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Academic Life and Scholarship as Spiritual Practice

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The 40th Distinguished Faculty Lecture, 2016 Graduate Theological Union

Every November since 1976, the GTU's consortial faculty nominates one of its own to be the distinguished faculty lecturer. The laureate embodies the scholarly and teaching excellence, as well as the ecumenical spirit, that characterizes the GTU. The 2016 lecturer is Dr. Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM, who is Professor of Spiritual Life at the San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS) and directed for many years the Seminary's Program in Christian Spirituality. A past president of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, she was appointed academic dean of SFTS in 2009, becoming the first Roman Catholic dean of a Presbyterian seminary.

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In 1991, in an address to the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, I began with the following quotation from theologian Miroslav Volf: "Right (communal) doing' seems in some sense a precondition for right understanding." Volf adds: "The obverse is also true; 'wrong doing'—especially if deeply patterned and long-lived—leads to twisted understanding."³ On that occasion, this quotation

³ Miroslav Volf, "Theology for a Way of Life," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 257.

provided a platform for my claim that practice, as I carefully defined it, is constitutive to the study of Christian Spirituality.

Twenty-five years after this address, as a pastoral theologian who has specialized in Christian spirituality, I am still engaged with the role of practice. Tonight, I would like to take the issue of practice in a somewhat different direction and explore the possibility that academic life, and scholarship in particular, is *itself* a spiritual practice. This claim may be self-evident to some; after all the medieval university was originally staffed by religious persons who assumed that their scholarship was spiritual practice. But for others, living on this side of the Enlightenment, scholarship is simply (though profoundly) our professional calling, and we may not perceive it as having anything to do with our spiritual life, if we even claim to have a spiritual life. Others may stumble on the terms “spiritual,” or “spiritual life,” wondering what they mean when I use them as part of my claim. Still others will wonder if the same claim can be made outside of Christianity.

Mapping the Territory

Let’s consider first the term “practice.” Rebecca Chopp notes that a practice is a “socially shared form of behavior ... a pattern of meaning and action that is both culturally constructed and individually instantiated. The notion of practice draws us to inquire into the shared activities of groups of persons that provide meaning and orientation to the world and that guide action.”⁴ Chopp, and others following Alasdair McIntyre’s treatment of practice in *After Virtue*⁵, understands practices to be bodily, social, interactive, cooperative and share rule-like regularities. They contain standards of excellence, and

⁴ Rebecca Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices in Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 15.

⁵ Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 181-203.

thus necessitate self-critical reflection as part of a larger communal discourse.⁶

These scholars' understanding of practice focuses on larger-scale communal practices over longer periods of time that address fundamental human needs and that together constitute a way of life. There are other scholars, often from the social sciences, who use the term "practice" to refer to *any* socially meaningful action, and, in this understanding of practice, can include smaller and more discrete actions. However, in terms of academic scholarship, the McIntyrian sense of practice makes perfect sense: what scholars do is shared broadly, over long periods of time, addresses human needs and constitutes a way of life. Scholarship is bodily, social, interactive and cooperative: we actually engage in actions such as research, writing, experimenting, drawing conclusions from data, and other methodologically consistent behaviors that others agree has a reasonable chance of advancing knowledge and/or uncovering truth—and, I would add, constructing something elegant and beautiful.

In what follows, I will assume that we can agree that scholarship is, among other ways it might be described, a practice, something we *do* regularly, and repeatedly, at certain points publicly, and in ways accountable to other scholars, for the purpose of building a body of knowledge about a certain angle of inquiry that, at least in the long run, advances the good of humans and all creation.

But what about the term "spiritual?" The first thing we might notice is that it is the adjective form of the noun "spirit." In common usage, the English word *spirit*, from Latin *spiritus* "breath," usually refers to a non-corporeal substance, and is contrasted with the material body. It is understood as a vital force that constitutes

⁶ See Craig Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," in *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education*, eds. Barbara Wheeler and Edward Farley (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 35-66.

the living quality of material beings. The term may also be used to refer to consciousness or personality, or to any incorporeal or immaterial being, such as demons or deities. If we stay with these common-sense understandings of “spiritual,” however, we can easily get lost in a dualism that pits body and spirit, material and immaterial, a pitfall that we would do well to avoid.

