

## Learning on the Ground: Ecology, Engagement, and Embodiment

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**Abstract.** *If theological education is to prepare religious leaders who will respond faithfully and capably to ecological challenges, what models of teaching and learning will best equip them for this work? In conversation with environmental education theory and examples from diverse learning contexts, this paper proposes a model of “learning on the ground” which is characterized by engaged and embodied pedagogy through participation in earth-honoring social practices. See a companion essay in this issue of the journal (Kevin J. O’Brien, “Balancing Critique and Commitment”) and a response to both these essays (Forrest Clingerman, “Pedagogy as a Field Guide to the Ecology of the Classroom”) also published in this issue of the journal.*

In a class meeting during a course on religious education and ecology, our band of ten set out for an excursion through the forests of Lullwater Park, each student carrying a simple notecard with their most pressing questions from the week’s assigned readings.<sup>1</sup> With apologies to Aaron Sorkin and Thomas Schlamme, we called it a “Walk and Talk.”<sup>2</sup> We had been through a cool spring, and the snap in the air evoked the brisk days of fall, rather than the soon-to-arrive summer. The ten of us sometimes walked in silence, stopping to point out to each other details we observed as we walked, staring into the center of the old well in the middle of the woods, and pausing from time to time to discuss readings on pedagogy, engagement, and what David Orr calls “slow knowledge” (2011, 17). As we ambled through the park, we talked about what sorts of discoveries are found in the midst of real engagement with our ecological context, and the points of resonance between these discoveries and our own stories. When we concluded our walk, the students offered unbidden reflections about the ways in which our conversation in the woods offered a point of integration between what we were reading and what we were doing in the course. The walk and talk is an example of an

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was conceived and strengthened through a consultation with colleagues Forrest Clingerman and Kevin O’Brien, each of whom has written pieces for this issue of *Teaching Theology and Religion*. I am grateful for their wisdom and friendship. Our work was supported by the Wabash Center’s workshop on writing the scholarship of teaching and learning.

<sup>2</sup> While they were not the first to do so, Aaron Sorkin and Thomas Schlamme are known for writing intricate dialogue between characters as they walk from one place to another, particularly in the popular television series, *The West Wing*. Sorkin uses the technique so frequently that the “walk and talk” has become a subject of satire (Shorrock 2012). The practice of walking and discussing course materials was suggested by Krista Showalter Ehst and Jason Myers, students in a directed study on the same subject in 2012.

embodied pedagogy of engagement, a pedagogical practice that engages the senses, emotions, and commitments beyond what is possible in a more formal discussion in a seminary classroom. These aspects of ecological theological education – engagement, embodiment, and participation in practices – comprise what might be described as “learning on the ground.”

As a course in religious education for ministry students, every choice we made about how to engage the questions at the heart of our work together would have far-reaching implications for how people in diverse contexts are formed and transformed for ecological faith.<sup>3</sup> As religious leaders, the students in this graduate school course will accompany persons and communities as they cultivate an ecological faith, a religious identity that situates itself in relationship not only to God and other persons and communities, but also to God’s creation. Theology students are thus in the position to consider how people of faith, as members of God’s creation, are nurtured in the vocation of responsible and faithful membership in God’s commons, the earth. This essay asks: what *kind* of theological education equips religious leaders for this work?

Assuming that theological education has a role to play in cultivating religious leaders committed to nurturing ecological faith, the argument that follows develops a theory of learning on the ground, an exploration of practices of engaged and embodied learning in our ecological context. In other words, I will suggest how learning on the ground contributes to the cultivation of ecological religious leadership. The case will be made by weaving examples of teaching and learning together with scholarship in environmental education, engaged pedagogy, and eco-theology. It is through such practices of formation that educators in both church and academy can attend to the whole person – and, in fact, whole communities – in social and ecological context. Through these practices of learning on the ground, persons and communities are formed for faithful ecological vocation.

