Abstract
The essence of a theology teacher’s vocation is about ‘sharing life’ as a ‘relational teacher’. Andrew Root in *The Relational Pastor* argues that relationships are not merely a tool of ministry but its very goal. He contends that ministry grounded in ‘place-sharing’ and being with and for others is especially appropriate for our dawning new age, as well as consistent with the essence of Christianity as sharing in the life of others and the life of Christ. This chapter builds on Root’s analysis of ministry to explore the practice of teaching theology as ‘sharing life’ in several directions—sharing life with God in cultivating authentic spirituality, sharing life with faculty colleagues as team and sharing life mutually with students. It also considers how teaching serves to foster sharing life with the communities our students will serve as the ultimate point of evaluation. This is an exercise in reflective practice—establishing a theological basis for ‘The Relational Teacher: Sharing Life as Vocational Essence’ while reflecting personally on how I share life with God, colleagues, students and the world.

In expressing my philosophy of teaching as being a relational teacher, and viewing the vocational essence of my teaching as ‘sharing life’, I am influenced by Andrew Root’s pastoral theology in *The Relational Pastor.*¹ He upholds a high view of personhood, critiques idolatry of individualism and argues that

¹ Root, *The Relational Pastor.*
relationships are not merely a tool of ministry but its very goal. Root draws on Jeremy Rifkin’s analysis in *The Empathic Civilization* of how new energy regimes lead to new communication forms, and new ways of understanding ourselves, others and God. The current oil regime is at its limit and needs a new system, to help all of us not just to consume but to produce and share. Root comments that ministry empathically grounded in ‘place-sharing’ and being with and for others is especially appropriate for this dawning new age. It is also consistent with the essence of Christianity as sharing in the life of others and the life of Christ.

This essay builds on Root’s analysis of ministry, as well as James K. A. Smith’s teaching on formation practices and Parker Palmer’s philosophy of teaching, to explore the practice of teaching theology as ‘sharing life’ in several directions—with God in cultivating authentic spirituality, with faculty colleagues as team, with students as a mutual learning community, and with the world that we are preparing students to serve. It thus focuses on the theological imperative and divine calling to relationships. I am exploring elsewhere the metaphor of ‘shared life’ as a framework for missional leadership. Here I want to explore what it means for my teaching. Wonder at the works of God cannot be caught and taught apart from relationships. Thus, this is an exercise in reflective practice, exploring my calling and practice of being a relational teacher and sharing life as the essence of my vocation.

**Spirituality with God**

My role as a relational teacher begins with God in cultivating authentic spirituality. I echo the heart of a great teacher Saint Augustine, who famously said: ‘You have made us for yourself, and our gut will rumble until we feed on you’. John 15 reminds me that as I abide in Jesus, Jesus abides in me and I will be fruitful. Andrew Root reminds me that the essence of the incarnation is not just a model of ministry, but the mystery of Jesus’ very person, communicating and *sharing* of the life of God’s self; and inviting us to share in God’s life, to be together. Kathryn Tanner continues this theme in writing:

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2 Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization*.
3 Hammond and Cronshaw, *Shared Life*.
4 As paraphrased in Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 58.
God does not so much want something of us, as [yearn] to be with us… An incarnation-centred Christology emphasizes the fact that God does not so much require something of us as want to give something to us. Our lives are for nothing in the sense that we are here simply to be the recipients of God’s good gifts.⁶

That receptivity to God’s generosity of sharing life with us is a foundational part of how I want to function as a teacher, and how I want to see my students grow.

Among my most formative moments as a learner have been when teachers made space for me to engage with God directly. These times did not usually involve much information transfer but were worshipful class episodes. A biblical teacher, Rikki Watts, once invited us to stay after class and pray in thanks for the richness of faith in the passage we had been studying. That fostered more of an attitude of appreciation and respect for the Bible than the previous three hours of lecturing. A spiritual formation teacher, Jill Manton, later challenged me to go beyond merely doing my assignments for passing the unit and to reflect authentically on where God was inviting and encountering me.⁷ I appreciated teachers who drew my attention back to attentiveness to God, and I know that is where I function best as a teacher.

One of the main obstacles to cultivating my inner life, however, is busyness. I know I let myself become dysfunctionally driven to overwork when I am trying to make an impression on others, or striving to be someone other than what God calls me to be.⁸ The word of grace from God is that who I am, and what I have done, is ‘enough’. A ‘busy teacher’, just like a ‘busy pastor’ whom Eugene Peterson critiques, is an oxymoron or a betrayal—two words that should not go together just like ‘embezzling banker’ or ‘adulterous husband’.⁹ Dallas Willard has sage advice for me in saying, ‘You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life, for hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our world today’.¹⁰ Finding stillness in the midst of busy demands and sharing life with God who loves and calls me are essential for the health of my soul. This is also what I want to embody and model for my students.

