

What have we learned on the road?

David Baer & Listening Group
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Χριστός ανέστη! // Christ is risen!

If it should turn out in the fulness of time that the Global Forum of Theological Educators, Version 2.0 @ the Orthodox Academy of Crete should require a title, a refrain, a remembered rallying cry, a *raison d'être*, I believe we will discover it to have been this:

Χριστός ανέστη! // Christ is risen!

We have asked ourselves in these days here in this magnificent location several questions about *learners on the way*.

We have, for example, followed Havilah Dharamraj as she's queried 'What does Abraham learn on the road?' We've tracked with our brother Daniel Ayuch as he in turn has asked, 'What do the disciples learn on the road to Emmaus?' This very morning Laurie Brink has dared to ask aloud, 'What did Jesus learn on the road?'

All the while a nearly invisible Listening Group comprised of seven of your peers has been laboring to understand 'What have *we* learned on the road?'

I'd like to ask the members of your Listening Group to stand so that you can recognize them. They are Daniel Ayuch, Janet Clark, Rufus Ositelu, Kirsteen Kim, Gemma Cruz, and Zakali Shohe.

The *we* that stands as the subject of that sentence—'What have we learned on the way?'—is of course *you*. That is, we have tried our best to listen to *you* and now to speak back to you what we believe all of us have learned on our shared journey down this GFTE road.

There is of course a high degree of subjectivity in this enterprise. And with that subjectivity comes our renunciation of any claim that we've got this exactly *right* and certainly of any suspicion that our intuition captures *exhaustively* the learning that has occurred here this week in our second gathering of the Global Forum of Theological Educators.

Nevertheless, we have been earnest about our work and so it's with a sense of sobriety that I now offer you some conclusions that represent both the results of the attentive listening

that your Listening Group has exercised on your behalf during these days and my own interpretation of events in the light of that listening exercise.

I hurry to add that this is something other than a summation of the proceedings and so I'll mention only a few presenters by name. I hope that none of you who has served us from this platform will feel diminished if your name remains un-spoken, for this in no way will reflect upon the value of the gift that you've given to us.

* * *

We have found common cause in these meetings around one or two of the great hymns of the Church. Do you remember the first?

Father Abraham has many sons.

Many sons has Father Abraham.

I am one of them.

And so are you.

So let's just praise the Lord.

That, at least, was how I captured Willie Jennings' suitably pious version of this grand old hymn.

The version I remember from my own misspent youth makes a more Stoic claim.

Father Abraham had many sons.

Many sons had Father Abraham.

And they never laughed.

And they never cried.

All they did was go like this:

Tick-Tock, Tick-Tock, Tick-Tock ...

It's no wonder that Willie grew up and turned out so well, while others of us lagged so sadly far behind ... and have such difficulty expressing our feelings.

I'd like to lay hand in this moment to another great, resonant hymn, one that my grandson Connor and I have intoned together no fewer than seven thousand three hundred times.

I wonder whether you know it ...

*Itsy Bitsy Spider went up the water spout.
Down came the rain and washed the spider out.
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain
And Itsy Bitsy Spider went up the spout again.*

Theological education sometimes feels like that, especially in these days of elusive sustainability and reductive vision and crushing market forces and contexts that move like tectonic plates under our feet.

Dan Aleshire lowered himself down to dinner at table beside me two nights ago with a vast, world-weary sigh and said, 'These conversations are so difficult. There are three poles and if you could lock down any one of the three, the conversation becomes easier.'

I asked Dan what the three poles are. 'Well, the first ... ', he intoned with extraordinary self-assurance '... is *region of the world*, that is, where one comes from. The second is a cluster of hot topics around *identity*, involving race, gender, and human sexuality.'

'Yes, Teacher, but what is the third?', I asked, though candidly Dan by this point was on a roll and didn't need my encouragement to continue. 'The third', quoth Dan, 'is *confessional identity*, which in our home contexts is fixed but here at GFTE is decidedly unfixed'.

This, in my view, is the genius of the GFTE concept to date: that we have chosen not to lock the third pole down but to engage the other two as the motley collection theological educators from six Christian families of theological educators that we are.

Whatever the GFTE experiment accomplishes, it most certainly does not make the conversation *easier*.

So one can be forgiven for feeling a little like Itsy Bitsy Spider on his or her infinitely daunting journey up and down the waterspout. Some would call it a futile journey though, as you'll hear, I do not think that *you* do ... I do not think that *we* do.