At this point, I have to claim my particular standpoint within Christianity. I ask those of you who profess other religious standpoints to critique the adequacy of my logic from within your own traditions.

Christian theology uses the term "Spirit" to describe a person of the Trinity, the "Holy Spirit," which is to say, to describe both God's reality and God's manifestations in creation. The term “spiritual” appears early in Christian texts, in I Corinthians 2:11-16. There are other texts, of course, particularly in the Fourth Gospel, referring to Spirit, but this Pauline text actually helps define “spiritual” as participating in the very life of the divine:

For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also, no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

That is, according to Paul, only humans can know the human spirit, and likewise, only God (here: “Spirit of God”), can know God's spirit. But God's Spirit has been given to *us*, so we can ourselves (at least begin to) interpret and participate in God's reality and activity.

Paul understands that spirit is an interior reality (“the human spirit that is within”). For Paul, spirit is that gift given to human persons that enables them to partake of the divine. It is more pervasive and deeper than other interior realities; it points us to the very source of meaning in the universe, because it points us to the Creator of all that is.

But is that spirit merely, or even primarily, immaterial it has so frequently been interpreted? According to Paul, spirit is that aspect of the human that participates in the life of God, and like God’s Spirit, is therefore likewise concerned with the fullness and flourishing of all creation. So, the spiritual life joins us to God’s creative activity toward that flourishing. Hopefully, we are at last coming to recognize that flourishing is very much material, bodily, fleshly, earthly, as well as immaterial.

The key that directly connects this passage to our concern comes a couple verses later in that same Pauline passage: it is the simple and profound statement: “But we have the mind of Christ.”

The Christian theological claim, in general outlines, goes like this: If Christ is the Incarnated Word of God, that is, God taken flesh in a real human person, Jesus of Nazareth, and if that human person is indeed the Christ, the Anointed One, the Savior, returning all things to God, then we too participate with Christ in God’s own life. “But we have the mind of Christ,” says Paul—we have been given the enormous gift of participating in the very life of God. The spiritual, then, is what is open to the action of the Spirit that comes to us as gift. But, to have access to it, one must dispose oneself by means of practices (*askesis*, from which comes the word “exercise,” and carries the sense of bringing mastery via repetition⁷).

⁷ Javier Melloni, *The Exercises of Ignatius Loyola in the Western Tradition* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2000), 21.

It will help in developing the larger argument on scholarship as spiritual practice to digress briefly into the academic discipline of Christian Spirituality, as it has struggled over the years with various understandings of the word “spirituality.” To understand this term, I will offer a definition of our GTU colleague, Sandra Schneiders: Spirituality is “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”⁸ In this definition, Schneiders is being particularly careful to define spirituality in a broad and human-based way so that, hopefully, all or most persons from a variety of religious traditions, or no tradition, can identify with the word.⁹

Schneiders is not alone in this orientation. Walter Principe points us in the same direction: “A person’s ‘chosen ideal’ and the striving to live toward that ideal is ‘spirituality’ at the existential level.” Note that that ‘chosen ideal’ need not necessarily be framed religiously.¹⁰

When we examine Schneiders’s anthropologically based definition, we see that three active elements comprise this definition:

⁸ Sandra C. Schneiders, “The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, eds. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 6. See also Sandra Schneiders, “The Study of Christian Spirituality,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 16.

⁹ Schneiders locates Christian spirituality within the wider universe of spirituality by giving the formal categories specifically Christian content. “The horizon of ultimate value is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ, and the project involves the living of his paschal mystery in the context of the Church community through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Living within this horizon of ultimate value, one relates in a particular way to all of reality and it is this relationship to the whole of reality and to reality as a whole in a specifically Christian way that constitutes Christian Spirituality.” See Schneiders, “Study...Contours,” 6.

