STORIES OF VOCATION: EDUCATION FOR VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

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Abstract

Women's stories often have unplanned vocational twists. In oral histories with thirty-four women from diverse contexts, Moore discovers the power of narration to reveal and shape women's vocational journeys. Analysis uncovers qualities of the women's journeys: facing unexpected turns; trusting spiritual-intuitive knowing; analyzing and responding to social contexts; standing for justice; committing to make a difference; helping others be who they can be; building bridges; practicing hospitality; valuing women's communities; caring for self; and practicing humor. By clustering these qualities, five narrative processes emerge. The corresponding educational practices are valuable for religious educators who engage with people in vocational discernment.

I have often not been clear along the way about the path ahead in my vocation. I do not think that this lack of a plan for the journey, common to many women actually, is necessarily a negative thing.

—Belle Miller McMaster

Well, who am I? I'm an ever-evolving 50-year-old, with contradictions even as I speak. If I talk for twenty minutes, I might contradict myself ... I'm learning and growing, and a lot of what I've learned is in the last eleven years, since my daughter was born. So I'm learning and growing. And so, that's how I would like to begin.

—Ayanna Abi-Kyles

These two women have fascinating stories to tell—stories that carry the wisdom of their lives. Reflecting on their stories uncovers an experience common to many women, the experience of unplanned, unexpected turns in their vocational lives. This article is an effort to draw wisdom from such women's narrative accounts, exploring the educational challenges of their vocational journeys and seeking clues to illumine educational practice with others facing moments of vocational discernment.

Religious Education
Vol. 103 No. 2 March–April 2008
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ISSN: 0034–4087 print
DOI: 10.1080/00344080801910024

Stories bear meaning in themselves. They do not need commentary; yet analysis amplifies life narratives by uncovering layers of hidden wisdom. Analysis enriches knowledge, but never exhausts or replaces the richness of stories, which inevitably carry a surplus of meaning. Thus, I offer an essay grounded in women's stories, illumined by analysis, and textured and nuanced with selections from the stories. The theme here is vocational journey and vocational discernment, which has emerged as a major theme in the eight-year Oral History Project with thirty-four women[1] The oral histories are filled with vocational surprises, together with a remarkable readiness of women to meet those surprises, make new decisions, and change their life directions in changing situations. In their narratives, we discover educational insights and challenges for preparing, informing, supporting, and guiding people in their unpredictable vocational journeys.

My purpose in this article is to analyze the women's life stories, discover qualities of their vocational journeys, and draw wisdom for a narrative approach to religious education, especially teaching and mentoring with people facing vocational decisions about how to shape their lives. We begin by exploring the power of narratives and describing the Oral History Project and its methods. We then move to the heart of the article, focusing on women's stories and the educational wisdom they suggest.

NARRATIVE POWER: POSING QUESTIONS AND SHAPING LIVES

The opening words of Belle Miller-McMaster and Ayanna Abi-Kyles pose questions about how people form their lives amid continual change, internal and external. Their words echo Mary Catherine Bateson's (1989) introduction to life stories of four friends and herself in *Composing a Life*:

[1]The Oral History Project was initiated in 1999 by the Women in Theology and Ministry Program of Candler School of Theology, collaborating with the Pitts Theology Library Archives Department, Emory University. We are grateful for generous funding from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, which has made the OHP possible by supporting action-research on teaching through oral history and oral history resources. Note: The complete transcripts will be available through Pitts Theology Archives, with excerpts available online at http://www.candler.emory.edu/OHP

> This is a study of five artists engaged in that act of creation that engages us all—the composition of our lives. Each of us has worked by improvisation, discovering the shape of our creation along the way, rather than pursuing a vision already defined (1).

Bateson recognizes that composing one's life story is important in an unstable society. She contrasts this with the settled processes of settled contexts: "In a stable society, composing a life is somewhat like throwing a pot or building a house in a traditional form." In settled contexts, one draws upon clearly established materials, skills, and styles; innovation is allowed but not required. She explains, "The traditional craftsperson does not face the task of solving every problem for the first time." Yet, our present society requires people to compose their lives continually; even people "who work on factory production lines must craft their own lives" (1–2). Bateson's analysis opens a significant question: how *do* people compose their lives in a postmodern world?

