traction in his guild—where the linchpin insight happened from a live performance of the actor Ian McKellen.

Most of us prefer to make hay while the sun shines. But experts stress that steady progress is maintained by regular and *regulated* work, that is, a moderated schedule, and they strongly counsel against what Robert Boice identifies as "binge-working." Something deeper than the apprentice's enthusiasm will have to be accessed. Deciding when to end a session is as important as beginning it, not unlike having to balance respite and hiking during a *camino*. Taking ourselves to empty or "crashing" at the end of a study session undermines the unconscious energy that works its own way toward insights. Without so naming it, Boice is describing the virtue of *entrapalia*—re-creation—which is a sub-virtue of moderation. We re-create ourselves for the return to work. The caveat underscores the importance of purposefully cultivating a life beyond the desk.

A productive work environment is an ongoing negotiation between shifting moods, dispositions, and settings. A night owl prefers to putter in the mornings, whereas the early bird hibernates in the evenings. Regular exercise and socializing become more strategic. Highly sensitive persons find that they need to fine-tune their environments; others not so much. An introvert may require regular contact with a public environment where the surrounding din releases a laser focus on work, meanwhile extroverts require an isolated desk in a forsaken corner of the library or a combination of settings that change with the morning, afternoon, and evening. "You can read in the space of a coffin," Dillard writes, "and you can write in the

space of a toolshed meant for mowers and spades.”⁹ One need not feel apprehensive about unorthodox arrangements that are proven; for some people two hours in the local coffee shop is nothing more than a distraction, whereas others summon it as wind for their creative sails.

It needs be said that our work regime is not a display to garner our colleague’s approval like nervous stockbrokers monitoring the trade screen. Conspicuous work posturing indicates that we are projecting too much of our worth into our peers’ eyes. Again, the destabilized ego will seek out any perch for security, and the need for recognition from colleagues could be one of them. A psychologist who specializes in work creativity describes the possible range of unorthodox but proven work scenarios that require the practitioner’s tenacity:

A client of mine is a hall wanderer. By nature restless, he thinks best when strolling around. Because he has come to accept this about himself, others have too.... Another person, a scientist, prefers to work in isolation in a company that values an open-door policy.... Even though at first she was soundly criticized for doing so.... All of these people have adopted a way of working that harmonizes antagonistic tendencies: the desire to concentrate with the need to walk around, and the desire to fit into a corporation with the need to act out a personal working style.¹⁰

It is necessary to yield to the advice of those who have trodden the academic path longer than ourselves, which puts us at the vulnerable end of a power dynamic while becoming differentiated from the collective’s endorsements. The point is to find what works *for me* and to chain myself to the arrangement, to cast anchor, lay out a ring of salt, and persevere in my self-made coffin or toolshed.

The Writing Vagaries

Once we settle on what works, what can we expect from the writing? It helps to listen to those who earn their bread and butter from the writing craft. For this doctoral candidate the

forementioned Dillard’s *The Writing Life*, which one reviewer calls “a spiritual Strunk and White,” was very instructive, as was Stephen King’s *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*.¹¹ To whom or for whom are we writing? Does the Rogerian precept, “what is most personal is also universal,” apply? Do we imagine some future reincarnation of the dissertation in the hands of laypersons or is it targeted exclusively to academic circles?

The experts recommend writing every day.¹² We write daily not to hasten the project’s completion but to learn how to write. Externalization is dialectical and like a conversation it can take any direction. Joan Bolker calls it “writing in order to think”¹³ and is perhaps not too different from what transpires with spiritual journaling and prayer; an objectification through reflection akin to Ignatius’ exhortations in the *Spiritual Exercises*. In writing we hone our voice(s) and unexpected insights do sometimes arise, a turn of phrase hits the page, connections occur with other things we have read, and we gradually learn to apply words like a fine sable paint brush. Writing is unpredictably creative because ideas that are dismissed or forgotten are tangibly pinned and move closer toward critical objectification; what first appears to be a 24-carat turns out to be fool’s gold, as an instance. This writing exercise is not a stream of consciousness or spiritual channeling—but it does open to “something” that is inspirational. Putting thought to screen or paper endows it with life, however brief. In these random yet delightful creative runs significant insights can spill onto the page.

To be sure the majority of these are subject to revision and will sooner or later be recognized as a *cul de sac*. The amount of time we give to crafting two or three pages of work (or entire sections) seems proportionate to our reluctance to eventually admit the inevitable. Rather than fretting over time wasted these now defunct vectors of inquiry are crucial because they have unpredictable, cumulative effects. Knowing which direction to go is a process of elimination that logically requires chasing down rabbit holes that lead nowhere. Sometimes an idea we reject has a boomerang trajectory and fortifies our original intuition that it must be included; on the other hand, knowing where *not* to pursue can be handy for the defense. Can it be otherwise if we are really

engaged in an investigation? In the meantime files can be opened for material that is useless for the dissertation but could contribute to a future class, presentation, or academic article.

