By All Means: Educational Diversity and Discernment of Gifts

“I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.”

1 Cor. 9:22

To borrow a note from Qoheleth, of the making many methods there is no end. I’ve always been a little skeptical about pedagogical orthodoxies: methods in the wrong hands tend to become mandates, after which they become measures of “excellence in teaching.” From the Greek “meta” and “hodos,” a method was originally a pursuit of knowledge. It is a way.

Teaching is a way of doing, a way of being, a way of living. It is inherently relational, inescapably subjective, improvisational, even idiosyncratic. No good teacher can be fully replaced, and no good teaching fully replicated. The verbs that describe the work of teaching are legion: to teach is to model, to instruct, to impart, to convey, to induce, to educe—even, in a sense, to seduce—to provoke, to evoke, to invite, to inspire, to show, to lead, to offer, to awaken, to mediate, to accompany, to midwife, to witness. And so on. A rich liberal arts education ought to do all of these things; no one teacher covers the whole spectrum, though methodological versatility is certainly one mark of a good teacher, as it was a mark of Paul’s ministry as he tried “by all means” to save some.

The teaching tools available now, especially those involving technologies that enable distance learning and wide public access, are challenging all of us to rethink our assumptions about what teaching means, how it may be accomplished, what tradeoffs we accept when we adopt new methods and enter virtual venues, what we consider our sine qua nons. They also challenge us to consider how open access to education from elite, expensive and selective
institutions might allow many who have been historically excluded from those institutions to participate in conversations and acquire skills that bring them into both collaboration and competition with the more privileged who sit in classrooms.

It is not my purpose here simply to delineate the advantages and disadvantages of massive open online courses, as others have and will do that in great depth, but my short lists would be these:

**Advantages:**

Wide access
Democratizing effects
Student-controlled learning pace
Certain kinds of versatility and adaptability
Preservation of lectures and material by exemplary teachers long after they retire
Creation of wide geographic and demographic learning communities
Vast possibilities for online animation, illustration, flexible organization of information, adaptive use.

**Disadvantages:**

Loss of in-person eye-to-eye, heart-to-heart contact
Loss of improvisational dimension of in-person teaching
Tendency to quicken pace and expand scope that would disadvantage teaching of material that invites contemplation, reflection, personal engagement
Tendency to privilege certain kinds of learners, certain kinds of pedagogy, and certain kinds of testing

These, of course, are a very quick gesture at a conversation that can only be begun even in a weekend devoted to the issue. What I’d like to do for the remainder of my paper is to consider how such online courses might be gracefully integrated into a more traditional learning environment without polarizing faculty into “camps” of Luddites and techies, without privileging one
type of instruction over the other in terms of funding, hiring, assessment, and new-faculty acculturation.

How, in other words do we (academics working in more or less traditional colleges and universities) honor the respective aims and values of high-tech and low-tech teaching, serve both local and wider communities, and bring what in some respects are widely divergent pedagogies to bear upon our deepest common purposes as communities of educators who ascribe to mission statements many of us take very seriously?

It seems to me the answer lies in a process many churches have undertaken to identify the gifts of their members and learn how to use those gifts. Churches that do this attend to the question of what they are called to do not simply as a creedal or denominational matter, but as a matter of calling to one place, time, and set of circumstances, equipped with a particular range of people and skills to whom ministries are to be directed and who are participants in shaping those ministries. I’d like to tell a few stories about churches that have undertaken that process with deliberation, time, and dedication, and how colleges and universities might learn from such stories about maintaining deep unity of purpose in the midst of wild and exciting diversity of methods and means. I’d like also to consider some particular ways educational institutions have succeeded in using distance learning creatively, adaptively, and generously without forfeiting the nuance, the relational character, and the mentoring that can only happen when human beings occupy the same sweaty space on a September afternoon, hear the same ambient noise, and enter into a conversation that will never be replicated. The absolute, improvisational here-and-nowness of the latter needs protection in the midst of what one researcher called a “hype cycle.”

Balance requires wisdom, and wisdom requires reflection, and reflection requires people willing to turn off their computers, lay down their pens, look at one another and consider what they are about. No pedagogy works apart from a lively, life-giving sense of purpose, and no institution thrives without the conversations in which such purposes are revisited, revised, and reaffirmed.