

The Tyranny of Excellence

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Introduction

I want to talk with you this morning about the tyranny of excellence. I don't intend to be cute about the subject for this conference and probably couldn't pull off "being cute" if I tried. Let me explain what I mean by tyranny.

I work with 252 theological schools. They are large and small, liberal and conservative, sophisticated and homey, old and new, housed in architectural award-winning campuses and generic office parks, endowed with a billion dollars and with nothing at all. They are Unitarian Universalist to Pentecostal, Russian Orthodox to Quaker, pre-Vatican II to post-Christian. They participate in different communities of discourse and use different translations for English Bible courses. Some are related to research universities; others are tiny, frail, freestanding schools. Occasionally, these enormously different worlds use a common language. And when they do, one word they all use is "excellence." According to the schools, they all provide excellent theological education; they all have excellent faculties; they all strive for excellence. What they all share in common, to a school, is that they are *for* excellence.

Being committed to excellence doesn't make excellence into tyranny, of course. But if these many different schools, with their very different capacities, visions of the world, and strategies for theological education, can all use "excellence" as the descriptor of their identity, then it must have a very plastic definition. That is the tyranny. I have decided that "excellence" is one of those terms that everybody affirms because nobody knows what it means.

Several decades ago, not long after I had finished graduate school, I had an artist friend who showed me a painting. It was abstract, and being a young theologically minded person who knew very little about art, I assumed it should have a meaning. I am wiser now, but back then, I asked him what it meant. He said that he painted it as a "meaning magnet." He had intended no real meaning, but was pleased when people brought their meanings to it. The painting had no meaning; it just attracted them. Similarly, "excellence" is a meaning magnet more than a conveyor of its own meaning.

In the context of theological education, the people who have taught me to be most suspicious of words like "excellence" are racial/ethnic faculty and administrators. "Excellence" can be a proxy for the way theological education has been done by white folks, most typically white males, and its meaning can exclude the work of racial/ethnic faculty—with their typically more intense ties to the church, their desire to do research

that benefits their own racial community, and the different approaches that they sometimes bring to framing problems and constructing solutions. “Excellence” can tyrannize by camouflaging a definition that is actually more about exclusion than excellence.

“Excellence” can also tyrannize because no one is ever against it. (I hesitate using an absolutist term like “no one” to a group of smart Unitarian Universalists, because some of you know—or are—the contrarian who opposes excellence for all the right reasons.) But, for the most part, most people affirm excellence, especially in light of the alternatives. Try mounting a big campaign for mediocre theological education for mediocre ministers for mediocre congregations, and see how far you get! I know a few schools, ministers, and congregations for whom mediocrity would be a big improvement, but in the vernacular of the day, “let’s not go there.”

If excellence is to serve as a goal for theological schools or for ministry, then its tyrannical tendencies must be tamed. It needs to have a definition that is clear enough that people have the basis for agreeing or disagreeing with it, and it needs to have a meaning that is inclusive, not exclusive. I want to make some suggestions about a definition, but before that, I want to make a couple of preliminary observations.

Two preliminary observations

Why this issue?

The first is really a question: “Why are so many people asking about excellence in ministry?” You are raising it in this conference, and next fall I talk on the very same question at a national meeting of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship—the mainline Protestant-leaning former Southern Baptists—have been working on the same question. These three groups are not what most people would think of as close ecclesial cousins. What could be in the water that is prompting this kind of question?