This vocational question leads naturally to educational questions. In most educational venues—whether educational institutions, religious communities, public agencies, or informal settings—educators walk with people who are discerning their vocation and composing their lives, one confusing step at a time. Since James Fowler's (2000) attention to this subject, however, little has been written to address the significance of vocation as a religious educational issue, nor the qualities of vocational journeys in human life. Particularly missing has been empirical study of vocation among people whose life patterns fall outside the dominant norms. The present study addresses this lacuna, exploring vocation from the standpoint of diverse women from diverse social settings—women from Christian and Jewish communities, academic and religious contexts, diverse ethnicities, and diverse ministries. Their oral histories promise to illumine education for vocational discernment.

In the Oral History Project, we have heard women tell life stories in relation to family, community, culture, and self. Commonly, they describe their vocations with intentionality but without a "master plan." They describe their vocational lives as coherent, but only in retrospect; thus, the very process of oral history invites them to remember the parts of their lives into a coherent whole. This process of telling their stories shapes and reshapes their life trajectories over time, as they structure and restructure their memories. As Elizabeth Tonkin (1992) writes, the past "enters memory in different ways and helps to structure it" (1). She adds:

> Literate or illiterate, we are our memories. We also try to shape our futures in the light of past experience—or what we understand to have been past experience—. . . Sometimes these processes and structures from the past are overturned; then there is a social revolution (1–2).

Not only does one's current life interact with the past, but one's life story is intricately woven with those of social groups and contexts. Further, people narrate their lives in relation to their audiences, whether the audience is a large group of unknown others, an intimate circle, or simply oneself in an internal dialogue.

In this article, we explore the power of narrative to pose questions and shape lives, which involves both diachronic and synchronic movements. Bateson gives a vivid picture of the diachronic processes—complex influences that take place over time— recognizing how people engage life as "an improvisatory art," combining "familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations" (3). Tonkin gives a vivid picture of the synchronic movements—complex social influences in the past and present—revealing how people shape their life stories in relation to social dynamics. Together, they reveal the power of life stories to illumine and challenge, and the power of narrative practice in the human journey toward self-understanding and transformation.

GATHERING WOMEN'S STORIES

The Oral History Project has gathered 85 interviews and presentations with 34 women—full sets from 18 women, plus one or more interviews with 16 others. The heart of the project is to gather life stories, with the expectation that these narratives will illumine others. The Oral History Project has three major purposes: (1) to provide opportunities for people to learn from women who have composed strong lives; (2) to develop women's archives; and (3) to discover the greatness of women around us.

The research team has used the following criteria in selecting the oral historians:

- Women who lead by their moral authority—by their integrity and example;
- Women of courage who have persistently challenged, changed, or sustained traditions in their communities;
- Women who have faced tragedy, adversity, or obstacles;

- Women who represent diverse geographies (rural, urban, and suburban); ethnicities; theological and political views; ages (over 40); and ministries (both ordained and lay). Diversity also includes women whose influence is quiet and localized, as well as those known widely for groundbreaking leadership.

The women interviewed thus far are Christian, with the exception of one rabbi. Their ethnicities are Caucasian (20), African and African American (12), and Asian and Asian American (2). Most have lived part of their lives in the Southeastern United States. Later phases of the Oral History Project will broaden the pool of subjects.

The oral history method includes several elements: formal and semi-formal presentations; two to four semi-structured interviews; some participant observation; collections of published and unpublished materials by and about the women; and analysis, interpretation and public sharing. With this brief introduction, we turn to the women's stories and the qualities of their vocational lives.

QUALITIES OF WOMEN'S VOCATIONAL JOURNEYS

The theme of vocation has emerged from our oral historians with particular power. To understand this better, we have done a content analysis of the 85 transcripts and discovered several vocational themes.[2] The result is a sketch of the vocational landscape, presented here as major themes in the women's lives.

Unexpected, Unplanned, and Unimagined Twists in the Vocational Journey

I began the article with the first theme—the unplanned and unexpected turns in women's journeys, particularly as regards life vocation. Belle Miller McMaster's words introduced the essay, and she embellished upon the theme in her presentations:

> So my journey in ministry has never been a clear path, but has had many unexpected turns. I notice this is true for many women and sometimes for men. Such a path calls forth imagination to envision new possibilities and attentiveness to God's guidance along the way.

[2]Analysis was done with the ethogenic method, a form of ethnography described in Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore (2006).

