



FTE

THE FUND FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

“Markers of Resistance”

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Last summer, I was invited to preach at the ordination of one of the FTE’s 1999 Ministry Fellows, Sarah Sanderson, a graduate of the College of Wooster and McCormick Seminary and now the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Lowville, New York. Sarah is exactly the kind of young adult we all hope will become a parish pastor. She has a beautiful heart. She has a voice like an alto angel. She writes like a dream. She is as smart as a whip. One of her college professors told me at the ordination that faculty were competing for her. Sarah really could have been anything she wanted to be. And she wanted to be a pastor.

Sarah formed her ordination service around 1 Corinthians 4:1: “Think of us this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.” What was it about this young woman --who could have been or done anything--that led her to cast in with Paul and the apostles as a servant of Christ? To claim the identity of a steward of God’s mysteries? Certainly this came about by grace. I want this morning to put the indicia of grace under a microscope in a sense: to look closely and analytically at some of the distinctive characteristics of Sarah and those like her that render them open and responsive to God’s call to ministry.

“Think of us this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.” So wrote Paul to that rowdy congregation in Corinth, urging a counter-cultural image of leaders worth following. I often struggle with how to reconcile this counter-cultural image with the notion of excellence we embrace at the FTE. We claim--overtly, intentionally, boldly--to focus on outstanding young people. Sometimes I hear people say that we are looking for the “best and the brightest”; then, as if Paul whispered the words “servants of Christ” in their ears, they sort of stammer and say, “Well, you know what I mean.” They’re not sure distinguishing the “best and brightest” is really Christ-like, but, at the same time, the “best and the brightest” are the very ones they secretly want to become ministers. They ask me things like: “How many Phi Beta Kappas are among the FTE Fellows? How many have above 4.0’s? How many are from Harvard, Yale and Princeton?”

So here is one way I reconcile my struggle: The best stewards, the most excellent servants, have among their gifts the qualities demonstrated by high academic achievement and powerful leadership: clear and analytical thinking, the ability to respond to needs with imagination, competence and perseverance, commitment and hard work, eyes to see the big picture, liveliness in drawing people together toward a

goal, interpretive skills, and so on. At the same time, to be a steward of something--to care for it, to rightly administer and nurture it's life--the steward must know intimately that for which he or she has responsibility. To become the caretakers, life-bearers and servants of the mysteries of God, young people must be able to enter the mysteries, to imagine freedom in obedience, wholeness in brokenness, purity in the midst of degradation, justice in a world of injustice. They must imagine love--and how to make it real in the here and now. Young people who embody both of these capacities--distinctive intellectual and leadership skills and humble engagement with the radically equalizing gospel--are those we seek.

Well, I don't need to tell you that young people like don't grow on trees. In fact, it is a measure of grace that they grow at all. The culture that nurtures their tangible, excelling achievement is toxic to their growth in the mysteries. Let me elaborate:

In April 2001, *Atlantic Monthly* magazine published an article by historian David Brooks titled "The Organization Kid." Brooks wrote about the young people he met at Princeton University – the future leaders of the free world, the people who will be taking care of us when we are old. In general and overall, Brooks found the Princeton students responsible, generous, perky, cheerful, bright, good-natured, well groomed, hard working and pleasant. But when I examine Brooks' work through with the eyes of one searching for excellent ministers, I detect four guiding principles embedded in the lives of the Princeton students that are, I think, toxic:

Invisible Guiding Principle Number One: Work very hard and all the time.

Brooks calls these young people the Future Workaholics of America. One student called himself and his friends "power tools" for processing information – without intellectual engagement. They are too busy to get involved in issues outside their own lives and self-interest.

Invisible Guiding Principle Number Two: Achievement is the ultimate good.

For these best and brightest, college is a time for achieving goals so that they can move up in the world. They put off romance and relationships off until careers are on track. Brooks calls them prudential not poetic. He says that they are "tongue-tied" when asked what it means to live a virtuous life; they use the language of accomplishment not virtue. Brooks asked them about cheating – like buying a paper off the Internet. He says, "The idea that it is possible to do wrong sitting alone in your room, even if you don't cause another person any harm, is hard for them to comprehend."

Invisible Guiding Principle Number Three: It is not necessary to question authority.

Brooks' Princeton subjects do not protest the status quo or rebel. Obviously, they don't have time and they can't risk the penalties. But here's the deeper reality: they don't question the status quo because what "is" is not problematized. One professor said,

“They work for Save the Children and Merrill Lynch and they don’t see a contradiction.”

Invisible Guiding Principle Number Four: All is right with the world.

