

Immersive Formation: Reflections on Dislocation and Transformation in Seminary Education

Odette Lockwood-Stewart

IMMERSION

Our class was called an immersion course . . . [and] that's exactly what it felt like. Deep and biblical and really fast. We sank emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. We went under with community, clergy, activists, and organizations, and when we came up, it was Moral Monday in Ferguson, and we were being arrested delivering a list of demands to the Department of Justice. Ferguson was an immersion baptism and when I came up, I knew that the people of Ferguson were never sinners, but decades and centuries of laws and practices built up on their skins was sinful.¹

One starting place for critical theological reflection upon experience is the question, "What is really going on here?" This question led seminarians and faculty from two theological schools to unite in solidarity and action in response to invitations from communities in Ferguson, Missouri. Participants engaged in immersion, in dislocation, in learning community, in actions, and in conversations, led by the people in Ferguson who were most impacted by racism, structural violence, and impunity. This

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two-week immersion course took place on the one-year anniversary of the killing in Ferguson of an unarmed young African American man, Michael Brown.

As the director of Community Engaged Learning at Pacific School of Religion, work on a Black Lives Matter immersion course began with the deans and faculties of both schools. Challenges of full academic calendars, committed budgets, and teaching loads were addressed by collective will. Seminary students, leaders, activists, partners, and lead faculty already were deeply engaged in learning in the Black Lives Matter movement. Doing work before, during, and following the immersion changed seminar-ies as well as students—work that addressed context, content, and critical issues.

BEFORE

Prior to the Black Lives Matter immersion, the learning cohort was shaped by prayer and communal spiritual practices. Pre-trip sessions also included training in nonviolent direct action, spiritual care of communal trauma, ethics of participant observation, and contextual ritual. The participants read and reflected collectively upon critical race theory, history, social analysis, theology, and critiques of “spiritual and political tourism.”

Initiative, invitations, and hospitality from Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis and local communities in the Bay Area and in Ferguson immersed course planners in the practices and principles of cultural and spiritual humility and in self-examination of our social locations. Multi-racial student cohorts and a multi-racial faculty team developed leadership and support roles. A covenant for participants was developed. At every step and misstep in course development, we learned from public failure and from each and every case-in-point moment. At Pacific School of Religion, Dr. Sharon Fennema opened and held a space in which immersion in Spirit might shape and transform the participants. Immersion began long before on-site engagement.

From the first meeting of cohorts, the immersion begins. Awareness of location and dislocation, immigrant experiences, and class differences challenge right relationship even as the class forms.

I am noticing how challenging it is for me to do the vulnerable thing of really listening well to an other, without responding reactively, and to let their experience potentially alter my own in ways that could lead to a new understanding for us both.²

Steve Commins is the director of Public World in the United Kingdom and is also the associate director of Global Public Affairs at the Luskin School of Public Affairs, University of California, Los Angeles. He works with UNICEF, the World Bank, World Vision, and many faith-based NGOs. In a recent conversation, he gave me his strong recommendation that seminaries should examine and emphasize *pre-immersion* work: "Above all else, you have to open, to get into their heads, hearts, souls *before* the experience."

AFTER

Following the August 2015 immersion, students and faculty continued to work and reflect on the ways they had been and were continuing to be formed as spiritual leaders in ongoing social change work. The stories, spirit, and struggles of Black Lives Matter in the Bay Area and in Ferguson, and also of Standing Rock Water Protectors and, now, of resistance to executive orders targeting immigrant communities, are held together and deepened through actions, spiritual practice, and critical theological work in a variety of settings long after participants return to their existing personal and institutional commitments.

Each immersion cohort commits themselves to a period of ongoing intentional spiritual and social change, solidarity work, prayer, communication, and mutual accountability. In class meetings, actions, organizing, vigils, in seminary chapels and published writings, in sermons and projects in community placements stories are told and retold, analyzed and linked. Soul work is magnified in community.