In a similar vein, Anne Streaty Wimberly recognized vocational surprises and how such surprises have shaped her life directions. She described the experience of moving from middle class security in Anderson, Indiana, to a brief period of homelessness in Colorado when her family gave up everything (job, home, etc.) to move to a climate to help her mother survive tuberculosis. They had their first Thanksgiving dinner at Daddy Grace's soup kitchen. This marked the beginning of a longer journey:

> But later on in my life—many, many years later—there was a connection between that event and another event. When my husband and I moved from Tulsa, Oklahoma, to Evanston, Ilinois, I found myself for the first time since undergraduate work without a position. I thought, well, God had brought me that far, to continue my vocation as a teacher. But at that point in time, absolutely nothing opened up. And I found myself yelling to God, 'God, now what's going on . . . And I was looking in the Evanston newspaper and found myself in the want ads. And there was a little tiny article that simply said, 'Wanted, a director of a shelter for homeless people.' That little tiny article loomed as big as the page . . . And I thought, okay, I get it, that's what I'm supposed to do.

After discouragement from other people, she decided to take this position, and was further confirmed in her decision during a worship service in that time period:

> I was questioning, now why did this happen? And I don't remember what the preacher was preaching about. I just remember breaking down and crying . . . because it all came together for me. And it was as though the Holy Spirit was speaking and saying, 'Don't you remember, you do remember don't you, when you were homeless. So you know what it's like, and I'm calling you to give back.

Wimberly, like Miller McMaster, sees her life in retrospect as involving many twists, but the twists frequently opened new insights, opportunities, and vocational directions.

Trusting Intuitive and Spiritual Knowing

A second common theme is the women's trust in intuitive and spiritual knowing. Sara Armstrong, who served in the Peace Corps, as Mayor of a small Alabama town, and then as a deacon in the United Methodist Church, expressed trust in life's lessons.

> Everything in your life, if you really look at it, teaches you something, even the bad things. They teach you something and, if you can learn from everything you do, that's what's most important. It's not what happens to you, but what you do with it.

Karen Green found that her faith helped her know things that were not generally allowed to her as a woman. She concluded her first presentation with these words:

> I leave you with a scripture. . . . That's Jeremiah 33:3: 'Call on me and I will answer thee and show thee great and mighty things thou knowest not.' As women, there have been great and mighty things we were not allowed to know but, through the grace of God, we know them now. And we will continue to move forward. I tell you to stand on that because it will not fail you.

Both of these women express trust in God and in their religious experience and faith traditions to guide them. They have developed habits of attending to their experiences with the Holy and of searching the resources of their traditions to illumine the world.

Analyzing and Responding to the Contexts Where One Lives

Another shared theme is responding to the contexts where one lives. Belle Miller McMaster explained how she learned from, and felt called to respond to, her Southern context. Through this, she learned sensitivity to other contexts, which was fruitful as she traveled and later worked with international students. As McMaster expanded her original cultural consciousness to include the world, so Leontine Kelly's vision grew to include the whole of God's creation, recognizing the goodness and evil permeating that creation, as well as the call of God to respond:

> I know that we humans are basically good and so too is the world. I know that we and the world . . . are badly broken by evil and that we need one another to heal socially and politically, spiritually, and morally. This is our life's work, to be healers and liberators of and with one another. It is an ongoing life project, one that is never fully accomplished. And it has as much to do with other creatures, with stars and snails and Eucalyptus and elephants as with you and me.

Our oral historians often expressed concern for contexts in a particular time and place, as when Mercy Amba Oduyoye described the

1968 Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, and its attendant demands to respond to the devastation of racism:

> The presence and the address of James Baldwin, the shock of the assassination [of Martin Luther King, Jr.], and the power of the civil rights movement propelled the Council into what became the Program to Combat Racism. We cannot forget the turmoil that Africans were going through at this time, and especially the struggle against apartheid. The over 200 member churches of the Council could not stand by and consent. As a faith community, Christianity professes a theology and a view of life that is incompatible with racism. . .
>
> But then we also experience the inadequacy of using violence to combat violence. . . . What we are after is to transcend the attitudes that breed racism.

Oduyoye represents how many oral historians addressed both local and larger social contexts. Their alertness to particular contexts raised their alertness to the global, and their concern for the global turned them back to the particular.

Standing for Justice: Focusing Attention on the Oppressed and Neglected

Ayanna Abi-Kyles, quoted in the introduction, grew up in Detroit, Michigan, and, as a teenager, affiliated with the Shrine of the Black Madonna. The Shrine taught her: "If you're going to address oppression, any level, then you have to address oppression on all levels." She now critiques the Shrine itself for becoming so focused on racism that it "left us empty when it came to addressing sexism and environmental issues and domestic abuse and it didn't leave any room for us to address anything other than issues of race." Abi-Kyles has continued to address oppressions in many guises, allowing one discovery and action against oppression to lead to others. She has thus been involved in programs to overcome racism and build the black church, support women in ministry, encourage healthy lifestyles in children, and counsel women victimized by domestic abuse.