Alas, writing also draws in multiple *inner* dialogue partners, and not all of them can be trusted. Gauging our written word for ourselves is a psychological chimera. On Monday the work seems superlative and we even risk slipping into grandiosity; by Friday we are tempted to toss it into the compost bin. On this problem Dillard advises stepping back as much as possible from either self-evaluative extreme: “The feeling that the work is magnificent, and the feeling that it is abominable, are both mosquitos to be repelled, ignored, or killed, but not indulged.”¹⁴ In Ignatian spirituality the practice of *indifference* (or *hesychasm* of Eastern Christian spirituality) helps us to cultivate an objective distance with our impulses in relationship to the work. We can cultivate a second sense through intellectual and spiritual ascetic practices to comprehend that looking over our work today will evoke responses that alternate between hubris and repulsive shame. It is better to resist the impulse.

Nowhere is self-evaluation more the grist for the mill of the superego, our inner critic that speaks with absolute, crippling authority. It rises in us as an authoritative voice that dresses us down for some perceived shortcoming, obsesses over minor faults, and is hyper-vigilant about slights to our imagined status in the collective. More often it arises in collusion with external authorities that echo past experiences of parental authority. In the long run an unchecked superego keeps us in an infantilizing poster-boy relationship of co-dependence with the systems we serve. Like a coxswain with a god complex, our superego can drive us even to the defense, but know that it will be our doppelgänger in the seminary, the faculty, and ministerial life. Recognizing and relating to it is one of the most significant moral and spiritual shifts that can happen in adult life. Slaying our inner critic is what shadow work entails, and doing so now means that it will not be our collaborator later when our work is vetted before colleagues, student evaluations, academic journals, and the institution’s administrators. Becoming conscious of it means that this life-sapping pseudo-authority will not rear its critical, ugly head later as a

compulsion with all the personal cost and collateral damage it inflicts. It can be curtailed if it assumes the properties of a temptation along with all the desolations in its wake. This is an example of the freedom of a transformed, differentiated consciousness catalyzed by intellectual activity.

As for the roller coaster ride of assessing our own writing, Voltaire’s aphorism that “the best is the enemy of the good” is a useful mantra to put the superego back in its place. Aim not for a perfect work—a *grand oeuvre*—but a completed one.

The End Times

At some point there is light at the end of the tunnel and suddenly we emerge into the full light of day. The work has been submitted to the review committee and defense dates are being negotiated. Coming to the end means different things to different people, but there are several scenarios that deserve mention.

In retrospect we see that the dissertation’s tangible success inexorably paid premiums of decline elsewhere. With all growth and progress there is eventually and always a trend of decline. What began as a call is now careerism, a study on social justice has rooted resentment, intellectual curiosity now includes arrogance, scheduling blocks of time becomes a need to control the daily details. These patterns of decline were developing even as the good was being accomplished: “I finished my thesis but it jeopardized my marriage.” These disvalues are reversed by being brought into consciousness so that they do not contaminate our post-dissertation life.

We also need to be vigilant of eleventh-hour self-sabotage. Bolker shares what she has learned with some of her PhD candidates months away from completion:

I’ve more than once heard someone with less than five percent of their thesis left to write say ‘I’ve decided not to go on with this project.’ This is a time when the demons can catch up with you, when every one of the internal creatures who got in your way all along decides to gang up on you just this side of the finish....¹⁵

What does this look like? We are weary beyond words. We have been asked for revisions. Insecurities and fears are surfacing. We are having second and third doubts about the world of academia. Future prospects seem dim or daunting. At times such as these the support of the director, family, and friends will be decisive.

Some newly minted PhDs not too long after the defense lapse into a depressive state, feel lost, or in astonishment find themselves weeping months after that chapter of their life was ostensibly closed. Bolker describes some of the possible catalysts: “Maybe you will grieve that a major stage of your life is over, or perhaps you will mourn the important people who are not alive to witness your triumph, or maybe you’ll confront the gap between the dissertation you’ve actually written and the one you imagined you would write.”¹⁶ The intensity of the angst some people experience is startling, a condition that even warrants a formal moniker: “post dissertation trauma.”¹⁷

The transition from the dissertation lifestyle to Something Else is an often-crooked road, neither seamless nor timely, and again the ego is displaced. Spiritual resources are extremely important at this time. As with the retiree who is adjusting to a new life long after the last official day at the office, new vitality will come with the new direction, but not according to the calendar. Even here the transition attests to the autonomy of the psyche insofar as previous habits have their own life cycle that belies the ego’s controls.