As you might expect, “excellent ministry” is more likely to become an issue when there are fears that something is not going well. When the question is being asked in earnest, my hunch is that it is often a symptom of some underlying dis-ease. For Missouri Synod Lutherans, I think it is the result of decades of effort to make sure they are doctrinally correct, in their Lutheran understanding, only to discover that doctrinal purity is not a guarantee of excellence in ministry. For Cooperative Fellowship Baptists, I think the question originates in the movement of the SBC to a confessional stance they could not support. The CFB Baptists are trying to figure out how to do ministry now that they no longer do it in the old Southern Baptist way. I am less sure what motivates Unitarian Universalists to ask this question, and regret that my ATS schedule made it impossible for me to be around yesterday to hear what you have been saying. My hunch is that “excellence” is a topical way of getting at some other question, maybe some worry. I have a hunch that, if UU ministers and congregations were doing well, and if there were abundant money for all the movement’s agenda, including theological education, the question would not be asked. All might be very good, and this meeting may simply

reflect a striving for ever higher quality—a kind of UUA “Good to Great” story. If that is the case, you can blame my suspicions on my very imperfect Methodism, or the assumptions that accrue from working with 252 excellent schools. But I still wonder.

Language

A second observation is about language. The referent I see most often for this ecclesial body is “movement.” It is not “Church” for obvious theological reasons, but it is less clear to me why the UUA resists “denomination” language. The UUA is not alone. The Assemblies of God, in particular, doesn’t want to refer to itself as a denomination. The AG understands itself to have been born of a work of the spirit, and “denomination” would reflect a calcification, a hardening, that would prohibit the continuing free form of the Spirit’s work among them. I am not sure why Unitarian Universalists prefer movement language, although I presume it is not the same reason that the Assemblies resist it. Being that Unitarian Universalists are Unitarian Universalists, I am sure that there is a carefully and critically understood reason, but the social analyst in me wonders if this linguistic convention does not reflect a certain anti-institutionalism—the fear that bureaucracies and boundaries will overtake free-thinking individualism.

I am a child of the 1960s. I was not a protestor, to my embarrassment, but I did pick up a deep sense of anti-institutionalism. Institutions were self serving, unchanging, not trustworthy. For the past two decades, and as penance for my youthful perceptions, I have been working at the Association of Theological Schools, administering efforts to strengthen and improve institutions. It appears that I copped out, joined the enemy’s side, became a bureaucrat. However, I have come to the deep commitment that institutions are necessary for the common good. Excellence in ministry is more than the sum of individual achievements, and often the support system that excellence most needs requires institutions. In this talk I will focus on ministers, but whatever excellence in ministry is, it is about more than individual achievement. Anti-institutionalism, if that is part of the reason that UU’s prefer movement language, is not always a virtue. And pro-individualism, if it is a romantic notion that truth almost always comes to Thoreaus at Walden Ponds, can be a vice. Ministry always has a communitarian setting and “excellence” must have a definition that a community has agreed to honor.

Implication

The reason I offer these two speculative observations is that they have influenced how I will talk about excellence. My hunch is that, deep down in the Unitarian Universalist psyche at this time, there is some anxiety about ministry, theological education, or the Association’s work—or all of these. If I’m right, talking about excellence is not just about excellence, it is about something else that is left unnamed. My other hunch is that Unitarian Universalists do not use “movement” language because they have habituated to it. They use this language because of a certain fear of institutionalization itself. So, my task is to talk about ministry and theological education at a conference on excellence, when excellence is a proxy for an unnamed worry, and the entities for which this excellence is desired are institutions (congregations, schools, and the Association) that, in Unitarian Universalist piety, are intrinsically worrisome because they are institutions.

Given these observations, I want to talk with you about excellence in ministry and in theological schools, in that order.

Excellence in ministry¹

I am deeply committed to excellence in ministry. Some of my experiences in church have been with ministers who were less than excellent, and I have seen the congregational pain, theological rancor, and organizational chaos that can accrue to poor ministerial leadership. I have also seen ministers who were, in every conceivable way excellent pastors, working in toxic congregations. Excellent ministers and excellent congregations are not the same thing, and one does not necessarily predict the other. Any talk about excellence in ministry needs to attend to this distinction. That being said, I am deeply committed to excellence in ministerial leadership. But how should excellence be understood? As you might suspect, given my job, I will refer to a definition embodied in the ATS accrediting standards. Here is how the standard describes the goal of theological learning, which for me, constitutes a definition of excellence in ministry:

In a theological school, the overarching goal is the development of theological understanding, that is, aptitude for theological reflection and wisdom pertaining to responsible life in faith. Comprehended in this overarching goal are others such as deepening spiritual awareness, growing in moral sensibility and character, gaining an intellectual grasp of the tradition of a faith community, and acquiring the abilities requisite to the exercise of ministry in that community.²

Theological understanding

“In a theological school, the overarching goal is the development of theological understanding.” The ATS standard does not begin with the assumption that the foundation for excellent ministry is specialized knowledge or professional skills. Rather, it argues for a kind of religious understanding that involves an overarching and undergirding kind of knowing. Ministerial work requires knowledge and skills, to be sure, but skills, abilities, and knowledge are not the ultimate goal of theological education, nor are they the ultimate definition of ministerial excellence. Edward Farley argues that the more theological education focuses on ministerial tasks, the less qualified the minister will be to perform those tasks!³ In the language of the ATS standard, the ultimate goal of the theological curriculum is the kind of “theological reflection and wisdom pertaining to responsible life in faith.” Excellent ministry begins with a pervasive religious vision, however defined, that orders perspective on life. Excellence begins with theological wisdom pertaining to responsible life in faith—however that may be understood or construed. But it does not end there. It requires more.

¹ I have adapted part of the material in the second and third points of this talk from: Daniel Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).

² Commission on Accrediting, Standard 4 “The Theological Curriculum,” Section 4.1 “Goals of the Theological Curriculum.”

³ Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 128.

Spiritual awareness and moral sensibility

In the language of the ATS standards, religious vocation involves “spiritual awareness” and “moral sensibility and character.” Somehow, the pervasive religious vision must take root in the way the minister orders his or her life. The minister is not spiritual or moral on behalf of the congregation, but pursues this kind of integrity because he or she has a theological understanding pertaining to responsible life in faith. These religious qualities have a second order function in ministry: they lend authenticity to the minister’s leadership. However, if they are pursued in order to gain authenticity, they won’t. A minister can’t manipulate the appearance of a real thing and get the benefit of a real thing when it is absent. The individual’s vision contributes to a spiritual awareness and moral responsibility. If these are authentic in the ministerial leader, they contribute to the congregation’s confidence in its pastor’s leadership. There is often considerable distance from the good that people know they should do and the good that they actually do. Seminary students do not graduate spiritually or morally mature—these are lifelong tasks for people of faith. Excellent ministry requires maturity as spiritual and moral human beings.

Intellectual grasp

Religious vocation requires “an intellectual grasp of the tradition of a faith community.” If a minister has a vague religiousness but no real knowledge or intellectual command of the religious tradition, then that person’s ministry is not going to be excellent. Ministers need to understand sacred texts and how to interpret them, theology and how doctrine has emerged historically, and the history of the long tradition in which their religious vision is located. Excellent ministerial leadership requires an intellectual grasp of the tradition of the faith community. Ministers should know something, and they should know it not as information that can be recalled but as constructs that can be argued, analogies that can be sustained, and images that have intellectual credibility.

Abilities requisite to ministry

Religious vocation also requires “the abilities requisite to the exercise of ministry.” These abilities include preaching, liturgical arts, teaching, counseling, administration, congregational and community analysis, community organizing and public witness, and other aspects of ministerial practice. Religious vocation involves the exercise of a wide range of activities, and theological schools seek to maximize the quality with which these practices are performed. These activities are not the “applied” version of what is learned more “theoretically” in theological or philosophical studies. Preaching and teaching are ways that theological or religious construals are communicated, not applications of that truth.

