

MENTOR'S REFLECTION

Expanding Horizons: A Christian Female
Talks at Length with a Muslim Male

Trudelle Thomas, Ph.D (English)

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During the past year, my mentee has been Anas Malik, a new assistant professor in Political Science. We met at my home throughout the year to talk about the Ignatian heritage and aspects of his Muslim faith. Since we knew each other before beginning the mentoring program and shared a natural affinity, our discussions flowed easily. My son and husband both enjoyed getting to know Anas as well. The two of us also wrote letters to each other and traded readings about Ignatian and Muslim spirituality. Insights from our talks had an impact on both my teaching and research.

Topics of Discussion in Our Mentoring Partnership:

Study. The value of research/study as a form of contemplation; Anas tells me that there is a longstanding respect for study as an important way of knowing God, something I had never thought much about before.

Karen Armstrong. A shared admiration for the books of Karen Armstrong, who is much loved by Muslims because of her insightful writing about the life of Muhammad and the history of Islam. Anas and I were able to share an intimate lunch with Karen when she visited Xavier University in April. The last two chapters of her *The Spiral Staircase* eloquently extol the value of study as an avenue to ecstasy: “‘Transcendence’ means climbing above or beyond. . . . Study can be a disciplined attempt to go beyond the ego [that] brings about a state of ecstasy. . . . We are most creative and sense other possibilities that transcend our ordinary experience when we leave ourselves behind” (279).

The Heart. The importance of “the heart” as the center of knowing. Christian spiritual writers have spoken of the heart as the “core self,” the center of longing and knowledge, the part of the human person that is able to behold God, the source of charity. Both Christianity and Islam assert the importance of love and intention as important to true knowing. In Islam, “God-wariness” arises in the heart when a person learns to live from the heart, the spiritual human being is born.

Islam as Other. Greater awareness on my part of the history of hostility toward Muslims in the past and today. Thanks to Anas, I am now much more aware when literature, textbooks, and politicians demonize Muslims.

Ignatian Focus: ENGL 205 Literature and the Moral Imagination

During Fall semester, I incorporated Ignatian principles into my core course, Literature and the Moral Imagination, which focused on the theme of the Adult Life Cycle. In particular, the Ignatian themes of “finding God in all things” and “*cura personalis*” were woven throughout the course.

Early on I developed a handout called “Spirituality, Adulthood, and Stress” (see below) which provides categories for thinking about how humans develop Purpose, Connections (personal and political), and The Amazement Factor. We used these

categories several times to talk about the novels/stories we read and about students' own lives.

“The Amazement Factor” struck a chord in many, even those who regarded themselves as atheists—something that I didn’t expect. In our initial discussion, students said they felt amazement when in nature, when falling in love, when studying science (sometimes), and when spending time with young children. Some readily understood Rachel Carson’s famed comment: “If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it” (The Sense of Wonder). The Amazement Factor turned out to be an important theme in several of the works we read. For example, a few short stories showed grandparents instilling in children amazement toward nature. And in Chris Bohjalian’s novel, Midwives, characters spoke about the amazement evoked by childbirth and newborn babies.

Students were surprised that adults might continue to experience amazement as they aged. One student wrote, “I always used to think my parents were ‘set’—that once you reached age thirty or so, you no longer grew or changed. Now I see that people can always continue to grow. You never really have all the answers.” “Age segregation” often causes students to be narcissistic and narrow-minded. The Amazement Factor promotes understanding across age barriers. Talking about how adults of various ages experienced Amazement helped students see beyond their adolescent ghetto.

Mysterium Tremendum

Once the course ended in December, I read more about the role of amazement in spirituality. I learned that there is a long-standing tradition of viewing God in terms of Mystery—a transcendent being that inspires wonder and awe. God’s Mystery was emphasized in the early centuries after Christ but was neglected during the Enlightenment. In the twentieth century, some theologians, notably Jesuit Karl Rahner, emphasized that God is characterized by “an essential incomprehensibility” that can be known partially but never grasped by the human mind. The Divine is spoken of as Mysterium Tremendum, and encountering God evokes awe, wonder, even fear, on the one hand, and enchantment, beauty, and joy, on the other. At best, humans can catch glimpses or intimations of the Divine. We come to see the limits of human understanding and appreciate what some have called that “sweet country of understanding nothing.”