These students live as if everything can be solved, as if there is a right answer that they can discover and enact. These young people experience the universe as ordered and benevolent. For example, Brooks points out that what used to be parks where children might range free are now all plotted into soccer fields – organized. These best and brightest have been formed by adult-organized activities to develop skills that can be successfully applied toward any end. Ambiguity? Nah, just an issue waiting to be resolved. Evil? No way, just something that can be cured with better education or therapy or Prozac.

Here is my question: When do these young people touch the messiness of life? When do they mull and ponder or tend something? We need to take very seriously these powerful, deeply ingrained, heavily rewarded principles that form the Organization Kids. Young people who want to be the best and brightest strive for these habits of mind and life; they are the norms for success our culture cultivates. This stuff--these myths--are like the Miracle-Gro my neighbor puts on her rose bushes to make them bloom faster and more than nature really intends. They work if what you want is lots of blossoms right away. But if what you want is a person fully human and fully alive, a person dreaming God’s dream of justice, a person imagining a life that gives glory to God, these norms of success may be poison.

At FTE, we have the blessed opportunity to know many young people who have not been exclusively shaped by the cultural norms of success. As I study the lives of young people I believe will be exceptionally good ministers -- Sarah Sanderson and many more – I see some habits of heart, mind and life that set them apart. I want to call these qualities “markers of resistance” – resistance to the toxicity of the ethic of accomplishment. I would argue that these markers of resistance can serve as a kind of rubric for the young people we seek to form and call to ministry. We will look at five markers of resistance.

First Marker of Resistance: An Inner Life

I’ve sometimes fantasized about recruiting young people for ministry by walking across a campus and grabbing all the students who are alone and not talking on cell phones. Those would be the ones who might have the capacity to be quiet and still long enough to access their inner lives. Nothing in youth culture supports nurturing the inner life. Yet, exceptionally good ministry requires rich interiority; it relies on a connection with one’s soul.

FTE Fellows demonstrate healthy inner lives. They write in journals, practice contemplative prayer, write poems and go on silent retreats. They can’t live without pondering and mulling.

How did they come to an inner life? Here are three things I have observed:

(1) Many are children of pastors. This can mean lots of things, but here is what I think is significant in forming an inner life: being raised by a pastor can mean living with a consistent presence reminding one of the reality and import of the inner life. Moreover, as I listen to the young adults raised in pastor's home, I am struck by the import of modest economic practices, including honest trust that what is needed will be provided. Modesty in income and consumption reinforce the value of the inner life.

(2) Many FTE Fellows have experienced a significant wounding early in their lives. They have suffered illness and injury, death or disability of a sibling, abandonment by parents, family disruption, alienation and loss of security for all kinds of reasons. By the grace of God, these young people have not been scarred to numbness, but instead are able attend to the hurt in a way that births questions of life's meaning and a consistent, interior turning over of those questions.

(3) These young people have been taken seriously by at least one adult. Someone has listened to their lives, asked them real questions, entered into the hidden mysteries by sharing books, prayers, work and time. You can really hear this in the good letters of recommendation – “Margaret was a bit quiet at times during class discussion, but I know she was listening carefully. She came by my office every week to talk about the connections between what we were reading and her own life. We sometimes went for coffee to continue our talk.”

Second Marker of Resistance: A Sense of Wonder

Many of the FTE Fellows are artists: They play piano, oboe, clarinet, trombone, flute, cello, violin and guitar. They sing – solo and with choirs. They are photographers and painters and poets. They write essays, plays, prayers and would-be novels. They dance and act and direct and do all kinds of things related to theater and the dramatic arts. Many of the FTE Fellows are also people who will risk unfamiliarity. They don't just travel to places my grandmother would've called foreign countries; they live there. They do semesters abroad. They spend summers working in social locations and cultures very different from their own. They participate in lots of different religious practices. They are curious people.

We can point to multiple strengths that result from the artistry and exploration I have described. But what strikes me as a marker of resistance is that these experiences hold the possibility of wonder, of self-transcendence, of being transported by the numinous. Their art is not just about performance, it is about creativity and entering the mysteries of what-might-be when the self is opened to delight and play. You can see this quality in the coffeehouse we have during each summer conference. It is not a talent show, rather it is a kind of feast of playfulness and delight. The Fellows do everything from reading

poems they have written that day about that day to juggling to stand-up comedy to gospel singing. This play is not about individual performance; it is about stewardship of gifts for joy and building of community.

