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thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, MAY 17, 2006

How Princeton Seminary Changed Me

I am back home in Indiana this week, and as always I am asked how Princeton has changed me. As I am still at PTS, my answers are still developing. But I have been here long enough and have enough distance from my MDiv years to begin to assess the affect it has had on me. I will list five things below that are particularly interesting, but certainly not exhaustive. This list may also serve to help those consider whether PTS is the place for them.

1) **I read slower.** Before I went to seminary, I learned how to speed read. I used this skill to my advantage in college and intended to use it to get through seminary. We are assigned so many pages that this is a must. However, at PTS I learned how to read slowly. I still speed read from time to time out of necessity, but I learned at PTS how to really digest and study a book. As one of my teachers says, "a book not worth reading slowly is a book not worth reading." This was a critical skill for which I have PTS to thank.

2) **I initiate spirituality.** At PTS there are endless opportunities for spiritual growth, but there is no longer the social pressure or institutional requirement to be engaged therein. So, I learned how to take the initiative in my spiritual life. This was a risk as I could simply have fallen through the cracks. But the risk was worth it, because to become a spiritual leader I a must learn to initiate spirituality for myself and others and not rely on my context to feed me.

3) **I think systemically.** I know longer think about issues as distinct topics, but as embedded in larger conceptual and social contexts. This plays itself out theologically by drawing connections between on doctrine and another, and furthermore tying all doctrines together in a way that coheres as much as possible. This plays itself out socially by looking for the larger family/social systems at work in particular cases that emerge in ministry and life. Systemic thinking is a critical skill for theological and ministerial work, and I learn it at PTS.

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4) **I am more Wesleyan.** This does not happen to everyone when they "go away" to a school outside their tradition, but I certainly become more secure in my Wesleyan identity at Princeton than ever before. Just as anyone who has studied a foreign language knows, you learn the grammar of your native tongue (often for the first time) in the process of translation. In order to figure out the grammar of the Reformed tradition, I had to double-back and figure out my own Wesleyan grammar. In the process, I re-discovered and re-embraced my Wesleyanism.

5) **I am more laid back.** In college, I got the feeling like few students cared about academics (this was one part reality and one part pride). Therefore, I sought to differentiate myself from the mass of students by avoiding a lot of fun activities, wearing slacks to class, hanging out with profs, etc. But at PTS, I immediately sensed that the bulk of the community actually cared about learning. Hence, there was no threat to also join in the fun of frisbee, jam sessions, dressing-my-age, trips to the shore, etc. I could do all these things without worrying that I was aligning myself with an anti-academic spirit. This was a major personality shift that emerged while at PTS.

Well, there's my answer ... for now. I am sure PTS is still changing me. And I suspect that I will realize more changes with increased hindsight. But these are enduring changes I have discovered.

Any thoughts?

How have you changed since college?

If you went to seminary, how did it change you?

For those of you who know me, do you see some more significant change than these?

Normative Question: How SHOULD a seminary change its students?

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posted by JohnLDrury @ 8:55 PM

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7 Comments:

At [6:18 PM, May 18, 2006](#), [Samuel Bills](#) said...

I always thought you wore the khakis for the ladies :)
Yes I have found a few books worth reading slowly.

At [10:50 PM, May 18, 2006](#), [phillip a. shaw](#) said...

excellent john, i like what i am reading. i definitely would be the same with #1 and #2, but would have some variations with the other three. love to catch up soon...it appears we'll be in close proximity next year.

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At [5:59 PM, May 19, 2006](#), [mark o wilson](#) said...

John,

Great post!

I was teaching a course last week in your grandpa's old church -- Stroudsburg -- and one of my students said,

"I took this awesome advanced theology class by an amazing man named John Drury!"

I thought that was really cool!

Remember when you came up to Hayward with your dad for a weekend when you were in High School? You helped him craft his sermon in the car on the way up!

Regarding Seminary -- I went to Fuller and experienced the same thing. I became more Wesleyan as a result of the experience.

But reading slowly?? Uh oh -- I have to work on that. Your dad used to teach us cadre guys how to speed read, so I can just blame my rush readings on him!

At [7:03 PM, May 19, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

John,

How fascinating to read your description of your academic character, both then and now. I'm not sure that we actually ever met at IWU, but this was largely unnecessary as your reputation preceeded you and I married one of your frequent classmates. You may find it interesting to know that the rest of us tended to examine your clothing and social practices and conclude that we must not care very much about academics.

Also interesting to hear reflections on changing views of scholarship and the academic life from one in a different discipline...going through graduate programs (and a few well-timed comments from your dad during Sunday school) has deepened and broadened my understanding of the relationship among scholarship, spiritual discipline, and the lightness of life - kind of a new spin on David Riggs' "Love the Lord your God with all your mind" bit. Blessings to you as you grow!

Sarah (Berne) Jones
IWU class of 2002

At [7:01 PM, May 21, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

I'm ready, let me in already and I'll try to make a few of these changes as well.

You can blame your dad for #1. He's the speed reading teacher.

At [11:53 PM, May 22, 2006](#), [Thinking in Ohio](#) said...

["The Father is Greater than I" \(Bible Brain Buster...](#)

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This is a really good post. Seminary just put me in my place, made me more humble (I hope!). It taught me how little I really knew and how much I had to learn. Above all, it taught me better how to think, ignited that academic spark that wasn't there in college.

At [8:53 PM, June 23, 2006](#), [Ragamuffin Reverend](#) said...

Hey John-

I agree with all of your points about PTS. I found myself to be a better baptist, learned how to relax (although I could have been one of the people you should have avoided), and think systemically.

In regard to academics, I learned how to be secure in my own desire to grow. I used to read and look for good quotes. PTS taught me how to slow down, read honestly, and let a text change me instead of processing with an agenda.

good to hear from you. I pray that all is well- Jenny Folmar

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