⁷ Previously discussed in Cronshaw, ‘Desiring the Kingdom (book review)’, 199.
⁸ Fryling, The Leadership Ellipse.
⁹ Peterson, The Contemplative Pastor.
¹⁰ Cited in Ortberg, The Life You’ve Always Wanted, 78.
James Smith, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, urges exegeting the culture of churches and society, to see what we really value and what our culture fosters. For example, Smith unveils the spin and idolatry of the shopping mall and the not-so-subtle messages of shopping to accumulate belongings in order to match up to others, to feel good, and to appear successful. He also identifies the liturgies of university that prioritise rational learning and promote workaholism. Reading Smith reminded me of a learning moment at college when our Vice Principal, Bruce Searle, maintained students should not need to study and work 60+ hours every week, a workload pattern that was establishing unsustainable work patterns for ministry. Rituals that students practise and expectations they adopt shape them just as much as what they learn in a classroom. Smith urges us to be attentive to what culture shapes us for: ‘habit-forming, identity-shaping, love-directing rituals that capture our imagination and hence our desire, directing it towards a telos that is often antithetical to the telos envisioned as the kingdom of God’.11

Smith also suggests that sharing life with God and cultivating authentic spirituality does not come from accumulating more knowledge or confessing certain beliefs, but from adopting new habits or practices that recalibrate what we love: ‘Jesus is a teacher who doesn’t just inform our intellect but forms our very loves. He isn’t content to simply deposit new ideas into your mind; he is after nothing less than your wants, your loves, your longings’.12 I encourage my students to adopt practices that help form their longings and spirituality, but I need formative practices too.

This year I have adopted the spiritual practices of examen and journaling. The examen is about discerning what in my day has been life-giving and what has been life-draining. Our family practises it in a simple form over the dinner table—asking one another what was the best part of our day and the hardest. I also use this approach as I journal some evenings. Since the essence of my vocation is ‘sharing life’, it helps to pay attention to where I find life flowing at its best, and where God is moving. I resonate with the scene from Narnia where Lucy sees Aslan and says to her companions, ‘He wanted us to follow him’. Peter asks, ‘Why wouldn’t I have seen him?’ Lucy replies, ‘Maybe you weren’t looking’.13 Thomas Merton wrote: ‘The Christian life—and especially the contemplative life—is a continual

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11 Smith, Desiring the Kingdom, 126.
12 Smith, You Are What You Love, 1.
13 Lewis, Prince Caspian, 119-134.
discovery of Christ in new and unexpected places’. The *examen* and journaling help me to look attentively and discover what Jesus is doing around me.

Another practice I am re-adopting this year is fruit-tree gardening. As I nurture my garden and its twenty-two assorted fruit trees, I remind myself I want to nurture my soul, and nurture those closest to me in my family, church and classroom. When I notice that leaves are wilting from neglect, I am reminded I cannot just plant and forget my trees, and I need to nurture them attentively and feed them with what they need—just as I need to feed my soul, and nurture the congregation where God has planted me.

I need these practices to direct my posture towards attentiveness to God—to share life with God and let God share life through me with others.

**Team with Faculty Colleagues**

One of the privileges (and sometimes challenges) of theological education is sharing life with faculty colleagues as a team. The etymology of the word ‘college’ relates to a faculty organising together with the aim, duty and privilege of teaching. In this vocation, our colleagues are, in fact, a gift of God to us. They sharpen our thinking. They watch our backs. Our vocation that begins with sharing life with God is something we share with one another as colleagues. We share in the privilege of our calling—to walk with God as God’s friends and to serve God in the world.

Parker Palmer explores education as a spiritual journey in his book *To Know As We Are Known*. He suggests many faculty feel disconnected from their students and colleagues, and from their own hearts. The love of our subject and the desire to share what is so life-giving for us with others draw us into the vocation. But when institutional expectations foster combat rather than community, or when debates of the intellect alienate us from those we debate, the heart of teaching evaporates and there is no team to sustain us.15

When we spend time with faculty colleagues it can be helpful to watch for metrics of ‘sharing life’ together. Do we enjoy eating

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15 Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known*, x.
together? How much do we laugh together? When do we take time to play together? What is the quality of our prayer together?