Seminary community members that do not participate in the immersion are also engaged through direct and indirect relationships forged by the cohort and by ongoing invitation. They follow blogs, action updates, and calls to action, raise bail money, hold vigils, and communicate in sustained relationships with local faith communities.

Lynn Rhodes, a leader in field education for decades and a predecessor of mine at Pacific School of Religion, strongly recommended that the key to personal and social transformation is *post-immersion* work and creating infrastructures that support that work. She asked, “What does it matter in the lives of the students and of the community without ongoing engagement in struggles for justice? Is it consumption of experience at the expense of others? How is the immersion becoming integral to the just life and work of the students and faculty?”

One year after an immersion in Colombia, the seminary became a U.S. center of organizing to reverse displacement of a community that had already been displaced multiple times. Three years after the immersion, the seminary translated and published a human rights report that could not be published in Colombia.

In 2017, a Spanish-language immersion in Mexico, “Engaging Communities of Liberation,” was structured so that the post-immersion language study, community learning, and solidarity work with students and faculty would continue formally for a period four times longer than the immersion itself.

In another immersion course, fifteen Changemaker Fellows, activists of color from across the United States, reported a deepened resilience in themselves and transformed perspectives on their change work. This learning journey was an intensive on human rights accompaniment in partnership with the Fellowship of Reconciliation Peace Presence in Colombia. The

power differential between those with U.S. passports and those without led to an awakening for many participants that had lived and worked in marginalized communities for years. Discoveries of deep joy in risk taking and resistance were recorded in blogs, journals, worship leadership, evaluations, and summative papers. One activist from Oakland wrote,

My immersion in Colombia resurrected a power in me that was slowly dying from the exhaustion of fighting battles that seemed hopeless. The dignity and strength that I saw alive and vibrant in actions taken . . . in the face of death and devastation has reassured me that . . . faith, hope and love still speak louder than corruption and violence. I have been transformed by the relationships that started on this immersion.³

Immersive learning, formation in community, experience as text, and soul work in dislocation can awaken or reawaken identity, belonging, purpose, and meaning and lead to greater impact of action. However, immersions can also awaken fear, bulwark denial of power differentials, and foster gratitude for privilege. Immersive learning can lead to a dying to theology of status quo, a dying to self that leads to new life. Or, immersions can reinforce previously held assumptions, opinions, and prejudices.

The current dramatic turns in the international community and the current collision of a newly proclaimed desire to exclude and the longstanding impulse to welcome clearly remind us just how crucial it is to learn to live with dislocation as well as difference as a resource for faithful global citizenship.

Susan Thistlethwaite writes,

It is not possible to think your way into other people's social conditions, you have to go there and you have to be there. But even this entering in and being with others, as in participant/observation, is a learning stage. "Commitment to work to change the ways our relationships are socially structured" is the product of entering into the neighborhood's struggles, but also recognizing that one's social location of privilege has been a systemic contribution to the oppressions against which these marginalized people are struggling.⁴

In my thirty-five-years of experience with immersive learning in congregations, campus ministries, and seminaries, my observation is that the

full power and potential of immersive learning experiences are realized most fully when the before, during, and after immersion experiences are brought together in an integrated, imperfect process. And, it is a beginning learning stage that also serves in formation and transformation. This brief reflection seeks to advocate for immersive learning in its many forms as a primary mode of seminary education.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Parker Palmer described the pain that permeates education today as “the pain of disconnection.” He writes,

In the midst of such pain, the spiritual traditions offer hope that is hard to find elsewhere. . . . These traditions build on the great truth that beneath the broken surface of our lives there remains—in the words of Thomas Merton—“a hidden wholeness.” The hope of every wisdom tradition is to recall us to that wholeness in the midst of our torn world, to reweave us into the community that is so threadbare today.⁵

Theological education is in a season of rapid transition, challenged privilege, and threatened sustainability in its current forms in the United States. The pain of disconnection rather than spiritual resources for the search for “hidden wholeness” is found in centers of theological education as well as in other arenas of education. As we move forward, we can contribute to reflection upon these questions: How do we measure transformation in Spirit in our current metrics, measurable competencies, and rubrics? How will new delivery systems open and hold space for formation and transformation? “Whole being” seminary education rebuilds connections to “what is really going on here” through curricular and co-curricular immersive pedagogies in which Spirit shapes soul and learning outcomes include dislocation and discovery and action/reflection.

