

## **SHAPING CHARACTER FOR MINISTRY: A TASK FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION**

HENRY EDWARD EVERDING, JR.

This is an historic moment in the story of The Iliff School of Theology. A new beginning is signaled by the establishment of an office of Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs. The office is a symbol of an institution which is coming into being. The office is a symbol of academic excellence for ministry for which this School has been an advocate since its inception in 1892. The office is a symbol of structures and processes which embody the values and beliefs for which this institution was formed. The office is a symbol of academic responsibility, freedom and accountability. To sum up the significance of this office, let me quote a colleague in deaning who supplied me with this metaphor: A dean is to a school of theology as a fire hydrant is to a dog. Furthermore, I promise to do a better job than any other dean in the entire past history of The Iliff School of Theology.

Be that as it may, it is a privilege for me to have this opportunity to serve this faculty and student body, to serve this institution with its rich past and unfolding story of future greatness, to serve God whose pulsating forces for creation, liberation and justice constitute the life energy in which we live, move and have our being.

This is a significant event, but just one event, in the continuing story of Iliff, a story for which we need the services of a storyteller. Kent Richards read the stories of one such storyteller earlier in this evening's service.

Three things are too wonderful for me;  
four I do not understand:  
the way of an eagle in the sky,  
the way of a serpent on a rock,  
the way of a ship on the high seas,  
and the way of a man with a maiden.  
(Proverbs 30:18, 19 RSV)

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HENRY EDWARD EVERDING, JR. was formally installed as Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs of The Iliff School of Theology on January 26, 1983. This is the address Dean Everding delivered on that occasion.

Here is another:

Three things are too wonderful for me;  
four I do not understand:  
the way of a storyteller,  
the way of a story,  
the way,  
and the way of the church with its storyteller.

There is a story about a Dean of a school of theology who came to a Zen master to ask him about Zen. Nan-in, the Zen master, served him tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, then kept pouring. The Dean watched the overflow until he could no longer restrain himself.

"It is over-full. No more will go in."

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I teach you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"<sup>1</sup>

The Dean of the school of theology wanted to learn "*about Zen.*" The Zen master wanted the Dean to be the sort of person who could live Zen. The Dean perceived the task of theological education to be the acquisition of knowledge. The Zen master perceived the task of theological education to be the shaping of character. The two perceptions are not exclusive of one another, but represent, nevertheless, significant differences of approach to education in general and theological education in particular.

Jesus is presented as a teacher in chapter ten of the gospel according to Luke. He instructs disciples, a lawyer and two women (Luke 10:23-42). This educator's aim is disclosed in his dialogue with the lawyer. An initial question and answer session results in the lawyer asking his own question. What he should *do* to inherit eternal life is written in the law which he, the lawyer, knows and recites:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.

(Luke 10:27)

Jesus approves, "You have answered right," and commands, "Do this and you will live" (Luke 10:28). Like Nan-in, this teacher expects the student to integrate values and actions.

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<sup>1</sup>Cited in Henri Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*. Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1974: 42.

In the following question and answer session, the lawyer presses for specificity and legal definition: "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). The teacher replies with a story and a question. The story seems to invite the lawyer to take the role of an anonymous traveler victimized by robbers and left half dead. The storyteller then seems to invite the lawyer to see how three persons respond to the victim, that is to the lawyer himself. A priest sees the victim (lawyer) and passes by on the other side. A Levite sees the victim (lawyer) and passes by on the other side. A Samaritan sees the victim (lawyer), has compassion, binds the wounds, takes the victim to an inn, cares for the victim during the night, and before leaving the next day pays the innkeeper for all the expenses and promises to pay for any extra expense upon his return. After telling the story, the teacher asks this question: "Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" (Luke 10:36). The teacher does *not* restate the lawyer's question by asking, "On the basis of this story, who is your neighbor?" as if he expected the lawyer to answer, "Why, anyone in need such as the victim." The teacher reverses the lawyer's question and requests that he approach the story from a different perspective, the perspective of the victim. He says, in effect, "As a neighbor who receives love, what sort of person is it who acts toward you in a neighborly or loving way?" Looking at himself as the victim who in turn is silently looking with expectation at each person who approaches, the lawyer is compelled to identify the Samaritan. The Samaritan did not stop to ask if this was his neighbor lying there. He immediately had compassion and acted accordingly. In effect, the Samaritan viewed the victim as himself whom he loved. He did not try to figure out if this was either "one of them" or "someone whose need demanded that he stop." He did not calculate; he acted out of his compassion. He had character.