It may already be evident that this concern for ecological commitment assumes a particular approach to theological education, one that might be described as *paideia*. Sometimes loosely translated as character education, a concept of education as *paideia* emphasizes the education of the whole person, the “ ‘culturing’ of a human being in *areté* or virtue” (Farley 1994, 152–53). An educated person, in the *paideia* model, is one equipped to live responsibly and virtuously in a community or society. In a sense, all religious education is meant to culture persons to participate (indeed, engage in ministry) in both their communities of faith and the wider community. Theological education, then, has the added task of shaping nimble, responsive, and grounded leaders for the “mobilization and facilitation” of the work of the “ecclesial community” in the world (Farley 1994, 176). Theological education for our ecological age, furthermore, demands that we expand our conceptions of culture and community so that the land and all of its inhabitants are also constitutive of the context to which religious leadership is accountable. Indeed, as Norman Wirzba points out, “the Latin *cultura* means the ‘cultivation of soil’ ” (2011, 37). We truncate the meaning of culture when we focus on social

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this essay, “ecological” refers to the quality of acknowledging and nurturing interdependence, both social and environmental. More is said about the relationship between “ecology” and “environment,” below. I prefer the term ecological because it highlights relationships, connections, and systems, both human and otherwise.

and political life to the exclusion of its quite earthly dimensions. What is required of theological education to accomplish the task of cultivating ecological faith?<sup>4</sup>

The learning acquired in a practice like the walk and talk described at the beginning of this essay cannot be reduced to what the students learned about forest preservation. Nor can it be solely attributed to the deep conversations we had about engagement and pedagogical practice. It cannot, finally, even be about the simple discoveries of ambling outside, although that would be a valuable learning outcome, in and of itself. Instead, one might describe the students' learning as the kind that moves and shifts underneath theory, technical expertise, and even ideational theological commitment.

In theological education, learning on the ground should issue in formation for "earthbound ministry," to borrow a term from religious education scholar Mary Elizabeth Moore. Earthbound ministry is God-centered, and at the same time, is "grounded in a particular time and place, responsive to the realities of that place, and responsible to the interconnected web of the whole earth. In short, the phrase signifies that we are standing on holy ground" (Moore 1998, xiv). If theological education is a specialized kind of *paideia*, if its purpose is the formation of persons for religious leadership in faith communities and in the life in the world, then the particularities of place – as well as interconnectedness of creation – must be considered part and parcel of the context for which students are formed. Theological education in the interest of religious leadership in ecological context thus requires attention to both the goals of education in the interest of forming leaders for an ecological faith, as well as the means toward these goals: engaged pedagogy and embodied learning, through participation in earth-honoring social practices.

### **Ecological Education and a Life Lived Accordingly**

Moral and religious concern for ecological interconnectedness is not developing *ex nihilo*. Indeed, in 1949, Aldo Leopold advocated for a "land ethic": "All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. . . . The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (2001, 171). In theological language, we might say that creation constitutes a "commons" to which all humans belong (Rasmussen 2006, 101). In other words, as religious faith requires moral attention and care for our social context, it also requires moral attention and care for our ecological context. Good theological education, then, requires good ecological education: the sort that prepares us to be good members and caretakers of the commons. Environmental education scholars fear that, in all kinds of educational settings, this kind of learning is too rare and too episodic to cultivate the level of ecological knowing required to address the environmental issues of our time. While the educational system in the United States may facilitate learning *about* the environment, about climate change, about the ecological crisis, it does not necessarily result in ecological literacy, "the knowledge necessary to comprehend interrelatedness, and an attitude of care or stewardship" (Orr 1991, 92). Ecological literacy requires not only skills in analysis and

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<sup>4</sup> Although the educational context of particular interest in this paper is graduate theological education, the pedagogical proposals made herein have relevance for other educational contexts, as well: in ecclesial settings, the most local and immediate sites of formation in ecological faith; and in college religion and ecology courses where, although religious identity is neither assumed nor made explicit, pedagogical approaches privilege character formation alongside disciplinary expertise.