But let's leave our sad little arachnid for a moment and attempt to speak concretely about some things we have learned on our road.

I offer seven things, not because of any insinuation that seven is the perfect number, but only because it's *our* number.

One: Our Bible reading is inevitably *located*.

For a goodly number of us, one of the highlights of our gathering came right at the start with Havilah's framing of Abraham, Sarah, Abimelech, Hagar, and Ishmael. In fact, what Havilah appears to have done is to reassemble the sequence of those names with her eye on the margins.

We did not so much trace the story of **Abraham, Sarah, Abimelech, Hagar, and Ishmael** as we did these:

Hagar, Ishmael, Abimelech, Abraham, and Sarah.

That our Bible reading is a socially located exercise is not *new* news to anyone in this room. Yet we learned it all over again together as though it *were*, under the expert tuition of an Indian woman who has found her voice in proximity to foundational texts like Genesis 12-20 and then handed that voice over to us as a generous gift.

We saw with freshly open eyes how YHWH does not *own* Abraham's abjection of Hagar and Ishmael but cares for and blesses outcast mother and child in a way that manifests 'the wideness of his mercy'. Yet Abraham in the act and Israel in the memory simply cannot forget these alien figures who haunt their margins.

At our table immediately afterwards, I learned that the young Asian woman *just there* and the Filipino immigrant to America *just there* have always read this text through Hagar's eyes while I, naturally and without question and for reasons that will be self-evident to many of you, have always seen it through Abraham's.

But not anymore, not now, because we've been on this road together, we've lingered over these texts together. So we are changed.

Our Bible reading is inevitably *located*. But this is no counsel of despair. Rather, it's an observation that invites us to listen to the located readings of our sisters and brothers and in the listening to touch Providence's deeper wisdom.

In fact, one Listening Group member asked a quite pregnant question, one that I think surprised even her:

Is this conference really about listening?

Two: We must be dreamers.

If I'm not mistaken, we've groaned a little together. We have shared our disparate experiences of Itsy Bitsy Spider and her accursed rainstorms, our lives weighed down by budgets and FTEs and 'economic contingencies' and the tenacious grip of hard-wired injustices and non-viable institutional legacies and ... two little steps forward and one bit step back ...

So it's refreshing to have been reminded that we must periodically lift our calloused hands from the business of pulling weeds and mopping up spills in order to dream *with* and *for* our students. A handful of years ago, in the context of lots of men in blue blazers at a North-South assemblage of seminary presidents in Brazil, my boss—a diminutive Colombian woman who guides the seminary I'm privileged to serve—loosed a cry of the heart. 'Please let us dream!', Elizabeth Sendek pled.

Let us remember why we do this, let us recall the unsolicited passion that invaded our lives and metastasized into vocation right smack in the middle of our complex context! Let us do it our way in our distinct places because our deep roots in those places tell us that we know a thing or two about them that are not well served by the abstractions and techniques of a 'globalized' monologue!

Now here comes Willie Jennings, providing us with some conceptual fodder for remaking our institutions—incrementally or otherwise—by doing again what got us here in the first place: *dreaming dreams*.

Willie is inexhaustibly quotable, but here is arguably my favorite line from his talk:

*We are all the inheritors of someone else's dreaming (both good and bad).
Let's find the points of alignment, of convergence, between our predecessors'
dreaming and our own.*

One Listening Group member said, perhaps more vicariously than she knew, 'I'm always obsessed by outcomes. Maybe dreams are more important than outcomes.'

Another offered, 'Dreams are an activity of faith.' Then, gathering steam, she observed 'Dreaming is praying ... Dreaming is hope.'

We must dream. Or, perhaps, we must remember what it was like to dream. And then find release to dream again ... for and with our students.

Three: We are changed by the people we meet on this road.

This was the observation of our most prolific Listening Group leader.

It's a home truth, a kind of rule of life. It's not a *new* thing. Yet, in the delight we took in her recitation of it there was novelty, there was discovery.

'Never in my life have I heard this!', someone exclaimed of a text that he had heard a thousand times.

'When we listen to the other, Scripture comes alive', someone else chimed in.

When we walk the road with people who are very much like us, we belong. We are loved, we are strengthened, our wounds are bound up, our dreams recycle referents that are familiar rather than alien.