Reflective spiritual leadership is developed by cultivating understanding and skill through immersive learning that clarifies the reciprocal ways that self and culture, social forces, and institutions shape and give meaning to our lives. Through a variety of modalities, immersive learning can recognize, shape, and sustain links between seminaries and diverse and emerging communities.⁶

One outcome of my year-long unpublished study of seminary and university immersive learning programs of great variety is that schools that commit time and resources for core faculty to lead immersion experiences and courses realize a greater impact on the school as an institution as well as greater sustained work among students than schools that do not have immersive learning programs.

DISLOCATION

Robert McAfee Brown, in *Creative Dislocations: The Movement of Grace*,⁷ weaves reading the world, the word, the Word, and oneself as a journey of grace. Intention, attention, and theological reflection provide a fruitful framework for helping to shape immersive learning and formation.

Chapter twelve of Brown's book is entitled "The Gift of Disturbing Discoveries" and describes some disturbing "but also liberating" discoveries:

*who we listen to determines what we hear; where we stand determines what we see; what we do determines who we are . . . where we come from says a lot about where we are going, but it needn't lock us in.*⁸

Brown ends the text with this affirmation,

*For all of us, future dislocations loom, whether their content is job insecurity, spiritual spentness, the fear of death, . . . and I affirm, in the face of all that, that the dislocations can be given creative content, not just because we determinedly will it so, but because we are sustained by grace, whether we call it that or not.*⁹

In preparation for an immersion in Guatemala entitled "Roots of Immigration," the seminary, students, and partners in advocacy and accompaniment, as well as host communities, learned together as we worked on strategies, led by transgender members of the cohort, to know the realities and reduce the risks of homestays in rural villages as well as in travel hubs for trans students.

In addition to course evaluations from students, partners, and communities, we conduct interviews following each immersion. We have also instituted five-year immersion reunions conducted live and online with faculty, partners, students, and resource people for contextual updates. These have given helpful information on the longer-term spiritual and vocational formation of participants and the role of the immersion in their formation. These have also served to reconnect members of each cohort and update alumni and seminary relationships.

At such a reunion, the lead faculty of a Washington, D.C., faith and public policy immersion course reported that the course gave her “new language for faith-based advocacy and changed my teaching at PSR [Pacific School of Religion]. A new book was informed by the conversations we had there.”¹⁰

Decades of student reports confirm that sustained and intensive immersive learning experiences are transformative. One student at that same D.C. immersion reunion said, “This immersion was the defining moment for me. I knew then that I wanted to work in public policy. And I was hired by Human Rights Campaign before I graduated!” A 2015 ethnographic study that included online surveys, interviews, and onsite shadowing of alumni by faculty from a ten-year period confirmed this as well.¹¹

In an address to theological field educators, Dr. Kwok Pui Lan described four dimensions of religious leadership for the year 2040. She stated that new religious leaders will be civic leaders and global citizens who are better prepared to serve racial and ethnic minority communities, creative leaders of new forms of religious communities, and rooted and risk-taking leaders.¹² What are the immersive learning experiences that will form and transform such leaders?

As Sharon Daloz Parks writes in her book *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World*, “A leader, then, is not only someone applying skill and competence onto a circumstance or situation—a practitioner, but also a hermeneut—a seeker, questioner and crafter of meaning.”¹³ Reading world, word, Word, and self in the midst of shared experience through theological reflection contributes to spiritual leadership formation.