¹⁰ Walter Principe, “Toward defining spirituality” (1983), cited in Lucy Bregman, “Spirituality: Unpacking a Glow Word,” in *Bearings for the Life of Faith* 6, No. 2 (Autumn 2016): 6. Bregman points out that the chosen ideal need not be religiously specified.

- Conscious involvement
- A project of life integration through self-transcendence
- Directed toward the ultimate value one perceives

Both Schneiders and Principe clearly indicate that spirituality is neither purely spontaneous, nor something that is done to us without our participation by another agent, nor simply a collection of episodic experiences. Instead, spirituality includes intentionality—conscious choice is integral to this definition. We chose to engage in certain activities either because of their intrinsic value or because of where these actions lead. Those actions are determined in light of their end. Their final goal is something that is highly valuable, and indeed, sets the primary orientation and direction of one’s life. Furthermore, this end is not purely self-referential; it’s not about one’s purely private satisfaction, but it pulls us out of our limited horizons, propels us beyond ourselves to attain this ultimate value. Theistic persons typically understand that ultimate horizon to be God/Ultimate Mystery, but it can also be other penultimates, such as the full development of human personhood, enlightenment, the good of the cosmos, the transcendentals of unity, beauty, goodness, truth, and so on.

Of course, one could put a less than altruistic goal at the center of one’s life: pleasure, sex, money, and power all too frequently become enshrined in the position of “ultimate value that one perceives.” Here, Schneiders insists that an adequate understanding of spirituality excludes such negative life-organizations as addictions and exploitative projects that seek one’s own good at the expense of others. The “ultimate value” must function “as a horizon leading the person toward growth.”¹¹ I want to underline that there is an inescapably moral dimension to this understanding of spirituality: true spirituality does not use power to dominate and destroy; rather

¹¹ Schneiders, “Study of Christian Spirituality,” 16-17.

it enhances individuals and communities, breaks down power differentials, and sets individuals and communities free to live deeper and fuller lives.

Schneiders further claims that spirituality in this broad sense is characteristic of humans prior to any religious or theological reflections and ways of nurturing it. Spirituality is an “anthropological constant,” by which she means that it is constitutive of the human person. Thus, persons of multiple religious and theological perspectives, or none at all, can share this definition—or at least that is her aim.¹² Approaching spirituality this way also allows for multifaceted exploration through as many avenues of human inquiry as are appropriate to the particular problem, question, or reality under consideration. Looking around at our multi- and non-religious cultures, it is very clear that, in contemporary usage, the terms “spiritual” and “spirituality” have long since escaped the parameters imposed by any theological categories—for better or for worse!

We can, I believe, connect Schneiders’ definition back to Paul’s use of the term “spiritual.” We have already noted that Paul sees “spiritual” as pointing directly to the Holy Spirit, to God’s own self and that the adjective “spiritual” designates the quality of living in the light of that divine Spirit. This Spirit searches everything, our spirits included. Since, Paul claims, we have been given this Spirit, with this knowledge that Paul calls wisdom, we can order our lives in light of God’s Spirit, searching everything. My claim here is based on Paul’s claim: we can order our lives around searching out manifestations of the true, the good and the beautiful to such a degree that these become our ultimate goal. It’s quite possible, therefore, to express this reality in a framework broader than the Christian distinctives that I used to construct it.

¹² Ibid., 26-27.

To sum up the discussion so far: A spiritual practice can be understood as the regular, repeated, intentional, embodied, actions that lead, step by step, toward enhanced good, true and beautiful, shared with and evaluated within a community of shared practice according to agreed-upon standards of excellence. Scholarship, in this understanding, can become a primary vocation, and its practice, indeed, a spiritual practice.¹³

Scholarship as Spiritual Practice

Now that we have constructed a common understanding of spiritual practice and scholarship as spiritual practice, let me invite you into a spiritual practice that I believe can be embraced by scholars of many disciplines and many religious traditions.