Summary perception of excellence

Excellence in ministry, by the logic of these standards, is the integrative and interactive result of all of these. Excellent ministry requires a theological wisdom—a religious vision or understanding—and while it is pervasively necessary, it is not sufficient. Excellent ministry requires spiritual and moral character, and while they are necessary, they are not sufficient. Excellent ministry requires intellectual capacity by which the religious tradition is engaged and made available to others, and while that is necessary, it is not sufficient. Excellent ministry requires professional skills, and while they are necessary, they are not sufficient. Excellence in ministry requires the integrated and sophisticated presence of all of these. None has precedence over the other. Ministers with profound religious sensitivity can be theologically naïve, and that does not work in the long run. Ministers with considerable intellectual capacity can do stupid things in the relational environments of congregations. Ministers can be morally exemplary and alienate others from a moral vision of the world because they lack humility. Ministers with considerable professional skills can fail if they know how but do not know what or know why.

Excellence is not the cumulative effect of critical amounts of these different dimensions; it is the result of their integrative and interactive presence. Different ministers integrate them in different ways that result in more than one kind of excellence. Perceptions of excellence in ministry often collapse into some totalizing idea that there must be certain amounts of each quality, or certain combinations of them, or a certain prevalence of one over the other. For me, anyway, excellence in ministry has many valences and hues and emerges from many different patterns of interaction and integration.

Theological education and excellence for ministry

If this is a defensible perception of excellence in ministry, how do theological schools contribute to it?

Educational practices that cultivate excellent ministry

Theological schools are powerful institutions that have significant effects on the students they educate. What educational practices do they have to engage to educate students to become excellent ministers? Excellence will require theological schools to do more than one thing.

Classroom learning. Classroom teaching is a powerful educational strategy. Classrooms often seek to gather people in intellectually “safe” spaces, so they can pursue the threatening world of new ideas and discomfiting conclusions. Classroom learning is typically highly ordered. A course begins with a syllabus that tells students what they should read, when they should read it, what they should learn from it, and how they should be able to demonstrate their learning. The map is clear, the objectives are stated, and the course is set. The completion of one course is linked to another, under a carefully prescribed curriculum. In this way, the classroom creates an order that distinguishes one kind of material from another and provides an organized exposure that enhances learning. Classroom-based education is particularly suited for learning that emerges from information in books, teachers, and human interaction. It is good for the assimilation of

material, for relating material in one subject to another. The classroom is an ideal environment for the kind of intellectual work that explores ideas and imagines new combinations and interpretations of those ideas. If a person wants to exegete the Greek New Testament, there are few better ways to learn how to do it than to go to a theological school, take an elementary Greek course, then intermediate Greek grammar, then exegetical courses. If a person wants to learn the history of the church, there are few better ways to do it than to go to a school, take a course on early Christian origins, then a course in early church to the Reformation, then church history post-Reformation to the modern era, and finish with a history of the person's ecclesial community. Classroom learning has demonstrated its value over time and across cultures.

Contextual learning. Ministry requires more than classroom learning, however. It also requires learning that accrues to the context and work of ministerial leadership. If classrooms typically gather people into a safe and welcoming space, ministry often throws them into spaces that are as likely to be threatening and unsafe as warm and welcoming. If classroom-based courses divide work into orderly units, ministry contexts confound work into chaotic and disorganized patterns. If classroom-based learning is particularly good for the intellectual tasks necessary for learning material from books, ministry settings are particularly good for intellectual tasks that require discernment across a wide range of individual and organizational ambiguities. If classrooms invent disciplines to organize work, ministry contexts have a way of smashing disciplines apart because the categories don't hold up in pastoral practice. Roger Shinn, in an essay now many decades old, wrote that "...perhaps the most significant education cannot be programmed. There are times of shaking foundations, times of trauma, times of revelation that bring new apprehensions of life and the world. Often they are the very experiences that civilized and compassionate education tries to spare people."⁴ Congregational and other ministry settings help ministers learn to think more clinically, administratively, organizationally, and interpersonally. I remember the first time in ministry when I left the joy of new parents at the hospital delivery room to go to the funeral home. How does one learn to move from celebrating birth to grieving death in two miles? No classroom instruction can do that. It is learned in the car on the drive between the two, and in the late night, reflecting on the day's events. It is an altogether different kind of learning.