This is the *ordinary* traveling, the walking where one has been placed. Without doubt, it is a deep blessing, the ground of *stability*.

When we meet new, curiously different people on this road, however, we are *changed*.

For most of us in this room, the candidly beautiful internationality of this gathering is not the new thing. Many ... perhaps most ... have grown accustomed to this, our lives made the richer by it.

But the *interconfessionality* of GFTE, the blooming six-family-ness of it conjures a *meeting*—to borrow my Listening Group colleague's dialect—a *meeting* that brings the alien into a space that is up close and personal.

So we are changed by the people we meet on the road ... on *this* road.

Four: Hospitality is arguably the defining quality of GFTE.

We heard about hospitality, we experienced hospitality, we practiced hospitality at every turn.

I think we could call this the Global Forum of Theological Hospitality and not risk being fined for telling a fib.

We are not, if I may use a contested expression from my own country, a *melting pot*. In fact, we are quite chunky.

What we have in common are just two things—trust in the Triune God and a common vocation—and not *very* much else.

Yet the divine hospitality that has welcomed each of us is something that we're more or less working out how to practice with each other as we slowly realize just how precious—indeed, how priceless—that *shared trust* and *common vocation* truly are. Both alone and in concert.

I lack the courage to be a polemicist and yet I remember the conscious effort it took me to remind myself that I need not contest a table partner's confidently declared opinion, one with which I could hardly disagree more completely. I felt better a few minutes later when a senior leader from another confessional family volunteered over lunch that he had had what I silently recognized as the very same experience at a different table and at roughly the same hour of the day.

It was related to me that a participant—again, from a confessional family not my own—had declared, 'I have been unable to find a theological family ... until now.'

In my view, GFTE has over the last 72 hours evolved from being a particularly interesting seventh-grade science experiment into being a *thing*. And I believe the defining quality of that thing may well be a divine one: *hospitality*.

As your listening group loitered longer than you were given the opportunity to do over yesterday's Bible reading, we pondered this intuition.

On the road to Emmaus, eyes were opened to recognition of Jesus at the nexus of memory, interpretation, and hospitality. (prophecy)

Deliciously, we've enjoyed all three here at GFTE. Perhaps we, like they, have seen Jesus and then been providentially abandoned to our little community of two or three who gather in his name.

Five: Our capacity for empathy ... indeed for shared journeying ... is best enhanced by narrative ... by the sharing of our stories.

For a moment, yesterday, it didn't matter which of six confessional families Molly belonged to. We were all with her in her story. For a moment, we were *all* Molly, save her particular chains and any bruises she chose to leave unseen.

In the telling of our narratives, we discover who are neighbors are. Often they speak the shared language of our conference—English, the Latin of our day—with an alien accent. Often they name a different ecclesial family. Yet it turns out, sometimes, that they are neighbor. Indeed, sometimes they are kin.

Yet we didn't know it until we heard their story. Until we learned of Molly's first board meeting at a Kansas seminary. Until Cristian Sonea spoke my evangelical language of conversion in the first person of a Rumanian Orthodox priest. Until Davina's narrative of daytime classes in Singapore with three students, nighttime classes that were full, and a Pentecostal seminary reborn. Until we learned that Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox

Churches are celebrated by many of our African Initiated Church brothers and sisters as the first and mother churches of their movement. Until a breakfast conversation with a colleague who in her institution was ‘marginalized’ from theology to missiology and then in that un-sought space converted by her students from Asia and Africa to a new understanding of mission.

Until ...

Well, I suspect that many of our narratives are still to be told. Still to be *heard*.

Six: Theological education is best understood as an enterprise on the move.

One of our members declared as her first words in our Listening Group yesterday: ‘My words for today is *mobility*’.

One would have to be living in the proverbial bubble not to have experienced theological education as an enterprise that is *conceptually* on the move. Our methods, our student populations, our various constituencies, our justification for the craft in which we engage ... all of these things are in a state of flux that roughly corresponds to the flux that defines every angle and corner of our world these days.

Yet we are also on the move as theological educators because we live in a world of massive migrations of human beings. Entire communities, however defined, are in movement and their churches with them. In Colombia, the country where I’m privileged to serve, 14% of our 48 million people have been internally displaced by half a century of war and political violence. Entire churches have been displaced with the communities they call home—a mobile home—as turns out. This fact has not been without redemptive significance for savaged Colombian communities that have found themselves *homeless* but not *churchless*.