LANGUAGE

While on sabbatical, I was invited to hear Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer address a small group of law students and leaders of the Center for Critical Democracy in Paris. Justice Breyer began speaking . . . in French. He spoke without translation for fourteen minutes. In French, he asked the students why they were studying U.S. case history while they were in France. “Ask yourself: ‘Where am I?’ Be where you are!” He exhorted them to study French, learn France’s legal system, study what other countries do and why and how they do it. Breyer said that this was urgently important in order to help to “expand the American imaginary beyond domestic reality.”¹⁴

When asked about the core thesis of his new book, *The Court and the World*,¹⁵ Justice Breyer confessed that his thesis was simply that “there is something really important going on here—I wish I knew what it was.”

Breyer spoke of ways beyond the rule of law, including religion, that shape identity, meaning, and value and that require asking “What is really going on here?” outside the U.S.-dominant cultures.

I had been studying French and took pride that I could completely understand Justice Breyer’s opening remarks until I realized that I could have completely misunderstood him! Language study is an experience of the vulnerability and need for attentiveness experienced in immersive learning.

Author Jhumpa Lahiri wrote the following about her experience:

My mother tongue, Bengali, is foreign in America. When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement. In my case there is another distance, another schism. I don't know Bengali perfectly. I buy a book. It's called "Teach yourself Italian."

Two years of study. . . . The language still feels like a locked gate. When I mention that I've studied some Italian and that I would like to improve it, they . . . stop speaking to me in English. They gave me this turning point . . . thanks to them, I finally find myself inside the language. Because in the end to learn a language, to feel connected to it, you have to have a dialogue, however childlike, however imperfect.

I write in a terrible, embarrassing Italian, full of mistakes. . . . I don't recognize the person who is writing . . . in this new, approximate language. But I know that it's the most genuine, most vulnerable part of me.¹⁶

The "genuine and vulnerable" parts of oneself can be experienced, and creative dislocation can be formational, without travel. Language study and study in other disciplines and faith practices can be immersive. Students from other countries have led these studies with their fellow students, including faculty.

Bishop Yvette Flunder has taught a local San Francisco Bay Area immersion for ten years entitled "Refuge in the City" in which students learn from members of the most marginalized communities, who respond to the question, "What do you think seminarians need to know?"

UNDERSTANDING

Arika Okrent, linguist and author of *In the Land of Invented Languages*, writes,

Understand seems like a pretty straightforward English word . . . it's had its current meaning, to comprehend, since our earliest records of it. Still, it's something of an etymological mystery. What does "standing under" have to do with under-

*standing. Most metaphors for understanding have to do with getting, grasping, or taking.*¹⁷

Artist Sister Corita Kent created a colorful serigraph of these words,

*To understand
is to stand under
which is to look up to
which is a good way
to understand.*¹⁸

This is an invitation to dislocation and a meditation on the perception of oppressive structures and systems. Structures and systems of oppression are perceived, exposed, and experienced most clearly by those most affected who are also most able to lead liberative change. Conversely, privilege requires one to learn how to follow, to learn how to be last.

Christena Cleveland, in her blog “How to be last: A practical theology for privileged people,” writes,

*When privileged people are invited to play a supportive role in justice and equity work, they often feel disoriented, marginalized and role-less . . . since they don't have a leadership role they don't believe they have a valuable role to play. . . . [They experience] disorientation and lack of clarity. . . . Privileged people have a difficult time recognizing the social value and the theological importance of such roles . . . of being last.*¹⁹

Parabolic experience that disrupts, disorients, and dislocates calls to mind C. H. Dodd's description of the action of parable as leaving the mind “in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” Immersive learning experiences can slow and even stop the student by their “vividness and strangeness,” leading the mind, heart, and soul into active spirit-led life that subverts power differentials and the domination/submission paradigm.²⁰