comprehension, but also demands the engagement of the affections and human commitment: “(Ecology’s) goal is not just a comprehension of how the world works, but, in light of that knowledge, a life lived accordingly” (Orr 1991, 87). In order to avoid paralyzing despair or guilt, learners need educational models that help them engage, in an embodied way, their ecological context. Beyond engaging their minds, ecological education must engage their hearts and bodies, as well. While Orr is not writing from a theological perspective, the categories of interrelatedness, care, and stewardship relate deeply to humanity’s vocation, a concern at the heart of theological education. Insofar as it nurtures a life of commitment among students, theological education must take into account all of the contexts in which ministry is pursued – ecclesial, social, and environmental.

It may be that as we look at current structures of both theological education and ministry, we must first lament our failures to adequately pursue environmental education. We may find that so much of what constitutes ministry is anything but earthbound, and rather disconnected from any particular place. Orr clarifies that, in fact, *all* education is environmental education. But in many cases we learn that the ecological context matters not at all to most fields of inquiry, and is reserved for the specialists – the environmental scientists or, in the case of theological education, the eco-theologians (Orr 1991, 90).<sup>5</sup>

There is an important note to be made here. One of the reasons that ecological context has been left to the specialists is that the environmental movement has been accused from time to time of caring more for nature than people. If nothing else, this accusation points to a failure of the environmental movement to communicate the simple fact that human beings are a part of nature, and that the most vulnerable persons and communities suffer from the same patterns and structures that harm the land (Boff 1997; hooks 2009). Perhaps, then, ecological education is a better descriptor than environmental education, because it points more explicitly to the interconnectedness of human and all other kinds of life. Our survival (humanity and the earth’s) is dependent upon thinking in a more integrative way.

The kinds of educational practices that contribute to ecological education are a means by which we begin to encounter and understand the world differently. As they contribute to theological imagination, they require creativity. In fact, they require the whole self: body, emotion, memory, intellect, soul. Feminist scholars might even describe these educational practices as erotic, in that they are founded upon the “joyous, creative energy of shared connections between self and other” (Carbine 2010, 323). If its goal is the formation of persons and communities for faithful and responsible religious leadership in social and ecological context, then theological education must be about the kind of learning that deepens religious leaders’ understanding of themselves as members of an interdependent ecological matrix. It must support students’ “yearning persistently for the beloved, that is, for better mutual relations and ways of life” (Carbine 2010, 324). This kind of learning requires a pedagogy of engagement and attention to embodied experience, through participation in complex and meaningful earth-honoring practices within a community of commitment.

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<sup>5</sup> Larry Rasmussen has said that the field of Christian ethics, having failed to make ecology of central moral concern, must now “do our first works over,” reimagining the field with ecology at the center (2009). What would happen if all of our fields in theological education took this same charge?

### Engaged Pedagogy

Experience matters. Being engaged as human beings changes how we understand ecological theories, reports, and theologies. Arguing that real learning always requires the whole self, bell hooks writes, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (1994, 13). When we engage students on an emotional and relational level, hooks believes, we strengthen the possibility that deep and intimate learning can happen. This is the sort of learning that characterizes ecological literacy and the commitments it cultivates.

What happens, for example, when six urban seminarians stare down a herd of cattle in the fields of central Michigan? When members of a travel seminar hear first-hand the stories of farmers in this country and others who have lost the capacity to grow food for local consumption, lost control of their own farmland, even lost their farms altogether? Or when theology students pause to stare into an open well, before discussing the ways in which learning happens by discovery, by ambling? Theological education that is responsive to our ecological context would not work in the same way without these kinds of experiential components. For those of us who teach, this is a no-brainer, but let us place some anecdotal observations in conversation with recent pedagogical theory.

