

## The State of the Association for Theological Field Education under the Cloud of Pandemics

Barbara J. Blodgett

**A**ssociation for Theological Field Education (ATFE) members gathered on April 3, 2020, for a webinar that we called Helping Students Thrive. ATFE's Steering Committee had planned this webinar before any of us had heard of the term 'coronavirus.' It was to address the intersections among mental health, field education, and competency for ministry. But since participants were still all reeling from the pandemic newly sweeping North America, our leaders began the webinar with a check-in about our own mental health.

Our responses ranged, perhaps predictably, from "overwhelmed," "anxious," and "exhausted" to "curious" and "hopeful," with a leaning toward the former. It was fitting, then, that the webinar leaders began (and later closed) our session with a blessing for living through liminal, shadowy, and murky times. We were blessed by words from Irish poet and priest John

---

Barbara J. Blodgett is Steering Committee chair of the Association for Theological Field Education and associate dean of Academic Programs, Assessment, and Field Education at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Email: [bbloodgett@pts.edu](mailto:bbloodgett@pts.edu).

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2847 (print)\* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

\* © Copyright 2021 *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*  
All Rights Reserved

O'Donohue and artist, writer, and Methodist minister Jan Richardson. In "For the Interim Time," O'Donohue uses the metaphor of twilight, that time of day that lies between lightness and darkness: "No place looks like itself, loss of outline / Makes everything look strangely in-between / Unsure of what has been, or what might come. . . . / You are in this time of the interim / Where everything seems withheld."<sup>1</sup>

Field education has remained in the "interim time." We do not yet know what changes will emerge and what will stay the same in our practices. We are still overwhelmed and still hopeful. We have figured some things out, but challenges remain. We have been reminded that we are only as strong as our partners are, for we have always relied on sites and supervisors in the field as context-specific teachers. It should also be noted that the summer of 2020 brought a reckoning with racial injustice that has also made us realize that many educational practices may have to change if we are to be faithful to our values of equity and justice.

Over the years, field educators have honed certain practices that now bode well for teaching through interim times. These times have brought at least three signature aspects of our work into relief. We have always emphasized *the importance of naming what you don't know*, *the benefit of disciplines*, and *the need to distinguish innovation from mere disruption*. These practices have become blessings now.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF NAMING WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

When introduced to the practice of constructing learning covenants, students sometimes ask: "But how do you put down goals when you don't even know what you don't know?" The question is especially timely given how a pandemic can take well-laid plans and throw them out the window. As Jan Richardson wrote in "A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark": "this is no place / to break your neck / by rushing, / by running, / by crashing into/what you cannot see."<sup>2</sup> But it is always a fair question. Ministry brings unexpected unknowns all the time, so whenever education and formation are as grounded in context as ours are, even the questions change.

Our awareness that learning is always contextual, coupled with our responsiveness to the needs of each learner, is one of the hallmarks of field education. It makes us distinctive as theological educators. Our learner-centered, open-to-revision approach qualifies us as critical pedagogues. Field

educators are therefore leaning into their practices of critical, democratic teaching and learning these days while still expecting their students to covenant with supervisors around learning goals. In times like these and at all times we are emphasizing renegotiation and reframing of central, perduring questions.

#### THE BENEFIT OF DISCIPLINES

During a late-October meeting, a group of us were comparing notes about how our semesters were going, and we discovered that on many of our campuses, students were simply trying to grit their teeth and hang on until the end. One person referenced a colleague's observation that the pandemic had brought on *acedia*. Acedia is that vice that has been called the 'noonday demon' because it afflicts the faithful when they are in the middle of a long, exhausting experience. Writer Kathleen Norris has described acedia as "restless boredom, frantic escapism, commitment phobia, and enervating despair," ultimately leading to the inability to care any more.<sup>3</sup> Norris testifies that, for her, sticking to repetitive actions that are small but self-caring can be a defense against acedia. She notes that monastic life centers on repetition in daily practices of prayer and work.<sup>4</sup>

These days, field educators find ourselves reminding students that ministry formation is a lifelong task that does not end with the semester. We are inviting them to take advantage of their internships to try out or recommit to daily rituals and spiritual practices that will sustain their ministries now and during future challenging seasons. We are doubling down on the importance of self-care. "It is a matter of common sense that I keep a close watch on myself during this critical time," writes Norris.<sup>5</sup> Or, as Jan Richardson has blessed us: "Go slow if you can. / Slower. / More slowly still."<sup>6</sup>

#### THE NEED TO DISTINGUISH INNOVATION FROM MERE DISRUPTION

Elsewhere in this volume, Richard Trist writes of the mixed response received from Australia, New Zealand Association for Theological Field Education field educators asked to reimagine field education. Some see opportunities to reshape their programs and curricula, while at least one noted that "the pandemic is a once in a lifetime event that disrupted all of our activities. It would be a mistake to adapt future field education programs

based on this crisis.”<sup>7</sup> Such a balanced approach to reimagining our work is appropriate and characteristic of us. For example, when recruiting and approving sites where their students might profitably learn to practice ministry, field educators have always balanced the values of solid experience and interesting creativity. Tall-steeple churches that have been around forever and experimental and new worshipping communities both have something to teach. Similarly, while field educators are clearly learning a lot during the pandemic about connecting distant students and sites through technology, few seem ready to give up on immersions, retreats, and travel seminars. The new and the old are both valuable when it comes to fostering ministry skills. In short, while it is often said that innovations are by nature disruptive, all disruptions are not by nature innovative. Field educators have never and are not now conflating the two. We heed what Jan Richardson writes about traveling through the dark: “It is not for me / to reckon / whether you should linger / or you should leave.”<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 John O’Donohue, “A Blessing for the Interim Time,” in *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (Doubleday, 2008), 119.
- 2 Jan Richardson, “A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark,” in *Through the Advent Door: Entering a Contemplative Christmas* (Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2011).
- 3 Kathleen Norris, *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer’s Life* (London: Riverhead Books, 2008), 3.
- 4 Norris, *Acedia & Me*, 5.
- 5 Norris, *Acedia & Me*, 265.
- 6 Richardson, “A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark.”
- 7 Richard Trist, “Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Theological Field Education in Australia and New Zealand,” *Reflective Practice* 41.
- 8 Richardson, “A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark.”