In this dialogue, the teacher calls into question the lawyer's integrity, the way the lawyer was able to make sense out of his life by knowing the law and living according to it. The teacher reverses the question that the lawyer asks, gives him a story rather than a definition, and has the lawyer identify one who is "not his neighbor" according to law as the one in the story who fulfills the law of love. The image of God's character disclosed in the character of the Samaritan, however, also gives the lawyer the opportunity to reconstruct his life into a more adequate coherent whole. The new shape of his character would be the possibility of seeing and responding to others as if they were his own self seeing and responding to him. In the dizzying effect of this transaction of character, he would be free to feel compassion and to act compassionately for he would see the others as himself and not as Samaritan, woman, black, Arab, man, white, Jew, or Christian.

In their probing at the point where values and actions intersect, Nan-in and Jesus aim their educational energies at the character development of their students. Their parabolic modes of education may also prod us and tease our imaginations into activity so that we might look at the task of theological

education in terms of its possibilities and opportunities. I would like to share with you some of my thoughts about that task, thoughts which have been triggered in large part by their parables. I have organized my thoughts with the image of those educators concerned for shaping character for ministry.

*First*, I am using the word character in a comprehensive way. James Gustafson and other ethicists distinguish “having character” from character traits.<sup>2</sup> “Having character” refers to a total composition of one’s person and one’s deeds. Character traits refer to single sentences or paragraphs. When there is a high degree of continuity, interconnection, integrity and consistency of one’s person and deeds, others can expect that a person will act “in character.” Character refers to the configuration or coherence or orientation of one’s thinking, feeling, imagining, believing, valuing and acting.

Years ago, William H. Danforth wrote a book entitled *I Dare You*.<sup>3</sup> This book reflects the entrepreneurial social character of the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Danforth dared people to think tall, stand tall, smile tall and live tall. This fourfold program for success dared people to adventure, to do things, to be strong, to think creatively, to develop a magnetic personality, to share, to launch out into the deep. His comprehensive program sought to help persons develop all of their human capacities. Yet, when Danforth dared people to build character, he had in mind just the religious or spiritual capacity or values. Contemporary ethicists who develop the “ethics of character” might resonate with Danforth’s comprehensive program, but would have questions about his limited view of character as well as the presuppositions upon which his whole program is based.

The comprehensive notion of having character is a precondition for executive leadership and institutional survival according to a recent article in *Psychology Today*. In the article “What Makes A Top Executive?” the authors report that one senior executive identified only two things that differentiated successful executives from those who were derailed . . . “total integrity and understanding of others.”<sup>4</sup> The authors commented:

Integrity seems to have a special meaning to executives. The word does not refer to simple honesty, but embodies a consistency and predictability built over time that says, ‘I will do exactly what I say I will do when I say I will do it. If I change my mind, I will tell you well in advance so you will not be harmed by my actions.’ Such a statement is partly a matter of ethics, but, even more, a question of

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<sup>2</sup>James Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975: 1-47.

<sup>3</sup>William H. Danforth, *I Dare You*. Privately printed by William H. Danforth, 1950, 14th ed.

<sup>4</sup>Morgan W. McCall, Jr. and Michael M. Lombardo, “What Makes A Top Executive?”, *Psychology Today*, February, 1983: 30.

vital practicality. This kind of integrity seems to be the core element in keeping a large, amorphous organization from collapsing in its own confusion.<sup>5</sup>

Three things are too wonderful for me;  
four I do not understand:  
the way of the infant grasping my hand,  
the way of the youth breaking away,  
the way of the aged letting go,  
and the way of the healer who said, "If it  
isn't old, it isn't any good."

*Second*, I presuppose that character can be developed and that the development of character is a proper, and perhaps an essential, aim for both basic and continuing theological education.

Stanley Hauerwas is for me the most provocative thinker who deals with the ethics of character. While acknowledging that character is in part determined by genetic and cultural influences, he emphasized that "...our actions are also acts of self-determination; in them we not only reaffirm what we have been but also determine what we will be in the future."<sup>6</sup> Thus our actions shape situations and also form ourselves for future situations. For Hauerwas, "...the character implies that moral goodness is primarily a prediction of persons and not acts, and this goodness of persons is not automatic but must be acquired and cultivated."<sup>7</sup>

The acquisition and cultivation of character has been and is an educational purpose of The Iliff School of Theology. In the Articles of Incorporation (August 27, 1903), Henry W. Warren, Elizabeth Iliff Warren, Willie S. Iliff and Louise Iliff wrote:

The principal business and objects for which this corporation is organized and created are not for profit, but to organize and establish a school of theology, the object and design of which is to develop the highest style of Christian manhood (sic), honesty in business and character, intellectual ability in every field of knowledge, recognition of and reverence for spiritual realities, the education of men and women (sic) for the Gospel Ministry, and especially a working together with God for the uplifting of men (sic).

Bishop Warren reiterated concern for character development in his address at the dedication of Iliff Hall in 1912 after the Hall had been refinished completely:

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 30, 31.