When a seminary course I co-taught on food and globalization ended, we did the usual course evaluations, but we also had an open conversation about implications of the course for the students’ senses of vocation and religious leadership.<sup>6</sup> Student responses ranged from “We want to start a farm and spirituality center in rural Illinois,” to “I will try to get to know one farmer in my local farmer’s market,” to “my congregation is thinking about starting a community garden.” Interestingly, almost all of the implications named by students had as much to do with their own identities and ways of being in the world as they did with concrete and measurable effects. As students surveyed the knowledge they had acquired through the course, they wondered how to “live a life accordingly” (Orr 1991, 87). How, then, do we think about what is happening in the processes of teaching and learning, such that students are thinking reflectively about their own identity as members of God’s creation and, more specifically, as religious leaders? Perhaps more pointedly, we must always keep before us the relationship between personal engagement and commitment, so as to mitigate the risk of developing instance after instance of seemingly significant and yet unexamined, fragmented experience.

For learning to take hold in a person, to make a difference in one’s life, it must matter. Instead of beginning with comprehending a series of facts, ecological learning begins with a real, immediate, and significant engagement with our ecological context. It begins with stories of places that give contour to one’s childhood; with a walk in the woods, pointing out animals, plants, and small instances of beauty to one another; or with careful observation of a particular place, of the tiny changes that happen over the course of a few weeks (Patterson 2011). To learn is to be engaged in emotion and in senses, which motivates one to learn more. As the process of learning and deepening

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<sup>6</sup> The course was called “Food and Globalization,” and was taught with Dr. Deborah Kapp from McCormick Theological Seminary, and Drs. Kate Blanchard and Catherine Fobes from Alma College, during the summer of 2009.

engagement continues, learners seek out more knowledge, more experiences. This pattern of learning contributes to the development of commitment – the kind of life that Orr envisions for the ecologically literate person. A committed, ecologically literate person is thus perpetually confronted by new experiences of engagement, which issue in ever deepening forms of commitment.<sup>7</sup>

This prioritizing of engagement rings true even in settings outside higher education, as in the case of a youth urban gardening initiative started by Faith in Place, an inter-faith environmental organization in Chicago, Illinois. The youth signed up for the project because it provided a stipend and they would learn something new. As they gained experience and understanding, however, their motivation for and level of engagement deepened. By the end of the summer, their engagement looked much like commitment, proudly gathering the bounty on harvest days and teaching garden visitors about the particularities of their assigned crop. In other words, they knew that garden – the church in whose backyard it grew, the soil from which the plants sprung up, the challenges of the neighborhood surrounding it, and the people who had worked that little patch – deeply (Ayres 2013, 106–10). In the course in religious education and ecology described at the beginning of this essay, students were asked to choose a place on campus and commit to observing it on a weekly basis, noting small changes in the environment over the course of the semester (Patterson 2011). Students reported, at the end of the term, a sense of obligation to the little places in which they practiced “disciplined curiosity,” whereby they committed to practices of observation and wonder (Orr 2011, 227). They particularly relished the opportunity to show the other students these places to which they had become attached.

To know a place well is to know, in part, the self: “Hence, knowledge of a place – where you are and where you come from – is intertwined with knowledge of who you are” (Orr 1991, 130). In a theological framework, this means that when theological students and religious leaders seek to know a place, they discover new dimensions of their holy and sacred vocation. It is to live as “inhabitants” in a place, rather than as “residents,” a distinction that David Orr believes has everything to do with how humans understand their obligations to and membership in the land and the community that makes its home there. We pay too little attention to the places in which learning happens, Orr argues, even to the point of contrasting campuses with “the real world.” We treat students as accidental residents, failing to encourage them in the cultivation of a life deeply related to a particular place, a disposition that characterizes a committed, engaged person. A resident only occupies a place temporarily, needing to know only enough about her surroundings to draw resources from it (Orr 1991, 102–3). In contrast, “good inhabitation is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness. . . . Inhabitants bear the marks of their places, whether rural or urban, in patterns of speech, through dress and behavior. Uprooted, they get homesick” (Orr 1991, 130). To really know a place, Wendell Berry argues, impresses upon us moral and religious questions, “What is this place? How should (humans) live in it? (These questions) are religious because they are asked at the