Third Marker of Resistance: An Appreciation of Ritual

People who study youth culture argue that middle class youth resist attaching meaning to religious symbols because of the contemporary mandate that all meaning systems are equal. That is, you believe what you believe and I believe what I believe and it's all good. Within this cultural milieu, young people who claim, celebrate and appreciate the rituals of a particular tradition are exceptional.

While I want to emphasize that FTE Fellows *are* people formed by a Christian tradition, I name this marker of resistance "appreciation of ritual" rather than "committed to their tradition" for a reason: the quality of resistance at stake is the refusal to act as if what we see, touch, eat or purchase is all that there is to reality. We engage symbol and ritual to point us to something beyond our apprehended experience. The young people we seek know down deep that accomplishment is not the ultimate good and that we need to be reminded of the holy that is larger than our own lives through ritual.

Fourth Marker of Resistance: Connection-making

Here I am talking about a kind of un-self-conscious way of being that connects with other people and with new ideas in a constructive process. Let me raise two examples and then I will elaborate.

First, in reading the letters of recommendation for the FTE Fellows, I am struck by how many teachers say things like "Justin consistently asked insightful questions that probed at the heart of the matter. But he didn't simply ask questions of me, he asked questions of his classmates that helped them clarify their own understandings. He has a gift for really listening to other people and building on what they say. I realized at one point that he was in essence a co-teacher with me."

Second, we ask the Undergraduate Fellows' applicants to write an essay in which they explain the connection between their most deeply held theological commitments and how they will spend their life's work. Many of the best essays begin with a confession of their own efforts to figure out what this means. One young woman began by quoting her roommate who said "That's the weirdest question I've ever heard." She went on to recount her own coming to understand the question through the process of interpreting it for her roommate.

Why do I call these behaviors markers of resistance? What is at stake here? I think it is a resistance to objectification. These are people who by their way of being in the world resist both the commodification of the Other and the objectification of knowledge. These Fellows do not approach knowledge as a product to be obtained and owned; knowledge is the coming to know by the community for the community, the weaving of a whole

through dialogue and interaction. In this process, the Other moves as a colleague or partner, rather than being employed as a device toward the end of one's own acquisition. These young people risk the vulnerability of truth emerging out of mutuality.

Fifth Marker of Resistance: Engagement for Healing the World

We hear a lot about students on college campuses spending more and more time volunteering. Helping others probably functions in several different ways for most of these students. But those who will be exceptional ministers are not simply interested in helping people. They are interested in changing the world. Let me give you four bases for my claim:

(1) Many FTE Fellows serve as Resident Advisors throughout their college life eventually holding leadership positions through which they can shape campus life.

(2) Many FTE Fellows establish new organizations to meet a need on their campuses and many of these students' recommendations comment on the value and success of the students' efforts.

(3) Many FTE Fellows are active participants in the life of a congregation where their college is located. They serve as leaders – teaching Sunday school classes, leading youth retreats, and the like. They are resisting the insularity of their bubble and acting as servant leaders rooted in a community that is not just about them.

(4) Many FTE Fellows come to seminary after spending a year or two in a service corps – AmeriCorps, Volunteers in Mission, Lutheran Volunteer Corps, and the like. Those are no slouchy commitments. What I see in this is a desire to go beyond the surface, to live a faith in community that deeply and over a significant time engages the world in an eschatological hope. Moreover, these alternative years of service mark resistance to the ever-upward careerism by which so many of their best and brightest peers are captured.

Having now opened up the lives of these young people for you, I want to say that I count it a great privilege to know something of them and I find it a source of great joy. At the FTE Summer Conference on Excellence in Ministry last June, I had the opportunity to put my observations about markers of resistance before the gathered Fellows. Many seemed to feel a tremendous relief, even exuberance, to hear someone articulate the pulls at work in their hearts and experiences. I don't think they are sure that the qualities that enable them to enter the mysteries of God are as important as the qualities that enable them to be academically successful and highly competent leaders. Within their worlds, they lack a discourse that names—much less honors—what they know to be complex, mysterious and true of themselves. We can give them such language and tell them in the words of St. Magdeleine that it is “the *world* that values efficiency rather

than the unobtrusiveness of the hidden life.” And we must offer this kind of external call if they are to claim their identities as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

This brings me to the final comment I want to make and the other way I understand the import of calling forth and nurturing the most excellent candidates for ministry. In this strange and difficult time the church needs leaders who are superior in both efficiency and the mysteries of the hidden life. If we identify and call forth passionate, smart and imaginative faithful leaders--the best leaders--and educate them well, I believe they will lead us in the direction we need to go. They will lead us all in the work of God and God's church in the world. Thank you.