<sup>6</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection*. Notre Dame, Inc.: Fies Publishers, Inc., 1974: 49.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

Many things of philosophy, eschatology and theology in general may be taught in a school of theology, but the one main thing to be constantly held before every pupil is the great command of the Supreme Head of every such school. After he had commanded the pupils in his school of theology to have such love as would enable them to love their enemies and pray for them that persecuted them, he said, "Ye therefore shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." It requires this kind of men (sic) to turn the world upside down. We expect to make them here. That is what this institution is for. There should be a faculty perfectly harmonious among themselves, each as anxious for his fellow worker's success as for his own, and each one anxious for the pupil's growth in every excellence toward that perfection that becometh the leaders of God's embattled host. Students must find here influences that shall make for perfect truthfulness, abhorrence of all tricks and shirks, a love for things that are honest not only in the sight of man but of God, and a burning desire like Paul's and Christ's travail of soul for the salvation of his brethren, in short influences that make for the ideal, perfect character in God's sight, or the institution had better not have been founded.<sup>8</sup>

This vision of theological education is represented in the statement of purpose which Don Messer read in the ceremony of installation:

... to promote religious and theological studies through which persons can prepare for Christian ministry and various forms of religious leadership in the world.

A good deal of teaching at Iliff already embodies this aim. This kind of teaching seeks to help persons develop character to be pastors, decision makers, interpreters, preachers of the word, leaders and theologians. Sometimes this aim is explicit. Sometimes it is implicit or hidden in a curriculum which overtly aims at the acquisition of knowledge, the accumulation of course work and grade point averages, the introduction to various disciplines of study, the participation in various field experiences, the retooling of skills or even the equipping of persons for ministry. Interaction with ideas, persons, methods, and other stimuli in the educational environment is necessary for character to develop. The question I ask is this: "Is the development of character an essential and intentional aim of theological education or is it perceived as an incidental by-product?"

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<sup>8</sup>Address by the Reverend Bishop Henry White Warren, D.D., LL.D. in *The Iliff School of Theology: Dedication of the Building and Installation of the President*, February 25, 26 and 27, 1912: 26.

What would happen if theological educators and groups like boards of ministry intentionally planned to educate for character development? Educators would seek ways to help persons develop their individual gifts and potentials for thinking, feeling, imagining, believing, taking stances, risking, and acting with confidence. They would seek ways to help persons in their individual journeys toward coherent lives and help them to examine the adequacy of that coherence for their ministry and the setting in which they serve. Boards of ministry would seek ways to help persons continue to develop character for ministry. They might not try to remedy lack of character by focusing on single issues or demanding that seminaries teach more or different courses. They would develop an ethic of character fitting to the profession, an ethic that would help them select the most qualified persons for leadership in the church and society.

Three things are too wonderful for me;  
four I do not understand:  
the way of teachers teaching,  
the way of students learning,  
the way of staff persons supporting,  
and the way of administrators who hold  
so many meetings.

*Third*, if “a” or “the” aim of theological education is to shape character for ministry, then theological educators will seek to help persons integrate their beliefs and values with social responsibility. The root meaning of ministry is to serve. Generally this service is understood in terms of helping persons. Ministry, therefore, is necessarily social and political. Traditionally ministry also means service to God and to Christ as Lord whose servant the minister is. Ministry, therefore, is necessarily theological and ethical. My dad used to summarize this interrelation between the theological and the social dimensions of ministry with two simple questions: “Do you believe in God? If so, what are you going to do about that?” The law quoted by the lawyer to Jesus summarized these necessary dimensions of ministry in terms of obligation: Love God . . . and your neighbor as yourself.

Theological educators can help persons come to terms with traditional expressions of beliefs and values in order that they might clarify and claim their own, and understand how their beliefs and values shape their service to others. For some, it may come as a surprise that there is a relationship, or that the relationship makes a difference. For others, this process may help them to sort out the validity of their own theology of ministry in relation to others which are quite different or competing. Others may be challenged to empty their cup, take stock, develop their capacities for commitment and generate forms of service consistent with their commitment. It is unrealistic to think that a single

product will emerge, as if clones of Jesus can be mass produced. Nor is some form of orthodox character for ministry desirable in a pluralistic and ecumenical church. Nevertheless, I think it is mandatory for theological educators to have some vision of ministry which gives direction to their work.

For one such vision I return again to Jesus' dialogue with the lawyer. The parable of the Good Samaritan is generally interpreted as an example of ministry characterized by the virtue of mercy and acts of kindness to persons in need. These are important and lasting values, which motivate many of us in ministry, especially through interpersonal ministries. Nevertheless, this understanding of ministry can be as limiting as the lawyer's interest in identifying his neighbors. Jesus tells us the parable to subvert this limiting view of ministry and to free the lawyer and us to catch a glimpse of a shaping vision of love-in-action which knows no limits of social expression. This vision of ministry stretches our perspective of social and political implications of service to God.

