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## Reading Basically

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### **(Re)learning to Read**

I was a junior in college when I first learned to read—really read—at an academic level. I was taking an upper-level New Testament course and, after several dismal presentations by students in the course, the professor decided we had never really learned to read. He told us that when you read an academic text or when you read Scripture it should involve more than just reading (and, one hopes, comprehending) words. You must dialogue with the text, he said. He advised that when you read Scripture for an academic class you should read it again and again. Then, when you think you understand it, when you've dialogued with the text, that's when you should set a circle of chairs and invite the scholars you are reading to join your conversation.<sup>1</sup>

1. I'm grateful to Dr. R. Wayne Stacey for teaching me this lesson while he was my professor at Gardner-Webb University.

In that moment, I latched onto that image. I pictured myself sitting on a barstool having a conversation with the scholars assigned on the syllabus. This visual metaphor taught me to read in a different way. Books were no longer a collection of words on a page that were “interesting” or “uninteresting.” They became spaces of invitation, sacred spaces to think and ponder and dialogue with a world of ideas. When my students are reading a set of academic texts, I often ask them to “set a table” as they’re preparing for class. I tell them to pretend they’re having a dinner party and the authors we’ve been reading are coming to dinner. I ask them to imagine asking these thinkers questions or putting them in dialogue with each other on a current issue. And in doing so, I ask them to (re)learn to read as they remember that words printed on a page are meant to be a conversation we are invited to engage rather than a set of facts we need to memorize.

Graduate school is a time when you learn to read all over again. This period of your life requires a new literacy, a new way of being with texts that does not forget the people who surround you. If you’ve ever helped a child learn to read, you know that becoming literate takes practice. I have a two-year-old who is deeply interested in letters and words. When she looks through her books, she tells us she’s “reading.” But when she picks up one of our books off the shelf (with no pictures and so many words), she says, “Look Mom, it’s ABCs!”

For my two-year-old, the letters have not yet begun to take shape and leap off the page as words and then sentences that have meaning. Whether you’re a student or a lifelong learner, reading is always a *practice* we cultivate. Reading is not only a place to listen to texts or explore theory but also a place to connect what we are reading to our communities of accountability.

## Reading as Practice

As a teacher, I am in the classroom with a brilliant group of graduate students who are activists, organizers, and educators, most of whom work in the non-profit world. They did not come to graduate school to explore the life of the mind, but to learn how to create social change more effectively. Naturally, the most common complaint I hear in the classroom is “this is just theory. It is not practical.” At these points in our teaching and learning together, I attempt to connect the two as I argue that good theory (though not all theory) can shape our practices.

This is an important distinction, for reading is not something we do only with our “minds.” In Western cultures, we live with the legacy of the mind/body split, where the mind was seen as greater than and separate from the body. The lingering effects of this philosophy shape our educational systems as we talk about a “life of the mind” as if it could be separate from our embodied reality and relationalities. Learning to (re)read means a commitment to stepping away from the legacy of a mind/body dualism and reading in a way that cares for ourselves and our communities, reading in a way that opens space for both action and reflection. In order to do this, we must learn to read in a way that is embodied, communal, spiritual, and transformative in practice.

## Reading as an Embodied Practice

Unfortunately, higher education can make a convincing argument for mind/body dualism when students learn to value their minds and ignore their bodies. Think of the times when you’ve stayed up late reading, crammed for a test that is due the next day, or “pulled an all-nighter” writing that final paper. In these times, the body’s need

to sleep or pause for a healthy meal is often neglected. During one semester in graduate school, I ate dinner out of a vending machine every Monday night because I taught an afternoon class and was taking an evening class. Each week I swore to myself that I would pack healthy food to bring with me, but an entire semester passed without my ever remembering to do so. I was giving priority to my mind without paying attention to the needs of my body, and in doing so I was creating a division that was unhealthy for mind and body alike.

Believing in and practicing a mind/body dualism is a particular danger of graduate school that is often experienced when we sit down to read. We do not often think of reading as an embodied practice, but in truth we read with our bodies as much as we read with our minds. Too often, when reading, we wage a war on our bodies—forcing ourselves to concentrate, to ignore distractions, to commit the words on the page to memory. I would suggest that the first task in (re)learning to read is learning how to read as embodied people.

In talking about embodiment, Margaret Farley says that we are “embodied spirits” and “inspirited bodies.”<sup>2</sup> As we recognize this truth about ourselves, we also recognize how we are vulnerable to the world and experience life in ways that are often more fragmented than we would like. In other words, we rarely live fully into who we mean to be. Recognizing this vulnerability allows us to be patient with ourselves as we (re)learn to read. Getting distracted does not mean that you lack intelligence or that the person you are reading is more intelligent than you. Getting distracted simply means you are an embodied being, a person who grows weary and can be bored. You are not a machine that you can command at will.

2. Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 116–18.

Reading with our bodies means, first, learning to pay attention to what our bodies need: rest, relaxation, food that does not come from a vending machine. These things are important. But reading with our bodies also means reading in the midst of our lived experiences. It means listening to the rhythms and memories of our own bodies as we read the text. For example, it is possible to read about a subject such as baptism without ever connecting the words we read with our own experiences. But when we read as “embodied spirits” and “inspired bodies,” this same text might connect with us in a way that allows us to feel the waters of our own baptisms again. This allows us to dialogue with the text in a way that is both material and embodied as we put what we read in dialogue with our own lives and the lived experiences of others.

### Reading as a Communal Practice

Reading is not only an embodied practice but also a communal practice. When we come to a text, we not only bring our own lived experiences but also the lived experiences of our communities. One important lesson I learned in graduate school is that all of our reading, writing, and study are worth little if we do it without a community of accountability.<sup>3</sup>

Let me give an illustration.