Smart schools know that good theological education requires learners to engage in more than one kind of learning and use more than one kind of intellectual muscle. Students need both classrooms and context, and theological education is incomplete without generous doses of both. Both kinds of learning are equally intellectually engaging, but they are of a different order and require different educational support systems. Good classroom learning does not necessarily lead to good contextual learning. Good theological schools multi-task. They guide students through more than one kind of learning, that leads to more than one kind of ministerial intelligence, that leads to the integrated and interactive knowledge, perceptions, skills, and sensitivities that are fundamental to excellence in ministry.

⁴ Roger Shinn, "Education is a Mystery," in *A Colloquy on Christian Education*, ed. John H. Westerhoff III (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1972), 19.

Theological education for a movement

It is one thing to identify the learning that is needed for excellence in ministry; it is another to identify what is needed for a movement. What does the Unitarian Universalist movement need from theological schools, other than the learning that their leaders need if they are to be good leaders?

Teaching. Religious communities, even the movement kind, need teachers. As cultural awareness of a religion's stories dims, religious communities need centers of study that sustain their story in historically informed and intellectually lively ways. They need teachers who have learned the story deeply and intimately, who understand how the story critiques the culture and how culture critiques that story, and who are capable of teaching students in seminaries and adults in congregations and parishes. As centers of teaching, theological schools provide a critical resource to communities of faith.

Research. Theological schools are also centers of research, and when that research is done with intellectual sophistication and appropriate attention to the needs of communities of faith, it helps those communities remember the past, evaluate the present, envision the future, and live faithfully in relationship to all three. Each era of a religious tradition must identify the truest understanding of the long tradition, the most intellectually faithful witness, and the most honest engagement of the culture. Theological schools provide an ideal setting for this kind of intellectual work. Theological research takes time, library resources, the stimulation and methodological correction of other researchers, the questions that students raise, and an informed understanding of a wide range of issues. Schools provide support for all of these elements. While other settings support intellectual work, schools comprise one of the best possible settings for theological research. As centers of faithful intellectual inquiry, schools support the efforts of faith communities to locate the underpinnings of their beliefs in the intellectual idiom of their time and culture.

Religious communities need teaching and research, and when those are combined with learning, over time and in communities of common interest, the result is fundamentally different than if these activities were done separately. Each is enhanced when performed in the context of the others, and a school provides a singular context that brings them together in both expectation and practice.

Schools for education and schools for identity. As I have just described them, theological schools do more than educate leaders, and the primary beneficiary of that labor is the religious community served by the theological school. A movement, if it wants to be excellent, needs theological schools to function in two ways.

The first need is education of leaders, and many schools can provide this function. The UUA welcomes students to study at scores of theological schools, and when an ATS school wants to brag about the range of its students, it will always include Unitarian Universalist students, if they are enrolled. It seems to me that, among the many schools, four are primary: the two that share identity with the movement, Meadville Lombard

Theological School and Starr King School for the Ministry, and two that have significant percentages of UU students and a history with Unitarians Universalists, Harvard Divinity School and Andover Newton Theological School. Each of these schools, along with the scores of others that enroll Unitarian Universalist students, bends theological education in different directions. A diverse movement will always require more than one kind of theological education for a diverse leadership. Each of these schools can make a compelling case for why it is a good place for the education of UU ministers, but those cases vary. The Starr King case is very different from the Harvard Divinity School case, and the Meadville Lombard case is very different from the Andover Newton case. Some religious communities are so homogeneous that they may not be well served by a diverse set of schools. The United Methodists are increasingly limiting the number of schools that are recognized for the education of United Methodist ministers, and it appears to me that the primary reason is the perception that a tightly connectional church needs clergy who are educated and socialized in a particular, more homogeneous way. The UUA, as best I can tell, is not very connectionally homogeneous. In fact, it competes with the SBC for “loosest ecclesial structure”—which may be the only area where these two communities are in head-to-head competition! Diversity of educational opportunity is likely a good thing.