To Abi-Kyles' story, we can add others. Consider Anne Wimberly, who has given attention to youth, the elderly, and others who are socially marginalized, with special attention to people in African and African-American communities. Consider other stories as well. Toni White is an advocate for people suffering from mental illness, and Diane Moseley is Executive Director of a homeless center for women. Rabbi Leila Gal Berner has advocated for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered peoples, serving synagogues that are inclusive in their

ministries. Berner, like Wimberly, has learned much from her own experience, as when she had to confront her own prejudice toward transgendered persons after years of ministry in the gay and lesbian community. This self-awareness helped her lead a gay–lesbian congregation toward being more inclusive of transgendered persons. We can also look to Rose Thomason, who grew up "a middle-class, white, southern, Methodist girl, coming of age in Atlanta in the 50s." When asked for the source of her passion for justice, she said, "It must have been a gift from God." Rose found that she was so angered by racial discrimination, and later gender discrimination, that she joined with activists in Atlanta and in her Methodist denomination. She participated with African American and white women in an organization working for racial integration in Atlanta in the 1950s and 1960s. She joined with others to advocate that Billy McClure be allowed to serve as an officer in the Salvation Army, and she helped instigate and form the Commission on the Status and Role of Women in the United Methodist Church.

The oral history and biographical literature adds others to this list: Helen Kies, Maureen Adriaan, Rose Jackson, and other Cape Town teachers during the period of apartheid in South Africa (Wieder 2003); Edna Baxter, Iris Cully, Mary LeBar, Dorothy Jean Furnish, and Sophia Lyon Fahs, who advocated for child-centered religious education during times when religious communities marginalized children in the United States (Talbot School of Theology 2006; Nolan 2003); Eileen Egan who advocated for peace during a time when war was popular in the United States and worldwide; and women in various forms of ministry who have advocated and stood with people on the margins, even while being marginalized themselves (Baratte 2003).

Committing to Make a Difference in the World and to Persevere in Oppressive Systems

The emphasis on making a difference pervades our oral histories. Ayanna Abi-Kyles recalled her childhood family: "Whenever there was an election, any election—city, state, and federal election—we all worked the polls, and we were aware how politics influences our lives." This awareness also shaped her spiritual longings and life choices:

> And there's another part of me that was spiritually searching for a home because it was, you know, the turbulence of the sixties and early seventies and I needed a place to find some peace. And I could not find it in the mainstream traditional black churches because of the lack of emphasis on social action. . . . My spirit was longing for a space, and so the Shrine best fit that need for me.

Abi-Kyles, as others, chose her spiritual home *and* her vocational directions based on her commitments to make a difference in the world.

One sees similar accents in Bishop Leontine T. C. Kelly, who agreed to be considered for Bishop because of her passion to lead the church in social vision, and in Belle Miller McMaster, who, even with her "newly minted Ph.D.," dropped her search for a teaching position and accepted a position doing peace and justice ministry in the Division of Corporate and Social Mission of the Presbyterian Church. One sees these accents in the literature as well, with some women risking their lives (along with men in many cases) to make a difference in the world (Wieder 2003).

These women embody the explicit commitment expressed in words by Kelly: "We have to really want God to use us to change this world." They also respond to a world that is devastated with poverty, violence, and oppressions of many kinds. Rabbi Leila gal Berner explicitly expressed this awareness of the world's need and God's call:

> We live in awful times. The world is a profoundly broken place. We gather here tonight on the eve of September 11 at the first anniversary of the horrendous destruction that reigned down upon America. . . . God's challenge to us to be partners in the work of healing and repair is ever more urgent.

Such awareness of God's concern for a broken world is a consistently strong motivation for the oral historians.

Helping Others to Be Who They Can Be

This theme is implicit or explicit in most of our oral histories. Mercy Amba Oduyoye made a particularly forthright statement of this value when asked about her life contributions. She said, "My most important contribution in life has been helping other people be who they are created to be." Similarly, Anne Wimberly has given her life to helping people grow into their full personhood, attending to people young and old, near and far. She has acted through personal friendships, and through formal programs at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, Georgia: Youth Hope-Builders Academy, Ecumenical Families Alive Project, and interchanges between ITC and churches in South Africa. In addition, she and her husband have

helped rear a number of children and have hosted families from Africa for long periods. All of these projects have enhanced the lives of others.