Finally, a successful defense deserves a celebration worthy of a post-battle victory feast taken from the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a public rite of passage that can be personally honored by organizing a dinner party, getting a tattoo, going on a trip, and, if possible, attending the graduation ceremony. Though the term “commencement” is a tad old school, it still recognizes publicly that something new is about to start.

As with any extended pilgrimage a dissertation is not a straight path; it is the unpredictable, the difficult, and the painful that transforms what the ego cannot countenance. Much of it hinges on letting go of what “ought to be” along with the

resentment that it does not match expectations or plans. Paradoxically the contrast is the creative space for possibility. The asceticism of the dissertation has helped us to more carefully discern consolations and desolations and moved us closer to the freedom of indifference with the defense. Not only do we have new credentials but we have taken a step toward becoming new creatures in Christ, the transformation of self as the condition for extra-subjective transformations.

A Call Within a Call

A dissertation is a vocational calling card no less felt by educators everywhere, but Christian scholars are primordially marked by discipleship, an awareness of being stewards of a sacred trust to build up Christ’s body and to serve the public good. The content of theological dissertations is especially different from those undertaken in other disciplines, as are their methods. It is not analogous to the astrophysicist’s capacity to differentiate stellar spectra, a statistician’s compiling techniques, or a surgeon’s skills at the operating table. Although theological method objectifies the operations of our inquiry, those operations are personal. Theological objectivity is implicated in the quality of our subjectivity, and unlike statistics and stars the object of our inquiry is a Subject who, like healthy collegial interchange, critiques our methods and theories. To frame this in the strongest possible terms, one can be at once a narcissist and a ground-breaking astrophysicist, a megalomaniac and a very successful surgeon. By contrast, self-knowledge, humility (defined as the regulation of excellence), and discipleship are, at root, epistemological inclinations where our valuing and psychic conditions direct our cognitive and affective operations. Egoism and God do not mix, even if we continue to theologize nevertheless. Our psychic equilibrium with the dissertation is structured into the continuing practice of the discernment of spirits and God’s will.

It seems disingenuous to raise a point that needs no explanation: There is more at stake in the dissertation than getting through the defense. The quality of our work and patterns of self-appropriation will contribute to the academic culture of which we are about to become a part. For instance, some of our eminent colleagues

think that the reigning ethos of the larger academic world introduced a dichotomy into theology by displacing Christian discipleship with preference for the professional dossier. This is the theologian's equivalent of clericalism. It parallels a rationale prevalent in our culture that sees no reason why nurses need be compassionate with patients, teachers need respect their students, and, to speak to the domain of this writer, ethicists need be ethical. A MacIntyrean explanation would put it up to another casualty of the severing of an intrinsic *telos* from human activity. "The disciple of Christ," writes Catholic ethicist Edward Vacek, "has an evidence that is not available to those who confine themselves within the strict canons of reason or academic study."¹⁸ John Garvey, president of The Catholic University of America—and I must limit the voices that call out this trend—offers a poignant critique: "Success is not an endowed chair or a book award from the American Academy of Religion. It is bringing teachers and students closer to God."¹⁹ This development in academic theology is conspicuous and could become a larger conversation as its role in society is subject to further disinterest, and Christian witness will have to do what professional credentials cannot.

The case can be argued from reverse engineering. What is not transformed in us is transmitted to our theological judgments, directs our care or inattention in research, informs how we depict our interlocutors, influences how our dispositions permeate the class energy, and contributes to the faculty personality and the overall institutional health. Gordon Smith perceives this mimetic logic in some of the gloomier academic environments of what he calls "astonishing" mistreatment among colleagues and administrators:

I once worked in a situation where the dominant energizing (actually, it was enervating) emotion was anger, and I could not help but conclude that if a person was susceptible to anger, this school would be a highly destructive place to be. But more to the point, I concluded that while it is possible to serve without anger in such a place, it was possible only if one was both *conscious* of the climate within which one worked and if one


*consciously chose to sustain a fundamental differentiation from that climate.*²⁰

I am reminded of the first readers of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) who lacked any cultural reference to buffer their shock at the end of the novella that Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde were one and the same man.²¹ The book's earlier chapters hint at nothing of the sort. By contrast we routinely invoke the Jekyll-Hyde aphorism but are disinclined to venture into the underlying psychic state to which it speaks. It is little more than a cultural artifact marooned from personal appropriations of the shadow and discovering God's loving disposition to our tragic condition. But whether we are conscious of it or not, our personal demons are the Hydes piggybacking on our soon-to-be Doctor. Will they be acknowledged and henceforth transformed? This is the differentiated consciousness to which Smith refers, and it is the transformative option in writing a dissertation. It is also the hallmark of the Jesuit university:

To deliver a transformative education in the Jesuit tradition requires the integration of academic, moral and spiritual learning—the union of mind, heart and soul. We also know that any university that claims—as Jesuit institutions surely do—to educate and form the whole person cannot pretend that the religious life of that person is somehow an optional or accidental dimension that can be relegated to the sidelines or attended to as an afterthought.²²

Learning environments engender overlapping echelons of imitation, superficially with mannerisms and quirks of dress but more profoundly from the scholar's character and disposition; our shadow work matters in fields as disparate as theology, astrophysics, statistics, and Fuchsian functions. A teacher's deportment attracts *and* repels others according to Plato's implicit social epistemological principle of "like seeks after like." A thought experiment might be helpful in this regard. Imagine a professor in class who regularly mocks his ideological counterparts; some students will imitate his disdain because they are similarly disposed, whereas others will see

through his scorn to his wounded psyche. Or another professor scoffs at a faith or political tradition different from her own and taps into the arrogance of some of her students; some, if they can, will avoid future courses with her. Personal unconscious mimetic urges attract similarly disposed individuals and contemporaneously repel those who could otherwise challenge the collective bias. If someone's orientation toward disvalue resonates with other like-minded persons, the shared sentiment will be grafted onto the workplace culture, and this is an incremental step toward institutional decline. In the long run it casts doubt on what is uniquely offered in our faculty or school by confirming the verdict of the Masters of Suspicion—along with most disciplines in the academy—that all theology is anthropology. Who we are as human beings matters, whether for the theologian or otherwise.

Along the dissertation *camino* there are buried treasures that can be found if we are willing to risk what they might reveal. Ironically the angels of the moment linger far beyond the completed thesis and are fecund in unpredictable ways. For one, we will be able to facilitate the liberation of students from the wisdom gleaned from our own process. God's call always combines manifold purposes and in a strange way our personal transformation and shadow work could be the more important reason for writing a PhD dissertation, the call hidden in a call. This is something that the "strictly professional" ethos cannot countenance, but it is the way of Christ and characteristic of discipleship. The muses visiting us in our reading and writing may not be the ones we want or expect—but they could be the ones we need. 

Notes

¹ Noelle Sterne, *Challenges in Writing Your Dissertation: Coping with the Emotional, Interpersonal, and Spiritual Struggles*, Kindle Edition (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), loc. 567.

² For a sample of the literature, see Barbara E. Lovitts, *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of Departure from Doctoral Study* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), and Robert Sowell, *Ph. D. Completion and Attrition: Analysis of Baseline Data*, NSF Workshop: A Fresh Look at PhD Education, Council of Graduate Schools, March 31, 2008.

³ Robert Doran, *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2006), 21.

⁴ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 292.

⁵ Doran, *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations*, 14–15.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: A Harvest/BJB Book, 1979), 162. Originally published in 1953.

⁷ Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 32.

⁸ Henri Poincaré, "Mathematical Creation," in *The Creative Process*, ed. Brewster Ghiselin (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 27.

⁹ Dillard, *The Writing Life*, 26.

¹⁰ Marsha Sinetar, "Using Our Flaws and Faults," in *Meeting the Shadow*, eds. Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1991), 116.

¹¹ Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Scribner, 2000).

¹² Joan Bolker, *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* (New York: Holt and Company, 1998), xvi. In my opinion the book's title is ill-chosen and tempts prospective readers to dismiss it as superficial. It does not, however, reflect the author's quality insights and valuable guidance.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Dillard, *The Writing Life*, 15.

¹⁵ Bolker, *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*, 129–130.

¹⁶ Ibid., 127–128.

¹⁷ Boice, *Advice for New Faculty Members*, 6.

¹⁸ Edward Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 46–47.

¹⁹ "[Pope] Francis' Focus on Practicing Virtue Has Guided Catholic Universities," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 11, 2018, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-focus-practicing-virtue-has-guided-catholic-universities>

²⁰ Gordon Smith, "Attending to the Collective Vocation," *Theological Education* 44/2 (2009): 105. Italics are mine. See also pages 95 and 109.

²¹ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (London, Longmans, Green & Co., 1886).

²² Kevin P. Quinn, "Teaching That Transforms: The Distinctive Heart of Jesuit Higher Education," *America*, May 9, 2016, <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/teaching-transforms>.