In another Narnia story, the warrior mouse leader Reepicheep has his tail cut off. He asks Aslan to grow it back. Aslan initially refuses, but Reepicheep’s mouse friends offer to cut their tails off in sympathy. Aslan says: ‘Not for the sake of your dignity, Reepicheep, but for the love that is between you and your people... you shall have your tail again’.16 That is a lovely image of team solidarity being affirmed.

I am inspired to seek to embody the kind of love Paul urged the church in Rome to have: ‘Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other’. (Romans 12:9-10, NLT)

Mutuality with Students

Sharing life is also a helpful framework for my relationship with students.

Theological colleges used to teach ministers-in-training ‘don’t expect to be friends with your parishioners’. The concern was to maintain appropriate boundaries, and not preference any one set of people in a congregation. But denying the possibility of friendship sets up ministers for an unhealthy lack of mutuality in ministry.

Our default hierarchy in the classroom, furthermore, is for the teacher to be the expert sage-on-the-stage and the student to be there to have their empty jug filled with knowledge. There is an unstated (or perhaps sometimes stated) assumption that teachers and students cannot be friends. Again, there is concern for appropriate boundaries and avoiding favouritism. As teachers, we cannot expect to have all our emotional or spiritual needs filled from sharing life with our students. But I suggest there is room for more mutuality in our classrooms. This mutuality may extend to include friendship as well as exchange of learning and encouragement between teacher and students, as well as among students.

Adult education methods are recognising that students, especially mature-age students, bring a wealth of experience. In my recent missional leadership

16 Lewis, Prince Caspian; cf. ‘A Tale of Tall Tails’.
classes I realised early that many of my students had years and sometimes decades of experience in diverse settings. It benefits us as teachers, and other students, when we can draw out and learn from that level of experience. Students and teachers, furthermore, are more likely to learn fruitfully in the context of a class that functions as a supportive community.

Unfortunately, our systems often default to lectures, readings and assessment. Many teachers hold on to the power of controlling the curricular agenda. Many students resist alternative approaches, as Palmer bemoans:

Students themselves cling to the conventional pedagogy because it gives them security, too, a fact well known by teachers who have tried more participatory modes of teaching. When a teacher tries to share the power, to give students more responsibility for their own education, students get skittish and cynical. They complain that the teacher is not earning his or her pay, and they subvert the experiment by noncooperation. Many students prefer to have their learning boxed and tied, and when they are invited into a more creative role they flee in fear.17

In one of my recent Missional Leadership classes, I started by inviting the small group of students to introduce themselves and their context extensively. I explained the class was very much for reflective practitioners and that I would expect a lot from them in terms of transparently sharing and reflecting on their experience, and relating that to Scripture and literature from the unit readings. The class thus started with their experience of faith and leadership and grappling with the challenges of their context, in conversation with the background reading and missional leadership literature, rather than as a class where I would offer a lot of spoken input with traditional lectures. With a ‘flipped classroom’ format, I distributed sections of some of the material I had prepared to different students, inviting them to rework and add to it and prepare to present it to the class for us to discuss. Yet one student after two classes said he would like to withdraw, since he found he ‘did not like my style’ and found it too haphazard and not well prepared. It prompted a crisis of confidence for me. I responded by saying perhaps the class would prefer more content from me. Perhaps I was less prepared than I could have been. But I decided I would persist in my ‘flipped classroom’ experiment, convinced that sharing life and experience as a community of

17 Palmer, To Know as We Are Known, x.
learners would foster deeper learning.

Palmer’s words have inspired me to persevere in my attempts to foster community and shared life. He commented that people find it threatening when leaders or teachers refuse to tell people how to do things, let alone do it for them—and this is because people have a wound of inadequacy.\(^\text{18}\) Palmer helped me realise that the vocation of a teacher is to maintain the space for mutual inquiry, not revert to lecturing and rule-making even if that is what students are demanding:

> It takes a deeply grounded leader—a leader with a source of identity independent of how popular he or she is with the group being led—to hold a space in which people can discover their resources while those same people resist angrily accusing the leader of not earning his or her keep.\(^\text{19}\)

We do not need to fill empty space in the classroom with our own words and deeds and egos as teachers.\(^\text{20}\) Stepping back from a presupposition that a teacher’s role is to transmit knowledge helps create space for a true community of learning from one another’s experience to emerge.