Building Bridges of Understanding and Relationship

Another hallmark of the oral history interviews is the women's desire to build bridges—bridges between groups of people, across cultures, across religious traditions, between religion and science, and so forth. Consider Toni White, who has built bridges between the church and people incarcerated in prisons, or Anne Wimberly, who has built bridges between people in her theological institution and communities in Africa. Toni White sees her mission as awakening people to deep human struggles. She says: "Because of what I have experienced, I can understand others who do desperate things and have desperate feelings. Then, I can help other people understand them better."

Some bridge-building is across diverse patterns of thought, as between religion and science, or between people and ideas. Carol Newsom's bridge-building is between people and biblical texts: "I like to think of myself as a matchmaker, matching people with texts that they can love. And, when that happens, it is very satisfying." Even this small sample of the interviews reveals how much value our oral historians place on making connections, a theme common in women's theological and educational literature.

Practicing Hospitality

Another major theme has been the practice of hospitality, especially accepting those who are different as guests. This theme is exemplified by Anne Wimberly's rearing of children and hosting families from Africa; Belle Miller McMaster's creating home space for international students; Ayanna Abi-Kyles' working with an organization to create healthy space for survivors of Hurricane Katrina; and Carolyn Abrams' leadership of her church's ministry with people who are homeless and disaffected in Wiggins, Mississippi. Carolyn Abrams described a typical weekend in her life:

> I spent Saturday afternoon burying a dear friend, Saturday night hosting a benefit program for ten families who were burned out in the community, Sunday morning preaching, Sunday afternoon delivering communion to the sick and the shut-in. ... Then, on Monday morning, . . . I [had meetings] and spent the next hour or so at Sam's Warehouse because I needed to purchase snacks for 91 children, who have enrolled in our after school program.

Soomee Kim also practiced a ministry of hospitality in her former pastorate, but only after considerable nervousness about being the first woman and first person of color to be appointed to a predominantly white church. When appointed to the First United Methodist Church of San Fernando, she said:

> I was very, very sick. . . . This was a very big Anglo church in the '70s. Now the church was shrinking . . . and in a very Hispanic neighborhood. What is a Korean woman going to do in this church?
>
> I started researching . . . and found that the first founder was somebody named Dr. McClay. . . . And then I also found out that Dr. McClay was the leader of missions in Asian countries. McClay led the first group to China and then he was the first [modern missionary] to put foot on Korean soil. . . . Now, I was called to his church to be pastor. I was the first woman and the first ethnic minority in their 122 year history. . . . This is my fourth year there. We are opening our doors to the neighbors. People [of all colors] have started coming to our church.

For Carolyn Abrams and Soomee Kim, and for most of the other oral historians, the value of hospitality emerges from their life experiences and then shapes their ministries.

Turning to Women's Communities for Support, Consciousness-Raising, and Empowerment

Another common theme is the value of women's communities for the oral historians. No one expressed the personal value more clearly than Laura Mendenhall:

> I have some incredible women friends . . . I'm part of two triads, two groups of three. One group is me and two social workers. They were both elders in one church I served . . . I'm very close to both of them and we have been friends for 25 years. They're my family. And I have another group of two friends and they are both pastors. We've been friends for over 20 years. . . . [These six friends] are the ones I could call at 2 a.m. for anything.

Friendships are life-lines for many of these women as they narrate their lives.

Women's communities have also been important to socio-political action for many of the oral historians. Rose Thomason said:

> Dana and I and some other astute women organized the Atlanta Committee on Women and Religion [in 1969]. We invited every religious establishment in the phone book and gathered a group of women together who were Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Christian Scientists, and Salvation Army. The group undertook two projects. We organized a defense fund for Billy McClure, who was suing the Salvation Army for sex discrimination against its officers. . . . The other project was directed toward the three seminaries in Atlanta: Candler, Columbia, and ITC. In 1969 there were no women in faculty or administrative positions in any of the three seminaries.

In Rose's story, as in many others, social action arose from camaraderie and conscientization in women's groups. Such groups initiated critical awareness, nourished it, and empowered the women to act in community with one another.