Lectio divina, or divine reading, appears early in the western monastic tradition and even earlier in Origin, Ambrose and Augustine. (That means, incidentally, that *lectio divina* is “abroad in the land” during the rise of the Western university starting around the 11th C.) In the Benedictine context, *lectio divina* was the consistent reading and rumination, usually of the scriptures, that permeated the entire day. In the 12th century work entitled *The Ladder of Monks*, Guigo II formalized these steps into the method often taught today as *lectio divina*:

¹³ Spirituality scholar Belden Lane puts this matter of spiritual practice a lot more poetically than I have just stated it. He also models scholarship as spiritual practice, in his case, scholarship at the intersection of spirituality and study of the natural world. In an unpublished manuscript, he speaks of allowing nature to become his teacher at a deeply primal level – so deep that he hears particular aspects of nature actually “speak” back. In his description of this relationship, I found this description of spiritual practice: “Not only [do we need] a hands-on exposure to specific teachers in the natural world, but a commitment to an exercise of contemplation. It means learning to still oneself, on a regular basis, before the wisdom of those who teach with unfamiliar tongue. This can take many forms ... Whatever the discipline, the outward journey (toward the reality contemplated) requires an equally-challenging inward journey.” Belden Lane, prepublication notes, *For Love of a Tree: Restoring the Great Conversation*, Prologue.

- *Lectio*/reading
- *Meditatio*/ruminating
- *Oratio*/praying
- *Contemplatio*/resting¹⁴

Although I will, for convenience sake, walk through the steps in the order provided by Guigo, I do so with the caveat that the order is not at all sacred. Practiced day after day, hour after hour in and around other more mundane activities, the steps of *lectio* take on a life of their own, changing order, weaving in and out, and circling back to a step just completed or jumping ahead to the next most important step in a dynamic that has its own life.¹⁵

Adapted to our more anthropological stance and language, and for purposes of scholarly inquiry as a spiritual practice, let me offer brief explications of these familiar steps. But first a word about intention.

Intention is a strategy for beginning a spiritual practice that is strongly advocated by Ignatius of Loyola. In every one of his Spiritual Exercises, he tells the one making the Exercises: “Ask for what you desire.” Asking at the head of the activity is a way to invite yourself to enter consciously into the practice, to dedicate it to the service of the Divine or of truth, and begin to focus your attention—a very practical way to “show up” more fully. A basic intention that may work for us as scholars: follow the good, true or beautiful wherever they take you and share this journey with others.¹⁶

¹⁴ Later promoters of this way of praying the Word of God in the Christian tradition include Dominic Guzman, John of the Cross, John Calvin and Richard Baxter; Ignatius of Loyola has also adapted it to the orientation promoted in his *Spiritual Exercises*.

¹⁵ I first ran across the notion of *lectio* as a model for a spirituality of teaching in an essay by Maria Lichtman, “Teaching and the Contemplative Life,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* (Fall 1998): 14-21. I have taken her idea in a different direction, however.

¹⁶ For most scholars, an intention such as this was probably set long enough

After setting our intention, we take up the first of Guigo's steps, **Lectio / Reading**. In its origin, *lectio* was text-based—either a written text spoken aloud, or a text heard and subsequently memorized and recited. The goal of this repeated reading, hearing, and speaking was to anchor the text deep within. Our more anthropological orientation might extend to loving attention upon whatever is the subject of study. You look deeply at the phenomenon or the data, noticing its particularity, the disparities it contains, divergences from other examples, its uniquenesses. You may find it surprises you, you may notice its difference from you. You turn it around and around in your mind, imagination, and intuition, being exquisitely curious about it in all its particularity.¹⁷ (If you are familiar with Guigo's practice, you may notice that I am claiming something for *lectio* that bleeds over into *meditatio*, but bear with me, as I want to push the analogy with *meditatio* to a different place.)