Our Listening Group, having listened to *you*, mused whether this on-the-road-ness of theological education and its constituencies might best be considered normal for a Christian movement that in its earliest moments became known as *The Way* ... Perhaps our moment, in historical terms, is not the uniquely deconstructing crucible that we imagine. Perhaps it is a more normal thing to find ourselves *on the road* than we have thought.

Perhaps, even, we are at our best ... perhaps our opportunities are the most rich ... when we must both engage and rest from the stress of mobility ... when we are exposed before both the warming sun and the clotting dust of our road.

Seven: We didn't learn new truths. We re-learned old truths in community.

Some may be left unsatisfied by the absence of reference to the skills, techniques, or performance of theological education in this review of what we've learned along the way.

That's not an accident. And I can assure you that my notes are peppered by Listening Group members' comments upon these things.

Yet none of them, in our conversations and in my estimation, rises to a level that would sustain a place as one of the top seven things we've learned. In fact, discussion of theological education's vision and vitality in contexts seems to me to have served as the warm, moist, soily bed on which relationship and mutual understanding germinated and rose towards the sun.

There were moments when a 'content cynic' might have wondered whether our group would have thrived if our conference topic had been 'Techniques of 19th-century Basket Weaving'. I think not, but it does seem that this group was—may I use a quasi-Pentecostal adjective—*anointed* in a way that made it a quick thing for us to recognize the neighbor, the fellow traveler, the family member.

A friend observed, 'As an outcome of these meetings, my language has changed when I speak about other faith realities. I see the faces of the participants with whom I've worshipped, shared my passions, etc. It's changed my language and my sense of identity. Before, I might have said of a certain seminary, "Oh, they've become liberal". Now, I would not use language in their absence that I would not use as I looked into their faces. Now my observation might become "Their vision seems to have changed. I wonder what situation they are attempting to respond to."'

That is, something quite powerful happened in the re-learning of old truths ... together ... on the way.

Conclusion

Well, your Listening Group was industrious and diligent. They flooded my inbox and my ears with many more fine observations than can be collected here. Time has done its violence to our task, but time is a force that must be welcomed rather than lamented.

How shall I draw these interpretative conclusions to their close without taxing your patience more than I should?

Let us recall a home truth of *ours*: When a narrative ceases to speak life and becomes death-mongering instead, it's time to change the narrative.

Let's re-read a great hymn of the church from the social location of theological educators from six Christian families gathering to find common cause in just two things: a shared trust in the Triune God and a common vocation:

Itsy Bitsy Spider went up the waterspout.

Down came the rain and washed the spider out.

Out came the sun and dried up all the rain.

And Itsy Bitsy Spider went up the spout again.

Here's what I hear, with regrets that this is not the moment for table conversation to tease out what *you* hear:

Itsy Bitsy Spider is not alone. And she is not climbing the *only* waterspout.

In fact, there are six spiders, of whom Itsy Bitsy is one, working out her vocation in the place in which she has been called to live and serve. Indeed, there may be more ...

What's more, this house has *six* waterspouts, each with its own busy, faithful spider. Or is this not merely a house? Is it a temple?

And Itsy Bitsy Spider's iterative climbing up and being washed down are not the monotonous exercise in futility that has been claimed. Itsy's vertically oriented lifestyle is in fact a liturgical rhythm. Itsy's life oscillates between heaven and earth, for don't temples always represent that space where heaven and earth intersect?

Itsy's upward-oriented doxological movement is complemented by the downward, liquid rush of her Spirit-empowered reassignment to her world, where two or three gather and where so many groan for creation's redemption and final consummation.

Some have conjectured that Itsy climbs a bit higher each time she makes her way up the waterspout, though others have felt that the mere insinuation of this belies something of a Pelagian spider-ology.

Regardless, the view from Itsy's waterspout allows her to glimpse the other waterspouts. Indeed, she has come to recognize the spiders that climb those waterspouts as her neighbors ... as her sisters ... as her brothers.

Itsy finds this an empowering recognition, for she had wondered in her relative isolation whether those other spiders even belonged to her species.

Now will you rise to your feet and join me in singing together this great hymn of the faith ... its narrative reframed so that it can give to us all the life that it has in it?

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Down came the rain and washed the spider out.

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Χριστός ανέστη! // Christ is risen!