Increasing Care for Oneself and Connecting with Caring Communities

Another value is not surprising in light of the active lives of the oral historians. This is the women's increasing care for themselves and their growing intentionality in connecting with caring communities. Ayanna Abi-Kyles and Carolyn Abrams have become strongly committed to health care for themselves and others. Bridgette Young has developed an intentional Sabbath practice in the past three years. She said, "Keeping Sabbath reminds us that we are not in control of our lives. God is."

Turning to Humor for Survival

One final quality of the women's vocational journeys is their emphasis on humor. Humor lightens their spirits and enables survival. Teresa Fry Brown, in a moment of dry wit, explained the situation of women pastors: "Women are often assigned to dead churches. Oh, we have some of those in the room that should be on life support. That is, of course, until [the women] bring them back to life, and then they are replaced by a competent young man."

Sometimes the humor has been aimed directly toward social change. Diane Moseley and Toni White described how Candler women students used crunching apples to teach their professors and colleagues the importance of inclusive language in the early 1970s. Every time a professor used non-inclusive language, each woman took a big bite from her crunchy apple, making a chorus of crunches.

This action was during a time when Candler women were about five percent of the student population, and their experiences of marginalization were daily. Women students found life-giving humor in their gatherings, and they sometimes used humor to make their mark.

NARRATIVE EDUCATION FOR VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

Most religious and educational institutions seek, with more or less intentionality and effectiveness, to prepare people for life. Schools, colleges, and religious communities generally make public claims to equip people for their life journeys. In ways appropriate to a particular institution, religious educators seek to prepare people with knowledge and skills, to mentor people in turning points and quandaries of their life journeys, and to help people discern directions for their lives. Life narration is central to this process of discerning and preparing for vocation, or life direction.

This study illumines the power of life narration. By clustering the vocational themes of oral historians, we discover narrative processes that are promising for religious education. The list is not exhaustive, but it is generative for educators who walk with people on their vocational journeys. The processes are: (1) *life review*—retrospectively remembering one's life; (2) *meditation and religious reflection*—opening self through prayer, meditation, and study of religious resources and traditions; (3) *critical contextual analysis*—discerning and evaluating the relation of individual human lives with social structures and groups; (4) *visioning the future*—imagining the future and courageously stepping in new directions; and (5) *building supportive, collaborative community*. These processes, shaped by the wisdom of oral historians, suggest educational practices and the contours of a narrative approach to religious education.

Practice of Life Review

The first cluster of practices is *retrospectively remembering one's life*. This corresponds with the women's first theme of discovering twists in their vocational journeys. We have learned in the Oral History Project that women find value in the very practice of remembering. At the conclusion of interviews, women often make comments such as: "it was fun"; "I thought I did not have much to say, but I could not

stop"; and "I realized some things about my life that I had forgotten or never even seen before."

Oral history is an active process, facilitating people in their work of understanding and reshaping their life journeys—sometimes making sense of a journey that earlier appeared to happen haphazardly, sometimes informing new decisions, and sometimes influencing other people. The process of life review involves people simultaneously in remembering and in self-construction. This conclusion supports Elizabeth Tonkin's ideas that life narratives are socially constructed, but it also reveals multiple aspects of that process, such as the power of life narration to uncover complex relationships, construct meaning, retrieve or question memories, re-live emotions and re-process them, protect against painful memory, and reconstruct meanings, even re-chart one's life.

Life review is a vital educational process, which includes several educational practices. Consider some of these:

1. *Create opportunities for people to share their life stories*—This educational practice echoes such educators as Anne Wimberly (1994) and Nelle Morton (1985), the latter emphasizing the healing, empowering value of "hearing others into speech." Life review can be encouraged in formal interviews, evenings of story-sharing, small group sharing, and mentoring sessions, to name a few.
2. *Value each life as precious, including those in the background or on the margins of their communities*—This practice is potent for people who have been undervalued in the past. One oral historian made this point in relation to women. Roberta Bondi said, "We need to hear, again and again, that our value does not come from pleasing anybody, including men and women too. Our value comes from God, who loves and cherishes us so we can go about being the women we are, without shame, hanging back, or apologies."
3. *Create a safe space for telling stories of terror and hurt*—Safe space is an urgent human need, and oral historians often expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share their stories and have them received. Lynn Westfield (2001) made similar discoveries in her women's literary group. The educational challenge here is to discern how, when, and where to encourage such sharing, and further, to recognize that no space can ever be completely safe. Indeed, the Oral History Project is instructive here because we engaged in extensive approval processes with Emory University's Institutional Review Board, as well as extensive consent processes with the oral historians. For educational settings, these processes will be less technical, but they will be important, namely planning an educational approach that is open, non-coercive, non-invasive, confidential, and respectful, then creating a spirit of respect so each person's stories can be accepted as her or his unique reality and perspective. The result is often healing, both in the sense of release and in the communal support and understanding that frequently follow.
4. *Pose questions*—We learned in the Oral History Project that a simple question invites life review, such as: tell us about significant moments in your life journey. In light of our discoveries, we might add other questions for vocational searchers: What unexpected, unplanned, and unimagined twists have you faced in your vocational journey? Where have these led you? Where might they lead you now?

