

## Serene Jones, Yale Divinity School



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This past Fall I returned to the classroom after a year off, feeling rested and more ready to teach than I had since I started fourteen years ago. The time away had given me distance on my work and renewed my sense of the wonderfully complex character of theological education.

According to our mission statement, my task at Yale is to help the school foster "...the knowledge and love of God through critical engagement with the traditions of the Christian churches in the context of the contemporary world." What a rich vocation — teaching students the blended arts of knowing and loving, critiquing and traditioning, embracing and judging, being active in the church and the world, and doing it all in relation to a "God" who is both present to us and not.

It's hard to imagine pedagogical goals more integrative than these, and my own area of the theological curriculum, constructive theology, remains committed to them. For me, a longstanding attraction of this field is its willingness to embrace this multileveled, integrated agenda. It shows up most clearly in our core two-semester course in systematic theology.

The overarching purpose of the class is to explore the doctrines of the Christian tradition as historical, living testimonies to the church's faith. On the first day of class, however, I explain to my students that you don't learn doctrines by memorizing dates, names, and a series of creedal propositions, because our beliefs aren't just facts we spout off. They are habituated "plays of mind" learned over years of practice in Christian communities. Or better, they are gestures of imagination that, as Christians, we have developed and used, over time, to orient our lives and make meaning in the midst of our worlds.

I also explain that, because they are gestures, you have to practice them regularly if you want them to become second nature. To do that, you need a coach, and here's where my teaching comes in. My task as the class coach is to help strengthen the muscles of head and heart these mental motions require. And like all good coaching, the best way to do this is not by telling but showing them how to do it, and then getting them to do it themselves.<sup>1</sup> I like this image because it highlights the action-packed, almost game-like quality of theology. You never do it in the abstract but always on the ground, in the midst of everyday comings and goings, caught up fully in life's messy, vibrant flow. Like swinging a bat or twisting your body around in a yoga stretch, it's a full-fleshed, world-engaging endeavor. And because of this, coaching matters.

Our Systematics syllabus is designed to do this — to combine showing and doing. Over the course of two semesters, students read a lot of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, two great masters of theological imagining. Our hope is that by repeatedly following their plays of mind, students will begin to learn (and be enabled to practice) the deep logic that drives their projects. We also read contemporary theologians — feminists, womanists, liberation theologians, communitarians, process thinkers, postmodernists, etc. — to learn new gestures practiced in the church today, some of them artful, improvised, and graceful, others not.

In my biweekly lectures, I also try to show them how to practice theological gestures. Here, they see me do it on my feet and in conversation with the world around me — with texts, traditions, my own life, politics, church culture, and, perhaps most importantly, their own pressing questions. I've never quite mastered the complex case-study method used by my colleagues in the social scientific fields, but for me, it would be impossible to lecture without multiple "examples" of the doctrinal moves I'm exploring. Whether I'm describing *justification by faith* by showing them how it pertains to their anxieties about an upcoming exam, or exploring *creation* by reminding them how odd it is to think of the air they breathe as a divine gift, I'm trying to show them that it's in these accounts of lived experience that the gestural logic of our faith resides.

I also try to show them that doctrines shape much more than our carefully considered, well-ordered God-thoughts. “Think of an ordinary, everyday thing like an apple,” I tell them. “How do you imagine it? What string of associations does it conjure up for you? And how might Christian habits of thought play a role in that conjuring?” I then give them an example of how it might happen by letting them in on my own theological stream of consciousness:

Apple? Eve’s apple. An Apple computer. Technology as temptation. Technology as gendered. Does the Internet represent the knowledge of good and evil? Is there good knowledge and evil knowledge? Is Information an idol? How does Information affect our understanding of divine Providence? Our social responsibility? Are these different for people who don’t have access to the Internet? For people who have at their fingertips an ever-expanding world of knowledge? It’s ambiguous, isn’t it?...

Apple as gift. Sin and pleasure. Or basic sustenance? How does technology shape our relation to food? Our distribution of it? As site of sin’s enactment, a temptation, a pleasure promised? The apple falls. Grace descends. The future stands in front of us somewhere, yes? No? If it’s a tangent line intersecting a circle, maybe the apple bite is the place where infinity touches history. Do apples have a future on our earth, if global warming continues? Maybe Apple will outlive us all. (Would Jesus have a PC or a Mac)? Will technology replace human effort and creativity? Will it replace God? If so, what are the eschatological implications of that?

And on it goes...this rather chaotic flow of thoughts shaped by doctrines.

Of course, until students grasp the fundamental logic of various Christian doctrines, the patterns embedded in this stream-of-conscious example won’t be apparent. Teaching them these — the basic rules of Christian thought — is our most demanding task because it requires showing them that these rules are both firm and flexible, both sturdy and open. I use the image of a hedge to symbolize this dynamic. Like a tall wall of trees circling a large patch of earth we call faith, Christian doctrines stand at the borders of our meaning making and mark out the terrain of what we believe. Note that as hedges, they aren’t brick walls but organic life forms that make a rough border around a plot that has space for a variety of imaginative gestures — but note as well that even though these hedges are twiggy, sometimes overgrown, and change with the seasons, they are hedges nonetheless. Faith has form. Our theological imaginations do have discernible shape.

Students also get to try on these gestures for themselves — in a more organized form than my above example suggests — in weekly discussion sections and monthly papers. If our curriculum

and the broader school environment are working well, students are also practicing these movements in Bible, preaching, and ethics classes (to name only a few), as well as in the dining hall, by the mailboxes, in chapel, and even while listening to NPR in the middle of a traffic jam on I-95. If the training really takes hold, these plays of mind are probably shaping their night dreams and their morning prayers, too, although not necessarily at a conscious level. All this is to say that if they are learning doctrine — really learning doctrine — every corner of experience is affected by it. And when this starts to happen, the integrative goals of the course (and of our school's mission statement) begin to be realized.

It's hard to tell, though, when exactly this happens or how to evaluate it. Sometimes it shows up in papers or in office-hour conversations. But more often than not, I have to trust that it is happening (or will happen) in places and times that I, as a teacher, will never know. Here's where my own theological practice of *providence* comes into the picture, as an imaginative gesture that allows me to let go of history and of their lives — as if they were mine to control in the first place — and to affirm that the integrating work of the Spirit extends far beyond the walls of my class or the school. Here, too, I am called to practice, alongside my students, gestures embedded in the doctrine of *grace*, affirming that it matters enormously that such integration occurs, and yet that it doesn't matter at all, because excelling as a student or a teacher earns us nothing with respect to the already/always fullness of God's love. There is perhaps no more difficult task in teaching than mastering this motion of mind and heart. And yet when one is finally able to grasp it, the freedom of gestural motions it allows is breath-taking. And a whole new level of teaching, learning, and integration begins to unfold.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Here I use Kierkegaard's famous description of how we learn the concepts of faith. They are shown not explained.