

Hannah Hofheinz
Lived Theology SILT Response

Good morning friends.

This has been an amazing few days. I am very grateful for my good fortune to be here. And it is to a large extent a good *fortune*. “What is your connection here?” a number of you have asked. Is Virginia a prior home? Have you done work with lived theology?

I answered you - no. I simply have the good fortune to be attached to a dissertation advisor who moved to a Center with which Charles Marsh is involved and through which I enjoyed the pleasure of meeting him in discussion of his work. This in turn opened the door for an invitation. “Oh yes,” several of you responded, “That is how it often goes.” And isn’t it though.

I’ll return to this in a bit, but for now, I just want to note how thankful I am for this particular chain of connection that laid the path for me to be here. The networks of relationship that enable and undergird academic *work* and academic *opportunity* sometimes are welcoming. Other times they are not. Thank you for welcoming me this time. I have gained tremendously from this event – from *all* of you. My scholarship, indeed, concretely, my dissertation, will show its influence.

It is a risky thing to give the floor to an interloper, an outsider, however positively one frames it (an external perspective? an outside reviewer? a friend? a colleague?). I also am sharply aware that I speak with a student’s voice – also a risky enterprise, particularly in the context of such erudite, wise, and rhetorically attuned scholars. So, frankly, I hope we will all set our expectations accordingly low.

I understand my task to lead us into discussion. Indeed, I believe the direct instructions are to briefly (that is, to keep it short) and informally raise some questions that can help to catalyze group reflection. As I talk then, I ask that you listen with this goal in mind. Start thinking, perhaps even noting - How have I experienced these days? How have I experienced lived theology? What does its future hold? What does it need to do? What else needs saying? So that, when I stop talking in just a few minutes, we will be ready for discussion. Sound good?

I believe that theology matters. Lived theology understands this at a very deep level. In his opening words, Charles Marsh offered us a litany of insights that crystallized over the past ten years. I'm sure we all remember, but quickly in review:

There is an intensification of meaning in lived existence. Theological drama exceeds secular narratives. Lived theology – as a hope – narrates this intensification. It asks after the good. It tells a multiplicity of stories in a multiplicity of forms. Interdisciplinary openness, indeed interdisciplinary practice, beats the heart of the enterprise; it keeps the blood flowing. Lived theology does not forget or gloss the parts of life that resist theory. It reminds us that life with God demands attunement – [Weil, attention] – to the ordinary. Lived theology reminds theologians of the importance of place, the importance of time, and the importance memory. Lived theology tells an honest story, however hard that telling might be.

I have witnessed this litany lived out in these past days. [...]

There is an intensification of meaning in the crucible of lived experience. What does it mean to speak, to write, and to teach *honestly* within the complexity of this space? To tell the truth, to be open to the possibility that the *process* of telling that truth *honestly* might perhaps offer an excess of theological meaning beyond the substance of the words used to tell it. To trust – even when there is significant risk and reasonable fear of doing so – in the worth of the outcome. Another way to say this: to have faith, and to let that faith seek understanding, however complex that understanding might be.

Ted Smith asked: “mindful of these risks, how do we write this hope? Or: how do we write lived theology worth the name?” After exhorting us to be careful of whipped homiletical froth and of the siren calls of illusory ideal countercultures and golden ages, he offered us a typology, a schematic of genre possibilities for how one can go about this. Transparent histories, stories of negation, wishful thinking, and prodigal stories. As he talked, we laughed and smiled. Do you remember laughing?

I felt my laughter align with Traci West's suggestion that liberationist ethics brings the comforting sense of connection to counter fear. She taught about -but more, she showed by performing it- the rich material at the heart of a pedagogy of honest truth-telling. She invited us into a space of courage and complexity sufficient for thinking together about the intensification of meaning in the crucible

of lived experience. She did not clean up or resolve meanings, but rather invited us to join her in truth-telling – an invitation that only works because of the comfort her vulnerable honesty offers to counter the fear the we experience in telling the truth. Courage has been at the center of all our discussions. Indeed, Willie Jennings noted how it, paired with greed, stands as a central virtue underlining the three characters of the merchant, the soldier, and the missionary. [...]

And this is a good time for my first question.

It is fair to say that emotion is at the center of life and at the center of theology. Yet often – far too often, I think – affect drops out of academic knowledge. Even when it appears in knowledge it disappears in the writing of that knowledge. Narratives offer not only the communication of affect but the communicative experience of it for those who encounter the narrative. In other words, narratives don't only speak about emotions but can contain them, embody them, share them, invite participation in them. Am I correct that lived theology grasps this and welcomes this difficulty?

If so, beyond fear and the courage and comfort necessary to counter it, what other affects (if any) should we be attending to carefully in thinking about lived theology? For instance, what about apathy or torpor – student apathy? societal torpor? Or, from a different direction perhaps, what about excitement or titillation? Voyeurism and voyeuristic tourism are serious risks of writing lives, especially complicated real fleshy historical social human lives.

And so I ask: What emotions are at the heart of lived theology both in its subject materials and - also, importantly - in its writing and teaching – its production? How ought these emotions be productively engaged?

Now, I am still processing Willie Jennings' presentation on Wednesday, and I will continue to learn from it for a good while. The cogent diagnosis of the disfigurement of Christian identities through the characters of the merchant, soldier and missionary and the impact of this on Christian imagination must be wrestled with. That's worth repeating: it must be wrestled with. But right now, I simply want to reflect on the role of characters for the possibility of theological imagination. Prof. Jennings reminded us about the merchant, soldier, and missionary.

What are the characters of lived theology that are shaping the possibilities of its theological

imagination? What characters are not yet recognized but ought to be brought to the fore? I am particularly interested not only in the characters it studies, but in the characters of lived theology's material production.

For instance, we can easily name the characters of academia and their impact on what can or will be written or taught (for example: the professor, the adjunct, the student, the editor, and so on). But, we would not be here without the brilliant "host" character fulfilled by Kelly, Deborah, and Rachel (thank you very much). We need to pay attention to the roles and identities of all sorts because these characters shape the possibilities of our theological imagination at the deepest and most material levels. I suggest that this is not only a question of the past, but a constructive challenge to each of us in negotiating a way ahead. What characters are needed? Do we need new ones?

Finally, I want to return to the relationships that unite us and make all of this possible. This gathering has been blessed with brilliant words and teaching not only in keynote presentations but in small group formal and informal discussions. From perusing the records of past meetings I understand that the format changes but my guess is that there is always this sort of attentiveness to the interpersonal connections and conversations that make academic work possible. Charles Marsh in his opening talk worried about the lack of practitioners at this table and the difficulty of maintaining that relationship. What relationships are necessary to facilitate the writing of lived theology? What sorts of relationships will bring the characters together in the ways that will pull lived theology forward into its future? How do we foster these relationships? What time will be necessary to do so? What spaces will be necessary to grow the relationships? How will we repair those that break and how will we celebrate those that ought to be cherished?

--- [closing, depending on room's mood, mostly extemporaneous]

Here is an interesting fact about me: There is only one identity that I will voluntarily claim and that is theologian. Others might or might not seem obvious to you, but they are not. I am not sure if any of you know my involvement with Occupy, but for much of last year I was in one camp or another. My first visit to Zuccotti Park was the first time I spoke as a theologian and was understood without translation. [...] This to me is the promise of lived theology, and its essential theological importance. [...]