Practice of Meditation and Religious Reflection

A second cluster of practices is *opening the self through prayer and meditation, and seeking life wisdom wherever it is found, in religious resources and traditions and in life stories*. This corresponds to the oral historians' second theme (#2 above) of trusting intuitive and spiritual knowing. Specific educational practices might include:

1. *Teach practices of prayer and meditation*. Teaching traditional spiritual practices can be rich, engaging with diverse traditions of prayer and spiritual and vocational discernment (as Ignatian exercises). Teachers can also pose questions regarding life direction, such as: When you ponder your vocation, what do you discover in quiet *contemplative moments* or in your *deep intuitions*? Where might these spiritual-intuitive insights lead you?
2. *Engage with resources of one's faith tradition*—Faith resources can help people make meaning, connecting (positively or negatively) with religious traditions. Such resources can help people to reflect on their lives and to question, problematize, supplement, or discover correspondences with tradition. To uncover the multiple possibilities, educators might ask more questions: How

does this biblical text or religious ritual shed light on your life? How does your life experience challenge or enlarge traditions you have inherited?

Practice of Critical Contextual Analysis

A third cluster of practices is critical contextual analysis. This cluster corresponds with the women's next three themes (#s 3–5 above). It involves *discerning and evaluating the intricate relation of human lives with complex communal and societal dynamics*. By engaging in such historical–social analysis, people come to understand the dynamic construction of their lives in relation to a larger world, as the oral historians did during the course of their interviews. When Belle Miller McMaster recalled her days as a young mother and pastor's wife, she recognized that her Presbyterian women's groups revolutionized her and many others. She was not fully aware of this at the time, but retrospective analysis revealed the prophetic nature of these groups.

Contextual analysis also includes meta-reflection on women's ways of telling stories. For example, one wonders to what extent the oral historians emphasized the unexpected and unplanned dimensions of their vocational journeys because of the greater social acceptability for mid- and late-twentieth-century women *not* to develop a vocational trajectory. To what extent did they employ humor to speak honestly about pain without seeming bitter? Might humor be a rhetorical strategy to awaken people to issues without losing their attention? Such questions deserve further exploration, as some have begun (Ritchie 2003; Gluck and Patai 1991; Lawless 1994, 2005).

Several educational practices are valuable for critical contextual reflection:

1. *Analyze the textures of social movements as they are uncovered in people's life stories and contexts*—Contextual analysis helps people understand human vocations in relation to human society and creation. Such analysis uncovers social movements, often near-invisible movements that shape vocational visions.
2. *Raise consciousness about the plights of people whose lives are filled with terror*—Life narratives reveal the textures of human lives, whether in the sharing of life stories or in pondering oral histories, film, or literature. Human story-sharing often evokes other sharing, and it often leads to deeper understanding, empathy, and hope for human life. Many of our oral historians described such encounters, and associated their experiences with their own passions for justice.
3. *Pose social-contextual questions*—Contextual analysis also involves direct questions, such as the following, which are inspired by the oral historians:
   a. As you ponder your communities and social contexts, what *social situations* (near or far) call for your attention? How might you respond?
   b. What *concerns you most about the world* as it is today, whether injustice, environmental degradation, oppression, or neglect? In what ways do you experience a call (or sense of urgency) to respond?
   c. When have you felt a strong *commitment to make a difference in the world*? As you reflect on this now, what difference do you yearn to make in the next season of your life? To what extent might your commitment(s) strengthen you to persevere in oppressive systems?
4. *Create opportunities for people to make small and large commitments for their lives*—In this way, educators respond to people's yearning to make a difference in the world and to persevere in oppressive systems, one step at a time.