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<sup>7</sup> Lee Shulman argued for a new “table of learning,” placing his own work in conversation with the famous “taxonomy” of his one-time teacher, Benjamin Bloom. In contrast with Bloom’s taxonomy, in which there are six sequential categories (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation), Shulman asserts that education begins with, and turns upon, engagement. He challenges assumptions that education always begins with the acquisition of facts (2002, 38–9).

limit of what I know; they acknowledge mystery and honor its presence in the creation; they are spoken in reverence for the order and grace that I see, and that I trust beyond my power to see” (2002, 22–3). Knowing a place is a particular challenge given the transient character of theological education, in which students dwell for only two or three years. What is more, an increasing proportion of students are commuters, present on campus for a few hours at a time in courses that seemingly have little to do with what is happening outside the door or through the windows. What are they learning, then, about how to relate to the places in which they will practice ministry?

Preparation for religious leadership demands the cultivation of the art of inhabitation, marked by careful observation and a commitment to rootedness. Engaged pedagogy, insofar as it invites reflection upon the self in relationship to both the known context in which one is learning and to holy mystery, prepares leaders for the very kind of earth-bound ministry conceptualized by Mary Elizabeth Moore. While many of the examples thus far discussed occurred in courses dedicated to questions of religion and ecology, the implications of an engaged pedagogy for ecological commitment reach far across and deeply into the broader curricular commitments of theological education.

### Embodied Learning

It is one thing to talk about engaged learning, and quite another to add the qualifier, embodied. Aside from the affections, what is the role of the body in ecological learning? Thinking about embodied ecological *practice* further challenges a narrower paradigm that might assume that education in response to our ecological context is best pursued by reading the data and then deciding on a position to take. No, the body has a role to play. What difference does it make to “go there,” for students to engage the earth with their bodies: touching, sensing, working?

As Pierre Bourdieu argues, “The body believes in what it plays at” (1992, 73). That is to say, what learners do with their bodies shapes how they encounter, experience, and understand the world. The deepest kind of learning emerges when one places one’s own body in a particular place – going there. In the case of theological education, or religious education more broadly, we might call this pilgrimage. Take, for example, one participant’s experience of a pilgrimage to witness the effects of mountaintop removal: “Ultimately, a pilgrimage connected with the environment is as much about spiritual growth as about stewardship of God’s earth. . . . For these three days, participants on the mountaintop removal tour lived and breathed the mountains of eastern Kentucky, including the music of Randy Wilson’s banjo and the rubble beneath their feet at the mining sites” (McDuff 2010, 145). It is hard to miss the invocation of the senses – breathing, hearing, feeling – in the description of that pilgrimage. Even on a smaller scale, mini-pilgrimages like the walk and talk contribute to embodied learning in weekly face-to-face courses.<sup>8</sup>

Embodied learning challenges, deepens, and re-inscribes the learning sought through Shulman’s engagement and commitment. Speaking broadly of religious education, Christopher Richardson puts it this way: “Practices . . . should begin with the direct

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<sup>8</sup> One challenge in contemporary discourses about the shape of theological education, which is too complex to take up here, is the emergence of online learning and its implications for engaged and embodied pedagogies. Of course, much of what happens in face-to-face theological classrooms might also be lacking serious attention to embodiment, but online education may force the question to the fore in new ways (Hess 2005, 64–75).

bodily experiences of teachers and learners by asking questions such as: What does or should religious education *feel* like? What does or should religious education *sound* like? What does or should religious education *look, smell, and taste* like” (Richardson 2003, 87)? Engaged pedagogy, perhaps particularly as it relates to ecological education, demands attention to these extra-cognitive dimensions of learning.