For example, character of ministry shaped by this vision will minister to individuals, but with a social perspective that can see how individuals are connected with or disconnected from networks or systems, be they church, society, nation or the global community. Character for ministry shaped by this vision will seek ways to minister to these networks, institutions and systems of human connectedness. Character for ministry shaped by this vision will seek ways to minister to environmental systems whether they impinge on humanity or not. Character for ministry shaped by this vision will seek to lead peoples by drawing out of the social character of church or nation those values of mercy and justice which can heal and transform institutions and societies.<sup>9</sup> Is this possible? It's been done before. A minister in a rural church works with her people to design committee structures that enable more persons to participate in the life of that congregation. Martin Luther King, Jr. beat a drum and thousands followed to love and liberate a system from its own oppression. Elsa Porter, former assistant secretary in the Commerce Department, created institutional structures and processes through which she was able to further human dignity, equality, and development.<sup>10</sup> A single layman, Mark Hatfield, risks in courage to effect some form of restraint in the arms race and to effect world peace, and he does this within the complexities of national and global political systems. Individuals and groups in the Rocky Mountain Conference plan and implement studies that will enable a pluralistic institution to make informed decisions.

If "a" or "the" aim of theological education is to shape character for ministry, then theological educators will need to claim a shaping vision of ministry which will give them a sense of direction in helping persons integrate their beliefs and values with their social responsibility.

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<sup>9</sup>For this understanding of a leader see: Michael Maccoby, *The Leader*. New York: Simon Schuster, 1981.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 170-195.



Three things are too wonderful for me;  
four I do not understand:  
the way of a Sunday School teacher who  
takes time for one particular student,  
the way of a layperson who devotes hours  
for a stewardship drive,  
the way of a believer who stops to help a  
stranded stranger,  
and the way of a minister with institutions.

*Fourth*, a shaping character for ministry as a task for theological education raises a set of pedagogical issues. I shall mention a few.

1. Character development has, does and will take place in theological education. Frequently this development occurs haphazardly and with a significant number of hazards and casualties for both teacher and learner. I think that theological educators and theological institutions should be intentional in educating character for ministry.

2. To be intentional usually suggests that there is an objective, ideal or end in view. To be intentional can also indicate that a teacher or an institution is living with and out of a shaping vision which is not precise or measurable. . . . such as Nan-in's empty cup or Jesus' parables. A shaping vision gives one a sense of direction to which one is responsible, but also allows one to be free to respond to the variables of human personalities and different environments.

3. In a very fundamental way, shaping character for ministry is concerned with the development of persons—who feel, think, imagine, believe and act. I am convinced that persons develop through a process of interacting with their environments. Shaping character for ministry must, therefore, be comprehensive and confluent. Each course, teacher, experience, learner is involved in the process. An intentional design will explore how these various elements interact in order to embody the values of the shaping vision and in order to enhance the possibilities for character development.

4. Shaping character for ministry especially requires interaction between learner and the stories of the tradition. Some stories will disorient the learner. Some will broaden perspectives. Some will be determinative and truthful narratives which will "provide integrity in a manner that does not deny the diversity of our lives and the necessity to claim as mine what I wish I had not done, as well as what I have done well."<sup>11</sup>

5. An institution which aims to shape character for ministry educates through the structures, processes and styles which constitute the social

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<sup>11</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward A Constructive Christian Social Ethic*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981: 151. See also James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography As Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1974, and Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1981 and 1982.

character of the institution, whether it be a seminary, a local church or a denomination. It is necessary, therefore, for the institution to discern what its social character is, how that character fits its shaping vision, and how that social character is functioning in the educational process. An institution that proclaims, as does second Isaiah and Luke's gospel, that all flesh shall see the salvation of God, will seek to develop policies and procedures to insure the rights and dignity of all persons.

6. My final comment on pedagogy. The person and style of the individual educator can embody the shaping vision as she or he seeks to educate character for ministry. Nan-in fills his visitor's cup to overflowing and asks a question, the response to which can occasion a reshaping of the visitor's character. Jesus acknowledges the expertise of his interrogator, asks for his opinion, listens, responds with affirmation and direction, and tells a story through which he offers a new possibility for the shaping of his student's character. These are educators who evoke from me a sense of adventure and wonder. Some of their ways and words I do not understand. I am convinced, however, that when they place me in the tension between wonder and not understanding, they have given me a gift...an opportunity for shaping my character for ministry.

Three things are too wonderful for me;  
four I do not understand:  
the way of wide open space seen from  
a high ridge,  
the way of silence heard in an isolated wood,  
the way of dead foliage smelled along the  
trail,  
and the way of humans with their environment.

Three things are too wonderful for me;  
four I do not understand:  
the way of a storyteller,  
the way of a story,  
the way,  
and the way of the church with its storyteller.

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