In East Africa, when a young person from a poor community is accepted to a university, the community will often throw a *harambee* to raise the money for the student’s tuition. The Kiswahili word *harambee* means “pull together,” and the idea behind this event is that the community not only helps the student but also makes an

3. I’m grateful to my professor and colleague, Aana Marie Vigen, for teaching me this lesson.

investment as the student is expected to return home with her or his new knowledge and help the community.

While most of you will not receive a *harambee* before starting your theological education, you still come to seminary bound to communities of accountability, groups of people who are counting on you to succeed. These may be your families, your churches, or people in specific groups who are marginalized or oppressed. These communities of accountability are important because they give meaning to your work. They remind you that you study not only for your own fulfillment but also to contribute to the common good.

One of my primary communities of accountability is a group of women living with HIV and AIDS in Mwanza, Tanzania, who are collaborators in my research.<sup>4</sup> When I read and write, I know that I am accountable to them because they have trusted me with their stories. When I was writing about our work together, I kept a picture of these women on my desk to remind me of the commitment I made to write a book that shared their stories. Likewise, before I worked with this community in Mwanza, I spent more than two years reading literature on the African AIDS pandemic. After I had worked with these women, the literature took on new meanings as I listened to texts with their stories in mind.

During my research in Mwanza, one memorable part of the focus group sessions I conducted was “reading” certain theological texts with the women. While there was a language barrier because these texts were not published in Kiswahili, I summarized key theological concepts and theories I planned to use in the book I was writing and asked them their opinion on the authors’ ideas. In one session we talked about John Rawls’s original position and the veil of ignorance,<sup>5</sup>

4. Melissa Browning, *Risky Marriage: HIV and Intimate Relationships in Tanzania* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).

5. John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness,” *The Philosophical Review* 67/2 (1958): 164–94.

and I asked them to use this concept to create rules and guidelines for an “ideal village.” In other sessions, I took the stories of the women and put them in dialogue with writings from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. These were some of my favorite sessions, as I listened to the women talk about these theologians as “this mama” or “that mama” when they gave their opinions on the texts, thus identifying with the theologians in relational ways that are not common in Western theological speech.

Reading is a communal practice not only because we come from communities and read in the midst of our communities, but also because books (or good books, at least) are written in community. In my focus groups in Mwanza, the women deeply identified with the work of Mercy Oduyoye, Musa Dube, and others more than they resonated with the work of John Rawls because Oduyoye and Dube were speaking from their communities of accountability, and those communities were ones that resembled the group of women assembled in Mwanza.<sup>6</sup>

When we recognize reading as a communal practice, we learn to pull up a circle of chairs, not only for other scholars whom we ask to join the dialogue but also for folks from our community whose lived experiences matter to our work.

6. Some particular texts we used for this exercise were Musa Dube, “Adinkra! Four Hearts Joined Together,” 131–56 in *African Women, Religion, And Health: Essays In Honor Of Mercy Amba Ewudzi Oduyoye*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Sarojini Nadar, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006); Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Woman in the West African Space,” 105–20 in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty Russell*, ed. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999); idem., “Be a Woman and Africa Will Be Strong,” 35–53 in *Inheriting our Mothers’ Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective*, ed. Letty Russell et. al. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988).

## Reading as a Spiritual Practice

Reading is not only an embodied and communal practice; it is also a spiritual practice. It is tied to our vocation as ministers and as people of God. Reading can help us discern or refine God's call on our lives. Reading should not be the hoop we jump through to pass the class to get a piece of paper that gives us credentials to be a minister.

In other words, we should not see reading or study as a means to an end but as an end in itself. (Re)learning to read is a practice we refine because we care for our communities, our calls, and our God.

For instance, when writing on worship Marva Dawn talks about the importance of giving our best work to God as we plan a worship service and argues that this best work is necessary because our planning is a gift we bring to God.<sup>7</sup> Your work as you study theology in this time and this place is part of your vocation as a minister, as a person belonging to God. For this reason, let your reading be part of your spiritual practice. This might be easier in some places than others, for instance when reading scripture or inspirational writings. In other readings, our spiritual practice is less about being caught up in the inspiration and more about living out our call through diligence in our work.

Helmut Thielicke wrote a wonderful book called *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* that is an excellent read for students of theology.<sup>8</sup> In this book, Thielicke builds on Anselm to say: "A theological thought can breathe only in the atmosphere of dialogue with God."<sup>9</sup> Thielicke warns theology students that they should not become so accustomed to reading scripture with an eye to exegesis

7. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

8. Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, trans. Charles L. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961).

9. *Ibid.*, 34.



that they are no longer able to hear how scripture might “speak” to their lives. Extending Thieliicke’s argument, I think this maxim applies not only to scripture but to other things we read as well. Reading as a spiritual practice is not only a way to give our best gifts to God but is also a way of learning to listen for God’s voice in the most unexpected places.

### Reading as a Transformative Practice

In (re)learning to read, it is important to begin by questioning why we are reading. Do we read to memorize content, or perhaps to be transformed?

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire forever changed the way many people think about education by tying it to liberation. Freire argued that education usually employs a “banking model” in which students memorize content and then give it back to their teacher. In this model, the teacher is the source of all understanding, while the students are meant solely to reflect this understanding back to the teacher. An example of this type of learning might be the “teach to the test” paradigm in which teachers spend their time preparing students for standardized tests. Freire instead argues for a “problem-posing” model of education that leads to what he calls “conscientization.” In this way of learning, teachers are not the sole source of knowledge in the classroom, but instead are collaborators with students in creating a critical consciousness that allows learners to become agents of their own liberation.<sup>10</sup>

When we think about reading and the way we normally approach a text to prepare for a class or an exam, we must admit that the banking model is often at play. It is deeply important that we

10. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1997).