Joerg Rieger writes in his book *Faith on the Road: A Short Theology of Travel and Justice*, “When immersion travelers become aware of the toxicity of their own environments in firsthand encounters with others, they are in-

variably shocked. Yet it is in the midst of those shocks that a deeper solidarity becomes possible and that travel develops the potential to transform."²¹

Local travel can have as great an impact as travel abroad. In a memorable dinner conversation in the mid-1970s, John Vincent of the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield, England, said, "The only authentic ministry in the suburbs is to dig ditches for people to fall into." This statement resulted in the visit of a very privileged youth group from Wellesley, Massachusetts, to the maximum security block at the prison in Walpole and the race relations group facilitated by staff of the American Friends Service Committee. Youth experienced grace in an unthinkable place and discovered that the only professional killer they met that night was the trustee working in the gift shop. Their minds and hearts and questions changed and challenged their families. Rieger writes,

*Immersion and short-term mission trips become truly alternative ways of travel when they lead us to take an extended and deep look at ourselves and at our interconnectedness with others and with God . . . the biggest challenge of all may well be coming home.*²²

CRITICAL ISSUES

In "The Voluntourist's Dilemma," journalist Jacob Kushner reports on misspent human and financial resources that can cause real harm, such as "orphan tourism." He writes,

*To many of these people, simply experiencing a foreign culture is not enough. They must change that place for the better. . . . I've come to believe that the first step toward making the world a better place is to simply experience that place.*²³

This, in turn, requires us to be specific about our context and location. Self-critical work in which we learn at least as much about ourselves as we do about the "other" requires developing relationships that may well challenge preconceptions, change lenses, raise new questions, and open the layers of belief to critical examination.

How we do what we do speaks louder than what we say, blog, or photograph. Those we meet will observe where we stay and how we travel.

They will be aware of every decision we make and want to know why. Critical issues from carbon footprint to use of resources to extraction or appropriation are engaged at every level and layer of pedagogy, planning, and implementation.

Immersive learning and creative dislocation involve perpetual critique, examination, and assessment. They require the engagement of participants in planning and implementation to learn about the work of mutuality and the power of and liberation in truth setting free.

Susan Thistlethwaite and George Cairns point out the dangers of what they call “theological tourism.” Their work demonstrates the critical importance of power analysis and of living into and learning from the discomfort of the differentials that shape us and our relationships in order to *reshape* us and our relationships.²⁴

In writing of her own discomfort in a community lab immersion, one student wrote,

I came across an Episcopal blog that described uncomfortability as a sacrament. “If uncomfortability is a sacrament, and I believe it is, then we need to lean into it . . . to dive into it even. We need to feel it deeply, knowing that it leads us to the very heart of Christ.”²⁵

Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether speaks about church as liberative community. Her statement at a Women’s Ordination Worldwide conference articulates clearly the inextricable relation between spiritual and social transformation in a theology of baptism. She said,

Baptism should manifest the overcoming of alienating and oppressive modes of human relationship, and the reunion with one’s authentic potential for life as one’s gift in creation by God, entering into a community which confirms and nurtures such redemptive capacities of our human natures. We should understand baptism as the proclamation of our entrance into a process of metanoia or turning around by which we see through the ideologies that justify oppressive systems and

*get in touch with our true potential for life. Eucharist is the ongoing nurture in such life in community.*²⁶

Immersion and dislocation can offer opportunities for such sacramental spiritual and social change. In February 2016, a student wrote about an immersion in Central America and the impact it had on her studies and her life:

The ideas that have been swirling around in my head from last semester, wove through the immersion, and have now settled into my current classes . . . are the definitions of power and the characteristics of how power moves . . . that I see underpinning the work of social activism, academia, cultural change, and flux in societies. . . . Before the trip, we read essays by Latina feminist theologians and excerpts from books on Guatemalan history, particularly around the war and migration. Now we are hearing stories directly from leaders from the Mayan community, ex guerilla combatants and people who have migrated to the US and have come back to Guatemala. . . . With new bonding and relationships, things get increasingly personal.