Palmer describes community as a spiritual disciple in itself. Community has worked since monastic times—alongside studying sacred texts and prayer and contemplation—in ways that sustain a spiritual journey. Palmer comments on how sharing life in community enhances spiritual formation:

> In the gathered life of the spiritual community, I am brought out of the solitude of study and prayer into the discipline of communion and relatedness. The community is a check against my personal distortions; it helps interpret the meaning of texts and gives guidance in my experience of prayer. But life in community is also a continual testing and refining of the fruits of love in my life. Here, in relation to others, I can live out (or discover I am lacking) the peace and joy, the humility and servanthood by which spiritual growth is measured. The community is a discipline of mutual encouragement and mutual testing, keeping me both hopeful and honest about the love that seeks me, the love I seek to be.\(^\text{21}\)

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\(^{18}\) Palmer, ‘Thirteen Ways’, x.
\(^{19}\) Palmer, ‘Thirteen Ways’, xi.
\(^{21}\) Palmer, To Know as We Are Known, 18.
As teachers, we invite students together not for pedagogical convenience, but to engage together in searching for wisdom and reflecting on faith and ministry.\textsuperscript{22}

We could benefit from learning more communal values from sisters and brothers from non-Western cultures. I find my Western individualism challenged as I get to know friends from non-Anglo cultures that value communal over individual interests. Communal cultures can have their own downsides with group conformity, and hierarchy and patriarchy that marginalise youth and women. But I am attracted by a culture that encourages the next generation to value serving family and community rather than just the dream of making their own way in the world. I saw this in a Karen youth worker intern at Werribee Baptist Church, Mi Doh Htoo. While doing studies in youth work, he developed a community project on how Karen young people can help their community access community services. He then did a work placement with Wyndham Youth Services and spent part of his week serving as a community liaison helper or driver for his community—many of whom are very new in Australia.\textsuperscript{23} That sort of moving beyond individualism and living for others is a value I would love my children to adopt. It is a posture I would be proud to see in my students.

Unfortunately, the academic system can foster individualism and competitiveness, at a time when people training for ministry need more interdependence and collaborative skills. We need more team players and less lone rangers in ministry. Let’s begin fostering a more cooperative approach to ministry by reshaping the ‘hidden curriculum’ in our courses to value cooperation and teamwork more than achieving individual results. James Smith suggests that a story of scarcity robs us of community:

> We have a ‘feel’ for the world that is informed by stories that dispose us to inhabit the world as either a bounteous but broken gift of the gracious Creator or a closed system of scarcity and competition; and as a result, either I will just ‘naturally’ be disposed to see others as neighbors, as image-bearers of God, whose very faces call me in a way that is transcendent, or I will have a ‘take’ on others as competitors, threats, impositions on my autonomy.\textsuperscript{24}

Despite theologically valuing community, our assessment systems tend to

\textsuperscript{22} Palmer, To Know as We Are Known, 36–37.
\textsuperscript{23} Cronshaw, ‘Training Next Generation’, 120.
\textsuperscript{24} Smith, Imagining the Kingdom, 36.
encourage students to default to competitiveness and individualism. One of my online students commented that they struggled with not having as much access to their teacher or class, and transparently confessed that when other students were not initiating much online interaction they hesitated too:

I got to the point of thinking if they weren’t interacting online then I was not going to give them all my ideas and thoughts and they could passively take it in. I know that this sounds selfish but those who did interact online we did keep it up via email too, for the same reason.

Even with online possibilities for sharing life, this student was functioning with perceptions of scarcity and competitiveness.

Rifkin’s analysis of how society is changing is that we are entering a new consciousness, flowing from new energy regimes and communication systems. We share files and information on unprecedented scale through the internet. Rifkin believes we are also on the verge of producing and distributing energy in wholly new decentralised ways. We are potentially entering a new era of sharing and seeing others anew as persons:

The increasing connectivity of the human race is advancing personal awareness of all the relationships that make up a complex and diverse world. A younger generation is beginning to view the world less as a storehouse to expropriate and possess and more as a labyrinth of relationships to access.

However, there is also a tendency towards narcissism. We are drawn between sharing life and cooperation on the one hand, and narcissistic self-involvement on the other. Rifkin comments:

The shift into a Third Industrial Revolution and a new distributed capitalism is leading both to a greater sense of relatedness... as well as a more fractured sense of self, and increased narcissism... The likely reality is that a younger generation is growing up torn between both a narcissistic and empathic mind-set, with some attracted to one and some to the other.

25 Rifkin, The Empathic Civilization; discussed also in Root, The Relational Pastor, 42-43.
26 Rifkin, The Empathic Civilization, 594.
Our classes will best form our students if they can steer away from individualism and narcissism, and instead foster empathy and sharing life.