Richardson’s questions resonated with the students in the food and globalization class, as they stared down that herd of cows on the organic beef cattle farm. In their case, the question becomes more specific: what does *theological* education feel like? Sound like? Look, smell, or taste like? How were they learning by placing their bodies there: In the fields of central Michigan, wafts of grass and manure surrounding them as they watched the cows lazily twitching their ears, chasing away flies; In the crowded, steamy cement dairy farm CAFO;<sup>9</sup> On the boisterous trading room floor of the Chicago Board of Trade? Going there and encountering the world through their senses makes a difference for how learners understand themselves as members of God’s creation. It means that their bodies, too, have membership. Wendell Berry writes: “What connections or responsibilities do we maintain between our bodies and the earth? These are religious questions, obviously, for our bodies are part of the Creation, and they involve us in all the issues of mystery . . . While we live our bodies are moving particles of the earth, joined inextricably both to the soil and to the bodies of other creatures” (2002, 93). Some students and I, upon leaving the CAFO dairy farm, discussed the gaze shared with some of the animals there. It was hard to get past, we decided, the sense that those cows, in such close confinement, are sentient beings. And thus, are related to us. Our bodies were inextricably bound to their bodies. The students read many important texts in that course but it was in the experience of placing their bodies in the CAFO, in the pastures, and in the fields, that the ideas came alive and engaged the learners: these embodied experiences contribute to an ontological sense of membership and belonging.

A similar story can be told about participants in a travel seminar to Cuernavaca, Mexico, examining the effects of recent changes in trade and agriculture. The students had all read insightful analyses of the effects of NAFTA, of the religious and cultural centrality of corn in Mexico, of the influx of cheap corn from the United States, and of the drastic changes in Mexican agriculture, before they arrived. At the end of the trip however, participants in the travel seminar recalled crowding into the tiny open-fire kitchen in Cuentepec, learning to make tortillas from scratch, smelling the roasting corn, feeling the fatigue in their arms and backs from pressing the nixtamal, tasting the complex differences between blue and red corn tortillas.<sup>10</sup> They recalled their discussion with the farmer, José, who had been noticing some changes when he sold corn at the market, but did not yet seem aware of the massive shifts that would drastically change his livelihood before much longer (Ayres 2013, 118–19). In the debriefing sessions each night, facilitated by a staff member at the Cuernavaca Center for Intercultural Dialogue on Development, the pilgrims reflected on their physical and sensory experiences, as well as their emotional responses. This experiential approach to learning is founded upon the problem-posing educational theory of Paulo Freire, whereby learners are

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<sup>9</sup> Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation.

<sup>10</sup> Nixtamal is the treated corn that is subsequently ground into dough for use in tortillas and tamales.

encouraged to trust their own physical and emotional responses in the learning process, and to engage those sources of knowledge in practices of critical reflection (1982, 66).

Such is the way of “learning on the ground.” By engaging the personal narratives of learners, their emotions, and even their bodies, this pedagogical model takes a more integrated approach to *paideia*, expanding the educational endeavor beyond knowledge acquisition to the vocational task of culturing theological students. It also expands the boundaries of “communities” to which religious leaders are accountable to include the ecological context. Engaged and embodied pedagogy in the interest of cultivating ecological religious leadership, then, requires explicit attention to the role of social practices, particularly those that might be described as earth-honoring, in processes of teaching and learning. In earth-honoring practices, Larry Rasmussen poignantly observes, “(l)ife is intensely present” (2013, 82). When nurtured in an earth-honoring faith, we are confronted with the awareness that “we live more deeply than we think. Faith apprehends ultimacy and a primordial goodness that extends well beyond the contours and reasoned formulations of our cosmologies and moral principles. . . . God is uncontained and so is much of life. The task of religions has always been to mediate the numinous and to foster ways of life that live in rapport with it” (Rasmussen 2013, 105). In theological education, earth-honoring practices of teaching and learning equip religious leaders to accompany those who seek to live more deeply – those who aspire to a “life lived accordingly.”

