

Unit One

Spiritual Autobiography and Listening

Week Two

Overview

An EfM seminar differs from an academic seminar. In a college context, a primary concern is understanding and mastery of content. The EfM program invites people into small, mentored communities that help us understand our lives and shape our actions as we deepen our Christian faith. The seminar is the primary place where members through conversation, prayer, and theological reflection discover and exercise gifts for ministry among those with whom they live and work.

Adults learn what they need to know as they enter into the struggle to understand the challenges of living faithfully. Mentors are trained to facilitate conversation and provide support as participants take responsibility for their learning; a mentor is neither the teacher nor the authority on the text readings. The seminar is a place where we practice the art of framing open-ended questions and listening to one another.

Some optimal techniques help avoid book reporting or retelling of study material and assist in drawing learning from study and bringing that learning into a meaningful seminar conversation: reflecting on your reading notes and highlights; noticing key concerns that are raised for you in your study; thinking about how your study can support you in living in today's world with faith.

Introduction to Context

A truism has grown out of thinking contextually: "Context is everything." The specific particularities of each experience shape how one views the urgent questions of being human. Who are we and who am I? What is truth and how can I know it? What is real and endures? What is the end (*telos*) and purpose of my life? Answers to these basic human questions arise out of particular contexts. To live faithfully in today's world requires attention to how different contexts impact our understanding of God, self, others, and the world. A person of faith does not live in a vacuum but among the specifics of cultural and religious contexts. Peter C. Hodgson, professor of theology at Vanderbilt University, wrote of the challenge of living in today's world:

What is the new cultural situation that we face as North American Christians? It seems that it is not that of the "underside" of history, as is in the case with Latin American, African, and Asian theologies, but rather that of the "passage" of history—the passing of Western bourgeois culture, with its ideals of individuality, patriarchy, private rights, technical rationality, historical progress, capitalist economy, the absoluteness of Christianity, and so on. It *feels* as though we are reaching the end of a historical era since we find ourselves in the midst of cognitive, historical, political, socioeconomic, environmental, sexual/gender, and religious changes of vast importance, comparable perhaps to the great enlightenment that inaugurated the modern age.⁵

Unit One of Volume A lays the foundation for thinking contextually. A person needs to be sensitive and compassionate to the contexts in his or her own life and that of others so that there is an increased probability of staying in conversation or community with others. Grappling with the reality of contextual sensitivity increases the growing awareness of God's activity within and among all people. Each week's work provides a portion of what a person or a group might need to create the foundation for living faithfully in the world.

⁵ Peter Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 53.

Spiritual Autobiographies

A spiritual autobiography is your life story—the telling of your journey with the purpose of discerning and proclaiming how your experience has shaped your relationship with God. Each year in the program you are asked to recall your life story. Later, you are given an opportunity to share what you think is appropriate with your seminar group. A different structure is provided for your use for each of the four years of the program. These structured methods allow you to look at the whole sweep of your life. Constructing your autobiography provides a firm foundation for the continuing work of integrating the content of your year’s study with the events of your life. Your experience is a primary resource for your theological education; the yearly review of your life story enables you to hear how the timbre and direction of that story have changed in the last twelve months. Your call, discernment, vocation, and ministry are imbedded in your spiritual journey. This process of telling and retelling your story helps those themes come more clearly into your consciousness.

A spiritual autobiography may contain both religious material —significant people or times within the religious community—and everyday material—people and times in your life that have influenced who you are now and how you understand God’s presence or absence in your life.

The work you do on your spiritual autobiography is private, “for your eyes only.” This allows you to be free, without concern about how others will interpret either the context or expression.

Preparing a spiritual autobiography each year provides a way to deepen your understanding of Christian life and ministry. By virtue of your baptism you were called to ministry, guided and pushed by personal gifts, passions, skills, experiences, and interests.

Once you prepare your spiritual autobiography, you need to decide what you want to share with your seminar group. Martin Buber, a twentieth-century philosopher and Jewish theologian, is reputed to have said that he could never hold a significant conversation with another person until he had heard the other’s life story. The purpose of sharing autobiographies is to build trust and understanding within the group and to begin to make connections within your own story. We need the experience of hearing other life stories to know that we are not alone in God’s world. By sharing appropriate stories of our lives we form learning communities that can challenge and support us throughout our lives.

Your mentor will relate her or his own story and help the group structure the time for sharing of autobiographies. Most groups give each member around ten minutes to tell his or her story, followed by time for the rest of the group to respond. Spiritual autobiographies are the focus of most of the seminar time for the first few meetings of the year. This is a special time for your group. This component of your group’s life will carry you to the next phase of your year together. This may be the first time to tell your story in this way. It may seem a bit daunting at first. Remember that you should offer what you feel comfortable sharing in the group. This is not an opportunity for “group therapy” or psychologizing, so the group should not engage in raising questions about motives or probe for information beyond what you share. Feel free to say “no” or to say that you do not wish to explore questions that others may raise out of curiosity or concern.

Sharing your spiritual autobiography is a way to say, “Here I am,” and to join your EFM group as a full participant. Over the years in EFM you will probably find that your spiritual autobiography changes. You may find yourself free to talk about things that were previously guarded. You also may find that your freedom to be yourself will grow as your personal story, the life of the group, and the story of God’s people relate to each other.