In Simone Weil's "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to Love of God," the central point has to do with developing the capacity for attention. For Weil, prayer consists in the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God. She advocates attention in everything related to study, even such boring activities as grammar and algebra proofs, so she would certainly include the kinds of activities we listed as activities of our scholarship. Attention in everything is a part of developing this absolute attention for God: "Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul. The

ago that we may not consciously attend to it any longer. Or, also likely, we never did consciously set this intention, we just learned how to do our particular brand of scholarship and kept doing it. But, as part of a spiritual practice, the intention can be set anew every time one picks up the scholarly task. In the middle of a sluggish writing project or a frantic teaching schedule, it may need regular renewing – mine certainly does.

¹⁷ On curiosity, Albert Einstein once said, "I have no special talents. I'm only passionately curious." Letter to Carl Seelig, March 11, 1952, quoted in Belden Lane, *For Love of a Tree*, unpublished manuscript, Ch. 2.

result will one day be discovered in prayer.” Clearly, attention is a spiritual practice in her mind. Helpfully, in the very next paragraph, she widens her perspective to include non-believers: “Quite apart from explicit religious belief, every time that a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit.”¹⁸

If that is what attention *does*, what does Weil mean by “attention”?

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object, it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts ... Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.¹⁹

Weil makes another claim: attention is difficult, more difficult than simply working long hours. She believes that there is something in us that is repugnant to the laser like attention she is proposing, and requires our vigilance.²⁰ Clearly, this kind of attention, at this cost, is, for Weil, a spiritual discipline for students and scholars.

Close to thirty years ago, Jesuit Walter Burghardt defined contemplation to be “a long loving look at the real.”²¹ I think

¹⁸ Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of Schools Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting on God* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1951), 51-59, quotations on pp. 52-53.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

²¹ Walter J. Burghardt, “Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real,” *Church* 5 (Winter 1989): 14-18.

Burghardt and Weil are talking about the same activity, the same quality of attentive openness to what is there, as it is, as unclouded by our own assumptions as we can allow it to be given our situated humanness. Weil suggests a more imageless path, and Burghardt a path that can be full of images—the traditional apophatic and kataphatic distinction. I don't think we need to choose between them; the choice may come precisely from the object of our attention, or it may come from the way our practice begins to open up with much repetition. In either case, says Weil, the object of our attention may reveal its bit of the truth to us—as a gift.

Meditatio/rumination: In the classic spiritual practice, *meditatio* was the continual rumination on whatever the text opened up. In the context of academic scholarship, the parallel, I propose, includes such activities as framing a line of investigation, and formulating a research question, then deciding, given the question, an appropriate method that balances one's own subjectivity with rigorous attention to what is really there. Then comes the long process of engaging that reality at depth, over time, and noticing what happens between you, the observer and the observed (both are changed). As Church historian and spirituality scholar Belden Lane says, "I won't love what I haven't first learned to know in exquisite detail," and also approvingly quotes George Washington Carver: "If you love it enough, anything will talk to you."

Lane points us to the dynamic interaction between knowledge and love as he acknowledges that love itself becomes a way of knowing.²² The effort to know always more deeply is part of the spiritual practice. We engage in learning to know long before but in hope that the knowledge may someday blossom into love, which in turn opens up into a whole new level of knowledge. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

²² Belden Lane, *For Love of a Tree*, unpublished manuscript, Prologue.

Oratio: The classic spiritual practice of *oratio* includes addressing God directly in light of one's *lectio* and *meditatio*. Scholarly practice entails engaging in dialogue about the reality one has been attending to and exploring through appropriate scholarly disciplines. It could be talking to oneself, it could be talking back to one's subject or writing about it. Such solitary activities are a big part of scholarship. But it could also be talking to others about one's subject, teaching about it (how many of us test out what we are thinking in the classroom!), speaking in public about the subject; here the scholar controls the exposition in large part.