### **Earth-Honoring Social Practices for Learning on the Ground**

How does “learning on the ground” establish the connection between these themes of engagement and embodiment, and the goal of theological education for leadership in ecological commitment? In the end, these are questions about character formation: *paideia*. Engaged and embodied learning are essential to the kind of holistic learning that contributes to the development of identity, which in theological education is often called “formation” (Shulman 2002, 39). This kind of formation happens in community patterns of action and reflection. The cultivation of ecological literacy requires, at minimum, two things: direct experience of the natural world (increasingly rare in the lives of children), and a teacher or mentor who serves as a guide for making sense of that encounter for one’s life and commitments (Orr 1991, 88–89). Orr’s argument here is similar to that presented in *The Last Child in the Woods*, in which Richard Louv laments children’s decreasing exposure to nature, which he calls “nature-deficit disorder” (2008, 36). Who will be the mentors in cultivating ecological literacy in the work of theological education? Religious leaders, too, need communities of support and accountability as they seek to nurture ecological consciousness in their sites of ministry (Daloz 2004, 92).

In communities, learners are engaged through their participation in social practices.<sup>11</sup> In these practices, learners put their bodies in particular places, participate in particular

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<sup>11</sup> The definition of practices proposed here mirrors the way in which the term has been retrieved and developed in recent practical theological discourse. Much of this discourse has developed in response to MacIntyre’s definition of a social practice: “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (MacIntyre 1984, 187; also see Dykstra 2005 and Bass and Dykstra 2002).

actions or rituals, and together reflect on the meaning and effect of these actions. Practices depend on communities of participants, who together establish, remember, and innovate the practice and its meaning. These communities also welcome and nurture new practitioners, much like the mentors for which Orr and Louv yearn. As it has been described above, learning on the ground is a practice insofar as it demonstrates these capacities. Indeed, religious learning is deeply embedded in participation in and reflection upon religious practices, and the formation of ecological faith and leadership is no different (Dykstra 2005, 41). These educational practices are earth-honoring in that they invite us to not only “savor life, (but also) save life,” holding together spirituality and moral concern (Rasmussen 2013, 86).

To prepare ecologically committed religious leaders, earth-honoring religious practices in theological education must invite both critical reflection and imagination. Practices of learning on the ground create space for critical reflection that can support learners while their own identities are being formed as people of faith and as responsible, committed members of their social and ecological contexts: “In commitment we become capable of professing our understandings and our values, our faith and our love, our skepticism and our doubts, internalizing those attributes and making them integral to our identities. These commitments, in turn, make new engagements possible – and even necessary. . . . An educated person, I would argue, is someone whose commitments always leave open a window for skeptical scrutiny, for imagining how it might be otherwise” (Shulman 2002, 38, 41). Skeptical scrutiny, or critical reflection, is an essential dimension of ecological religious practices, if theological educators are to avoid the unexamined production of shallow experiences. In fact, Pierre Bourdieu was quite suspicious of practices, particularly those that excluded critical reflection, precisely because they had the power to subconsciously manipulate participants’ dispositions and behaviors (in the interest of the ruling class) (1992, 55–58). The same critique could be made of ecological pedagogical practices, if they were to lack this critical dimension. Certainly, theological education is in the business of nurturing commitments among its students. Absent a critical lens, however, those commitments might lack the solid grounding necessary to sustain religious leaders in ongoing ecological vocation.<sup>12</sup> Russell Butkus and Steven Kolmes developed a method for this kind of reflective learning in their course, “Theology in Ecological Perspective,” in which students could opt to participate in a three-day eco-plunge. Informed by the experiential learning theory of David Kolb and the pastoral circle method of theological reflection associated with liberation theology, these two educators accompanied students in the plunge as they moved “from concrete experience to reflective observation to abstract conceptualization and finally to active experimentation” (Butkus and Kolmes 2008, 52). Although the eco-plunge is a major commitment of time and resources, some of the same principles of engagement, reflection, and experimenting with new commitments are at the heart of smaller-scale practices of learning on the ground, such as the walk and talk.