The second need is for identity, but only a few schools can provide this function. Earlier in this talk, I mentioned the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The struggles in the SBC gave birth to seven new theological schools, all of them related to the CBF. At first, as new money was coming to the new CBF offices, much of it was routed to these new schools. However, when the flow of money slowed and the CBF “network” (as this group tends to refer to itself) stabilized into a quasi-denominational structure, it had to think differently about these schools. As a religious community, it needed some of them to do more than educate CBF pastors and leaders. It needed some of them to live with the burden of identity, to worry about the CBF, to direct more faculty research in the direction of CBF worries, and to keep the well-being of the CBF close to the center of their institutional agenda. The CBF decided to name some schools as “identity partners” and fund them differently than the other schools that remained as educational partners.

A movement like the UUA, it seems to me, needs both a range of educational partners and a few schools that serve the movement in more intimate ways, as identity partners. Most theological institutions were founded as a result of some religious movement and have become an extended historical argument for that movement. The institution bears in its DNA the traces of the movement that founded it. Fuller Theological Seminary extends an historical argument about Evangelical Christianity long after both Charles Fuller and his radio ministry are gone. Both of the Roberts associated with Oral Roberts University have been pushed away from close ties to the institution, but the university extends Roberts’ argument about a trans-denominational charismatic Christianity in a way that Oral never could. The CBF schools were founded because theological education was a central issue in the Baptist wars of the 1980s, and the CBF was anxious to extend an argument about a kind of Baptist scholarship that it perceived was threatened by changes in the denomination. Institutions are the means by which a movement extends the argument that brought them into existence, and for religious movements, the most

frequent kind of institution is a theological school. Theological schools that provide identity—that uniquely embody an extended historical argument—need attention and funding that differs from schools whose primary connection to the movement is to provide an educational service.

Conclusion

Well, in the course of forty-five minutes, I have compared the UUA to the Assemblies of God, Missouri Synod Lutherans, Cooperative Baptists and the Southern Baptist Convention. Sounds far fetched when you think about it, doesn't it? I raised my suspicions about "excellence," then proceeded to spend most of my time talking with you about how it might be rightly understood in ministry, theological education, and even in a movement. Sounds pretty inconsistent, doesn't it?

So, how do I conclude a talk consisting of far-fetched inconsistencies? Perhaps this is no good way, except to encourage you to think about a definition of excellence more than a rhetoric of excellence, to think of excellence as multifaceted without over-emphasizing any one facet, and to remember, deeply and devotedly, what you are about.

While I was working on this talk, I noticed a review of Ted Sorensen's book *Counselor, A Life on the Edge History* in *Commonweal*. Listen to this passage from the article:

Á Unitarian whose faith includes a belief in "the essential goodness of human beings," Sorensen relates an amusing anecdote on the subject of religion. As he and Kennedy were en route to Houston and working on the final draft of the church-and-state speech, Kennedy laughingly asked whether any of his Catholicism was rubbing off on Sorensen. "No," Sorensen replied, "but I think some of my Unitarianism is rubbing off on you." And undoubtedly it was—at least on Kennedy's speeches. "Many of the speeches that I drafted reflect Unitarian principals," Sorensen acknowledges. As for his influence on his boss's politics, he confesses that over time he "gradually . . . crafted a more liberal perspective into some of his speeches." Of course, he could hardly have done that without Kennedy's assent. Still, Sorensen was very aware of having influenced Kennedy—so much so that a friend once remarked that the speechwriter looked on the president as "his work of art."⁵

Somewhere along the way, Sorensen had ministers who helped him discern and understand Unitarian principles. Somewhere along the way, ideas became convictions, and convictions informed a unique opportunity to speak to the common good. Maybe excellent ministry, in support of an excellent mind, made this country more whole and human, at least for a time. Maybe we can hope for more of that kind of ministry.

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⁵ Robert K. Landers, "Unitarian Advice," review of *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History*, by Ted Sorensen, *Commonweal* (November 7, 2008), 25.