Scientific advances, perhaps more than theology, have inspired amazement. Photographic images from the Hubble Telescope, first available to the public in 1990, reveal that the universe is much vaster, more ancient, and more grand than we imagined. The majesty of the cosmos shows how limited the human perspective has been. Similarly, discoveries about DNA and quantum physics are inspiring awe in scientists and non-scientists alike. Such discoveries have caused some thinkers to see a profound connection between the human mind and the works of God.

Viewing God as Mysterium Tremendum is conducive to dialogue among different religious traditions. In a time in history when many discussions deteriorate into stand-offs between the Left vs. Right, Saved vs. Unsaved, Enlightened vs. Benighted, appreciation for Mystery reminds us that all truth is limited. We can let uncertainty cause us to latch on to partial truths--or we can let it lead us into greater exploration. Here Rahner’s concept of the “anonymous Christian” is useful: anyone who embraces truth and goodness is ultimately embracing the God of Jesus Christ (regardless of the labels assigned). Even though religious creeds may be quite different, there is common ground in how God is *experienced*.

Perhaps Jane Goodall says it best: “There are many windows through which we can look out into the world, searching for meaning. . . . [Often] we are confused by the tiny fraction of the whole that we see. It is, after all, like trying to comprehend the panorama of the desert or the sea through a rolled-up newspaper.” (Jane Goodall, Through a Window).

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Spirituality, Integrity, and Stress in Early Adulthood [Student Handout for ENGL 205]

The goals of “self understanding” and “self-knowledge” are at the heart of liberal education, and of most of the great philosophical traditions. Yet, according to a recent study of the professional lives of professors, they are seldom discussed overtly in academic life.

The following concepts will help you know yourself better now and also help you continue to grow as a person in your future lives, especially your future work.

Please translate these into your own words, then see if you can apply them to characters in the works we’re reading, I’m especially interested in your application of 2, 3, 4, and 6.

1. **Knowledge** –of various subjects; of various skill-sets (such as Instrumentation, Interaction, etc.); of self; of your religious and cultural tradition.
2. **Purpose** – aka a sense of personal mission; vocation or calling in your work-life (and after-work-life); service. Often spoken of in terms of “priorities.”
3. **Connection** – meaningful relationships with other humans; love relationships, including family and spouse; relationships with co-workers. A sense of connection (or solidarity) to the larger human family including the marginalized. A sense of connection to animals, nature, and God might be included here. An understanding of how social systems and institutions operate. Awareness of the political nature of all organizations.
- *4. **The Amazement Factor**– a sense of awe, wonder, and mystery in the face of the world; the infinite; that which transcends time and the physical world; a sense of “the More” (W. James’s term); yearning, joy, beauty, and enchantment are also associated with amazement.
5. **Personal Renewal** – what you do to keep yourself growing; how to avoid burnout; balancing the need for replenishment with the need to be productive and effective.
6. **Encounters with evil** – Is evil real? In what forms do you encounter evil? Issues of good vs. evil in your future work?

Reflection Questions re “The Amazement Factor” for Faculty (Mentors and Mentees)

1. What initially drew you to your area of study? Was there a moment of amazement that made you want to pursue this area? Has the amazement level increased or lessened in the course of your education?
2. Have you ever considered that study/research could be a form of spiritual devotion (or prayer)? That study involves more than information and sharpening the mind—that it might actually open a person to a transcendent level of reality? Have you experienced this affectively? Describe such an experience if you feel comfortable doing so.
3. Have you experienced a paradigm shift in your view of a subject? If so, what prompted this? What was your emotional response to this shift?
4. Does sharing a subject with a different generation cause you to see it differently?
5. Have there been times when a discussion in class opened up new insights into a subject, even amazement? Was this a happy accident, or did you lay ground rules conducive to such an experience?
6. Have events in your personal life impacted your intellectual life? Has aging or awareness of your mortality affected how you think about your field of study?
7. Are there things in your life that evoke enchantment, wonder, joy, peace? Does your field of study inspire these? Do these things have anything to do with your experience of spirituality, faith, or religious tradition?
8. What causes you to feel cynical or closed down about higher education (or Xavier University)? How do you respond to such feelings? Might junior faculty benefit from learning about how you cope with disillusionment?