Strengthened by critical reflection, ecological practices also aid in the construction of a new “social imaginary” that contributes to ecologically literate communities, in which persons are compelled to practice greater ecological responsibility: “A new social

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<sup>12</sup> On the tensions between the critical approach to religion and ecology and the cultivation of ecological commitment among students, see Kevin O’Brien’s essay, “Balancing Critique and Commitment” in this same issue (2014, 189–202).

imaginary comes about when new practices – practices of hope – emerge together with new understandings of humans and the earth, and when ecological practices are imbued with new meaning” (Dalton and Simmons 2010, xiii). Might the experiences of students in the rural village of Cuentepec, in a forest, or in a pasture – all sites of earthbound ministry – be construed as practices of ecological hope? And if they are practices of hope, what kinds of imagination (or social imaginary) are being formed therein?

Practices are an essential means by which education engages the imagination. They are a means by which learners begin to encounter and understand the world differently. Since they are experienced, rather than merely conceptualized, they engage the affections, the body, and one’s commitments. As they contribute to theological imagination, they require creativity. In some cases, practices strengthened by a healthy critical lens even aid in the cultivation of what Evelyn Parker and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have called an “oppositional imagination” (Parker 2003, 48; Fiorenza 2000, 81), embodying an alternative view in practices of resistance. What new future can be imagined in an urban garden, in the CAFO, in the “grocery aisle” of the convenience store? This kind of imagination requires learners’ whole selves. Ecological literacy is driven by imagination, too, evoked by nothing less than “the sense of wonder, the sheer delight in being alive in a beautiful, mysterious, bountiful world” (Orr 1991, 86). Religious and educational practices that are earth-honoring draw their strength from and contribute to the cultivation of precisely these dispositions: wonder and delight in response to beauty and mystery.

### Conclusion

It is rare in theological education for students to express their gratitude for a learning experience. This is, however, precisely what happened as our walk and talk came to a conclusion. The sun began to set and students pulled up their jacket collars against the early evening chill, yet we all lingered in the tower housing the well in Lullwater Park, leaning against the graffitied stones, and pondered a little more. Then as we were departing the forest, one student spoke up: “Thank you for bringing us out here,” a simple comment that was met with a chorus of affirmations. Some students were eager to make pedagogical connections between what we had been reading and what we had been doing that day. Others just wanted to note that the time spent in the forest felt personally meaningful. In both cases, it is hard to miss the significance of engaging students’ narratives, questions, and even emotions, as well as their very bodies in that class session.

In such practices of learning on the ground, theological students’ whole selves are awakened, engaged, and summoned. At the conclusion of courses on religious education and ecology students sometimes jokingly express their mock indignation: “I can’t even go to McDonald’s anymore without thinking about that class” (or that film, or that book)! Perhaps another way to say it is that through engaged, embodied practices of learning on the ground, theological students are ever more conscious of being “earthbound,” and the pull toward ecological commitment – a “life lived accordingly” – generates a creative tension. “Nature is the theater of grace here, (b)ut cheap grace it is not. In the manner of all genuine liberation, it goes to the places where the community is most ruptured and ruined. It . . . remembers tragedy and loss. It embraces rather than bypasses Earth’s distress” (Rasmussen 2013, 106).

Dwelling with such creative tensions is the work of a committed life, in which one recognizes challenges, embraces ambiguities, and seeks deeper engagement in the world and in holy mystery. If theological education is to nurture among students capacities for working in this space of creative tension, it is strengthened by marshaling as many dimensions of human experience as are possible – emotions, memory, embodiment, analysis, and imagination. This work cannot be accomplished by merely getting the data right. It demands earth-honoring educational practices that bring together embodied engagement and critical analysis. This essay has presented just a few practices that meet these criteria, and the field of ecological pedagogical practice is wide open for theological educators' cultivation. In so doing, theological education expands the model of *paideia* to include ecological commitment as a dimension of the religious and public leadership for which students are being prepared – leadership that the world so desperately needs.

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