Theologically, we are sisters and brothers before and after we are also teachers with students. In Matthew 23, Jesus critiqued the Pharisees and religious scholars of his day for their pretentious show of hierarchy and failing to practise what they preach. He urged his followers in fact not to be called rabbis or instructors, and not to celebrate titles or positions of honor. The position of teacher and instructor belongs ultimately to Jesus before whom we are all students in the one classroom, as the Message translation suggests:

Don’t let people do that to you, put you on a pedestal like that. You all have a single Teacher, and you are all classmates. Don’t set people up as experts over your life, letting them tell you what to do. Save that authority for God; let him tell you what to do. No one else should carry the title of ‘Father’; you have only one Father, and he’s in heaven. And don’t let people maneuver you into taking charge of them. There is only one Life-Leader for you and them—Christ. (Matthew 23:8-10, MSG)

As people tasked with the role of teacher, we are still sisters and brothers with one another, and fellow students of the one teacher. Jesus called his disciples ‘friends’ (John 15:15). This is not a functional relationship, but a person-to-person relationship of mutuality. Surely if the Son of God could call his disciples friends, then we can be friends with our students.

Root suggests that pastoral ministry is not primarily a utilitarian relationship for the pastor to get people to fulfill certain interests or achieve selected tasks. A pastor is called to open their spirit to the spirit of the people in their congregation—through sharing life and being present in prayer, worship and the stories of their people. Root suggests: ‘Pastoring is the brave action of leading by opening your person to the person of others so that together we might share in the life of God’. That is a delightful image of pastoral ministry that also has resonance for me as a teacher. Teaching is a brave process of opening our self to others, and together sharing life with God, and one another, and the world around us.

28 Root, The Relational Pastor, 68.
Mission in our Neighbourhoods

Sharing life is a metaphor that frames my approach to learning and teaching in the classroom. But it also flows on to what I hope will be its product, in terms of students sharing life with the communities they will serve. This is the ultimate point of evaluation for learning and teaching.

Universities that teach teachers are best evaluated by examining the learning that happens in the school classrooms of the trained teachers. Similarly, our training of people for ministry is best evaluated by examining the quality of sharing of life that happens in the local communities where our students serve.

Sharing life is a helpful framework for vocation. Part of what I want to fulfil as a teacher is helping my students connect with what is most life-giving for them. Part of my role as teacher is to help students discern how they can best share life and the fullness of what really is good news about Christianity with their world. Regarding vocational discernment, Frederick Buechner counsels, ‘The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet’.29 Parker Palmer expands on Buechner’s wisdom and urges people to ‘let your life speak’, and make your contribution based on the gifts and passions God has given you, rather than what others think you ‘ought’ to do.30

The lesson of following not someone else’s expectations but one’s own passion for contributing to the world was learned (or not) by the students in the story ‘Dead Poets Society’. The new English teacher John Keating, played by Robin Williams, inspires his students through teaching poetry. He urges them to ‘make your lives extraordinary’, and teaches them the Latin phrase ‘carpe diem’ or ‘seize the day’. It is not just the teacher but the class that supports one another in dreaming and following their dream. They re-form ‘The Dead Poets Society’ and meet in a cave to recite and create poetry in ways that tap into their creative potentials.

James Smith upholds a high view of worship as part of education; not in the sense of being overly formal, but being important for forming people and inviting them into union with God. Notably he urges making the most of the arts, metaphor, and especially story to captures people’s imagination in Kingdom of God directions:

29 Buechner, Wishful Thinking, 95; cited in Palmer, Let Your Life Speak, 16.
30 Palmer, Let Your Life Speak.
We don’t just need teachers and preachers and scholars and “doctors” of the church to tell us what to do; if the gospel is going to capture imaginations and sanctify perception we need painters and novelists and dancers and songwriters and sculptors and poets and designers whose creative work shows the world otherwise, enabling us to imagine differently.31

This essay is an exercise in reflective practice—establishing a theological basis for the relational teacher but also reflecting on my experience of sharing life with God, colleagues, students, and the world. It is unfortunate if students are so preoccupied with the demands of study (or teachers are so focused on the mechanics of teaching and learning), that they spend little time fostering shared life with God, with their classmates, and with their church and neighbourhood community their studies are designed to serve. Wonder at the works of God cannot be caught and taught apart from relationships. This chapter thus explores my calling and practice of being a relational teacher and sharing life as the essence of my vocation.

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