Practice of Visioning the Future

A fourth cluster of educational practices is *imagining the future and taking courage to step in new directions*. This practice corresponds with three common visions of the oral historians (#s 6–8 above): helping others be what they can be, building bridges, and practicing hospitality. Specific educational practices might include:

1. *Encourage imagination and courage for action in the future*—Narratives inevitably evoke imagination and, in educational settings, this imagination can be invited, encouraged, and developed. Imagination can revitalize hope and courage to move toward the future, the hoped-for future that many religions promise.
2. *Pose personal vocation questions*—Some important questions are informed by the women's stories:
   a. When in your life have you been *drawn to help others be what they can be*? Do you feel drawn to this now? If so, who are the

people (or creatures) who need your support, encouragement, and empowerment?

b. What *conflicts or unnecessary separations* trouble you most—separations among nations, cultural and class separations, generational separations, religious misunderstandings and conflicts, or seemingly irreconcilable ideas? Do you sense a call to build bridges of understanding and relationship? If so, with whom, for what purpose, and how?

c. Where do you see needs in your life or your community's life to *practice hospitality*? To whom might that hospitality be offered and how might you shape it as authentic hospitality, neither false nor degrading to others.

Practice of Building Supportive, Collaborative Community

The final cluster of educational practices is building supportive, collaborative community, which corresponds with the oral historians' communal themes (#s 9–11). These include: seeking communities for support, consciousness-raising, and empowerment; caring for oneself by connecting with caring communities; and relying on humor for survival. Specific educational practices could include:

1. *Reflect on communal support in your life*—Teachers and mentors might shape questions, as before, from insights of the oral historians.
   a. What *human communities* offer you support, insight, and empowerment? How might you develop stronger relations with these communities?
   b. Where do you feel gaps or needs in your own life, places where you need extra *care*? How might you increase your care of self and connect more fully with caring communities?
   c. When has *humor* helped you endure difficult times? How might you draw more fully on humor to maintain perspective and provide strength?
2. *Take steps to build a multi-faceted, compassionate, and challenging community life*—Educators are vital community-builders, vital in building communities that are responsive to the unique people and contexts of their educational setting.

CONCLUSIONS

These educational practices are not exhaustive, but they reflect important discoveries of the Oral History Project. Underlying the particular practices is the value of engaging people in personal reflection on vocation, which is important for human flourishing in all ages and life situations. If vocations do indeed shift over time, people need to engage in vocational discernment throughout their lives. Oral history research highlights the promise of a narrative educational approach to vocational discernment. The purpose is to help people engage the unique stories of their lives, thus to discern movements of the Holy, complexities of the world, and vocational directions for their lives. This article is a beginning point for religious educators who seek to travel with others on their vocational journeys, but beginning is what we need now to do.

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APPENDIX

Oral Historians included in the Quoted Interviews

This appendix introduces the women quoted in this article. The analysis of the article was based on all thirty-four oral historians, and on the 85 presentations and interviews we have collected to date.

Carolyn Abrams—Pastor, H. A. Brown Memorial United Methodist Church, Mississippi

Ayanna Abi-Kyles—Program Associate, Black Church Studies and Women in Theology and Ministry, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta

Sara Armstrong—Retired Associate Council Director, California-Pacific Annual Conference, United Methodist Church

Leila Gal Berner—Rabbi, Kol Ami, The Northern Virginia Reconstructionist Community

Roberta Bondi—Professor Emeritus of Church History, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta

Karen Green—Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students, Muhlenberg College

Leontine T. C. Kelly—Retired Bishop, United Methodist Church; former Bishop of San Francisco Area

Soomee Kim— Acting Director of Student Life and Campus Ministry, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California; formerly Pastor, San Fernando First United Methodist Church

Belle Miller McMaster—Former Director of Advanced Studies, Candler School of Theology, Presbyterian lay leader, Atlanta

Laura Mendenhall—President, Columbia Theological Seminary, Atlanta

Diane Moseley—Executive Director, Killingsworth Home, Columbia, South Carolina

Carol Newsom—Charles Howard Candler Professor of Old Testament, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta

Mercy Amba Oduyoye—Professor of Theology, Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana; Former Deputy General Secretary, World Council of Churches

Rose Thomason—High school teacher, author, activist, Pensacola, Florida

Toni White—Pastor, Suber-Marshall Memorial United Methodist Church, Columbia, South Carolina

Anne Streaty Wimberly—Professor of Christian Education and Church Music, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta

Bridgette Young—Associate Dean of the Chapel and Religious Life, Emory University, Atlanta