But there is still another level: deep collegial sharing where each party engages as both initiator and receiver, listening together to how others see the same reality. Notice that the understanding and relationship to the subject develops differently in a community of inquiry than it does if one simply pursues the inquiry as a solitary being or maintains the initiative in its exposition.

Quantum theorist David Bohm claims that even science, often understood to be the bastion of experiment and the antithesis of conversation, is actually based on deep conversation. He's not talking about scholarly discussion, where ideas are batted back and forth and a subject of common interest is analyzed and dissected, with each participant attempting to forge a strong position that ultimately prevails over the perspective of others. He has in mind something very different that he calls "dialogue." It occurs when colleagues become open to the flow of a larger intelligence. In this kind of dialogue, participants do not seek to win, only to participate together in a larger pool of meaning that is always developing—a larger pool of common meaning that cannot be accessed individually. In this kind of dialogue, the whole organizes the parts, and it can form individuals into a powerful learning community.²³ Scholarly *oratio*, perhaps?

Contemplatio: In the classic exercise, contemplation consists of simply resting, present to all that is, in particular to the Divine hovering within and around. Is there an analogy in our scholarship?

With contemplation, we return again to Belden Lane's dynamic of knowing/loving/being present, and to Simone Weil's understanding of absolute attention being prayer, and Walter Burghardt's description of contemplation as a patient, leisurely, unhurried, loving look at the real, allowing ourselves to be open to it, to be captured by it, to accept it on its own terms, to love it, and to respond to it in such a way that the world becomes better.

In my experience of trying to put into words the contemplative aspect of scholarship, I find my prose falters, and I turn to poets and philosophers, to metaphor and image. A taste to follow, but you will find your own.

Rainer Rilke speaks of "inseeing," which he describes by way of a very homely, earthly metaphor, that of a dog. He says:

I love inseeing. Can you imagine with me how glorious it is to insee, for example, a dog as one passes by? Insee (I don't mean in-spect, which is only a kind of human gymnastic, by means of which one immediately comes out again on the other side of the dog, regarding it merely, so to speak, as a window upon the humanity lying behind it, not that) — but to let oneself precisely into the dog's very center, the point from which it becomes a dog, the place in it where God, as it were, would have sat down for a moment when the dog was finished, in order to watch it under the influence of its first embarrassments and inspirations and to know that it was good, that nothing was lacking, that it could not have been better made."²⁴

²³ See David Bohm as cited in Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990), 238.

²⁴ As cited in Meng-hu, "Dogs and silence," *Hermit's Thatch* (blog), *Hermitary*,

Inseeing, contemplation, delight indeed.

The philosopher we've already met this evening, Simone Weil, closes the "Right Use of School Studies" with these words: "Academic work is one of those fields which contain a pearl so precious that it is worth while [*sic*] to sell all our possessions, keeping nothing for ourselves in order to acquire it."²⁵

In an early essay describing a spirituality of education, Parker Palmer offers some thoughts relevant not only to the contemplative dimension of scholarship, but also to the whole aspect of scholarship as spiritual practice. He observes:

To know in truth is to become betrothed, to engage the known with one's whole self, an engagement one enters with attentiveness, care and good will. To know in truth is to allow oneself to be known as well, to be vulnerable to the challenges and changes any true relationship brings. To know in truth is to enter into the life of that which we know and to allow it to enter into ours. Truthful knowing weds the knower and the known; even in separation the two become part of each other's life and fate ... In truthful knowing, the knower becomes co-participant in a community of faithful relationships with other persons and creatures and things, with whatever our knowledge makes known.²⁶

So, how is scholarship a spiritual practice? The careful work of the scholar can be transformative precisely in the way it brings us face to face with the radical otherness of what it is that we study. And in the very wrestling with this otherness we might even be transformed. That is, not only might our scholarly opinions and

April 23, 2008, <http://www.hermitary.com/thatch/?p=436>. No specific reference to Rilke's corpus given.

²⁵ Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies," 59.

²⁶ Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: The Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 31-32.

conclusions be revised, but also the very way we act and live might also change. And the world itself.

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