Preparation for Seminar Session Three and Following Sessions

Spiritual Autobiography

Background: Experience begins from the moment of birth and continues to the present moment. “Raw” experience is neutral and insignificant until a person interprets the experience and gives it meaning. Each grows up living within multiple worlds. There is the world of the family, the intellect (mind), the physical world of the body through which we know that physical universe. Lives involve living within an economic world; that is, the way in which someone gets required resources. The world of play is part of experience. Each of these worlds constitutes a context in which a person creates or discovers identity and meaning.

In EfM, participants are invited to construct a spiritual autobiography according to methods that change each year. This year, the method grows out of the formation theme of Volume A: *Living Faithfully in Your World*.

Recollection and Reflection: Living and growing as a person means living among several worlds or contexts. Recall “worlds” or contexts in which you have lived: intellect, family, religion, play, body. You may be able to think of some others.

- Who are the people of importance in that world?
- What concerns or questions were central to the different worlds in which you live?
- What events do you remember?
- What stands out for you as you remember moving through different stages of your life?

After bringing together memories of those times and contexts, notice any sense of who you have been and who you are. These worlds or contexts and your recollection of the experiences shape your autobiography. In EfM our interest is in fashioning a *spiritual* autobiography that reflects the answers to theological concerns about the presence or absence of God, or the experience of grace, forgiveness, repentance or questions about evil or life after death, among other concerns.

Preparation: After working with the context/worlds to recall people and circumstances of your entire life, focus on any five to ten years: How was/is your faith impacted by your various worlds during that period; how has your faith sustained you through the selected period? When or how did you experience the presence of God? What would you consider grace in various periods of your life?

At the Seminar: Each person will have time in the next three or four weeks to offer his or her autobiography.

Education for Ministry and the Importance of Listening

Education occurs as a person reflects on experience and content. Listening initiates learning. Christian ministry begins and continues with deep listening—listening for God, listening to others, and listening to oneself. A learned ministry builds as a person “listens” to the Christian tradition and applies learning to daily living. Listening is central to both education and ministry.

Before proceeding much further, it is important to define what is meant by listening. Robert Bolton in *People Skills* takes great care in defining listening. The extended quotation below began to define listening by drawing a careful distinction between “hearing” and “listening”:

It is helpful to note the distinction between hearing and listening. “Hearing,” says Professor John Drakeford, “is a word used to describe the physiological sensory processes by which auditory sensations are received by the ears and transmitted to the brain. Listening, on the other hand, refers to a more complex psychological procedure involving interpreting and understanding the significance of the sensory experience.”⁶ In other words, I can hear what another person is saying without really listening to him. A teenager put it this way: “My friends listen to what I say, but my parents only hear me talk.”

I recall a time when I was talking with someone who seemed to ignore everything I said. “You are not listening to me!” I accused. “Oh, yes I am!” he said. He then repeated word for word what I had told him. He heard exactly. But he wasn’t listening. He didn’t understand the meanings I was trying to convey. Perhaps you have had a similar experience and know how frustrating it can be to be heard accurately by someone who isn’t listening with understanding.

The distinction between merely hearing and really listening is deeply embedded in our language. The word listen is derived from two Anglo-Saxon words. One word is *hlystan*, which means “hearing.” The other is *hlosnian*, which means “to wait in suspense.” Listening, then, is the combination of hearing what the other person says and a suspenseful waiting, an intense psychological involvement with the other.⁷

“Listening is one of the greatest gifts we can give one another and a key component of a functioning group. Often we primarily focus on what we plan to say next rather than really listening to what others say.”⁸ Skillful listening involves gestures, attitudes, and attention. Effective listening builds from a few basic, common sense approaches which emerge from the desire to respect the dignity of others.

Make eye contact without staring.

To really hear another person, listen for several things:

- What the person describes (what facts, events, situations, or information the person is trying to convey);
- How the person feels (what emotions accompany the information);
- Where the person places emphasis and shows energy;
- What the person’s body is saying (sometimes one is unaware of the mixture of reactions and important information the body gives).⁹

Any skill builds from the desire to acquire it and then practice, practice, and practice some more. Use the time from week to week to continually practice until listening becomes habitual.

⁶ John Drakeford, *The Awesome Power of the Listening Ear* (Waco, TX.: Word, 1967), 17.

⁷ Robert Bolton, *People Skills: How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others, and Resolve Conflicts* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 31-32.

⁸ “Listening Skills” from *Common Lessons and Supporting Materials* (Sewanee, Tennessee: University of the South, 1998, 2002), 6-8-1.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Respond

Prepare your spiritual autobiography. Remember to divide the work into two phases. First, use the contextual format to remember your spiritual autobiography. This work is for your eyes only. Second, plan (and rehearse) what you will present to the other members of the group. Most groups ask each participant to speak for ten to fifteen minutes.

Practice

Determine two or three ways you can put the listening skills listed above into practice. You may go to a coffee shop or some public place where you can practice listening among strangers. Also, plan how you will apply listening among those with whom you work and live.