The student quoted at the beginning of this article ended his sermon with these words:

*I have learned from my time here at PSR [Pacific School of Religion], at Refuge, at Glide, and in Ferguson, that this movement is made up of moments of awakening by people just like us. We are a people moving from what scares us, our ability to change the course of history, to being a people, from here to Ferguson to Palestine, who insist that our gifts, our lives, our comfort, our discomfort, our privilege, be used for the most sacred act, love—or not at all. To God be the Glory, Amen.*²⁷

NOTES

- 1 Marvin K. White, “Scared Sacred,” sermon preached at Glide Memorial United Methodist Church, San Francisco, October 18, 2015. Used by permission of the author.
- 2 Used by permission of the author.
- 3 Used by permission of the author.

- 4 Susan B. Thistlethwaite and George F. Cairns, *Beyond Theological Tourism: Mentoring as a Grassroots Approach to Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 12–13.
- 5 Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).
- 6 Examples include field education, project and portfolio social change field work, community-driven research, sustained civic engagement, mentor-based spiritual practice, social entrepreneurial initiatives, layered change leadership, case-based learning, language immersion, cohort collaborative learning, community labs built into classroom or distance courses, short- and long-term immersion placements, host site technologies, disorientation at orientation, design thinking modules, and learning living communities.
- 7 Robert McAfee Brown, *Creative Dislocation: The Movement of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980).
- 8 Ibid., 105–13
- 9 Ibid., 144.
- 10 Mary Donovan Turner, lead faculty, interviewed immersion participants at a five-year reunion of “Faith and Public Policy,” Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California, August, 2015.
- 11 Bernard Schlager, “Learning from Our Graduates,” Wabash-funded study, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California, 2015.
- 12 Pui-Lan Kwok, “From Pasts and Possibilities: Religious Leadership in 2040,” 32nd Biennial Consultation, Association for Theological Field Education, Jan. 24, 2013, http://atfe.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/From-Pasts-to-Possibilities.mss_3.pdf,
- 13 Sharon Daloz Parks, *Leadership Can be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005).
- 14 Stephen Breyer, address to the American University of Paris at the American Church in Paris, May 3, 2016.
- 15 Stephen Breyer, *The Court and the World: American Law and the New Global Realities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).
- 16 Jhumpa Lahiri, “Teach Yourself Italian,” *The New Yorker*, Dec. 7, 2015.
- 17 Arika Okrent, “Understand,” *Mental Floss*. July 17, 2015).
- 18 Mary Corita Kent, *Sister Corita* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1968).
- 19 Christena Cleveland, “How To Be Last: A Practical Theology for Privileged People” [blog], Christena Cleveland, Dec. 6, 2016, <http://www.christenacleveland.com/blog/2016/12/new-series-how-to-be-last-a-practical-theology-for-privileged-people>, italics added.
- 20 C. H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1961).

- 21 Joerg Rieger, *Faith on the Road: A Short Theology of Travel and Justice* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 100.
- 22 Ibid., 105.
- 23 Jacob Kushner, "The Voluntourist's Dilemma," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2016.
- 24 Thistlethwaite and Cairns, *Beyond Theological Tourism*.
- 25 Mike Kinman, "The Sacrament of Uncomfortability," *Come Together* [blog], December 1, 2014, <http://cccdean.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-sacrament-of-uncomfortability.html>.
- 26 Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Church as Liberation Community from Patriarchy," address to Women's Ordination Worldwide, July 23, 2005.
- 27 Ibid.

International Congress of Pastoral Care and Counseling. Fall of 2015 in San Francisco

Transcripts, videos, photos and minutes of the ICPCC meeting are now available free on the web site of the North Central Region of ACPE.

www.ncracpe.org.

