

CURIOSITY HELPS

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It is an honor to be able to talk about yourself, and it's more of an honor that anybody listens. I hope your sherry is good and the refreshments ample.

I arrived at Yale in 1955. I had done my undergraduate studies in Texas at Baylor University. It was a religious trip for me to come to Yale because I wanted to be admitted to Yale Divinity School. My favorite teacher at Baylor, where I majored in philosophy and religion, was Leonard Duce who was a Yale PhD. When I got here many years later, one of his professors told me that my hero wrote the most boring dissertation in the history of Yale. But Dr. Duce was not a boring teacher. After I graduated from Baylor I spent one year at a seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and my favorite teacher there was Theron Price, another Yale PhD, who had worked with Kenneth Scott Letterette at Yale. He was also a very good teacher. While I was at that seminary in Louisville, thirteen of my favorite professors were fired because they did not engage in right thinking. It was a school where fascism was wrapped in religiosity. Another student and I headed for New Haven, Connecticut because we had been admitted to Yale. It was a wonderful liberation to go to a school where critical thinking was a norm. Critical thinking continues today to be threatened in many ways. Out of my undergraduate work I was convinced that what I needed was to concentrate on a study of the human imagination, or the creative intuition. So I was thinking about how creative intuition ought to be thought about seriously in theological education. It was a wonderful experience to be liberated from that non-thinking tradition to come into a thinking one. I was reading H. Richard Niebuhr, Kenneth Scott Letterette, and Robert Calhoun among others. Instead of staying at that school that fired people for thinking, I came to this school and found it a very rich and rewarding opportunity. While I was a student here, a knock came on my door and I was visited by a very portly Harry Adams. Can you imagine Harry Adams being portly? It was 1956, and he came to my room to ask me a very engaging question: why were my grades better here than they were there? I always appreciated that visit because Adams was recognizing something very important about Yale and its teaching. I was in a course taught by Professor Charles Foreman. In it we had a lecture one day by the chairman of the Communist Party of Connecticut. We were asked to think about what that person stood for, what it meant in relation to our tradition. It was a moment of critical thinking.

I decided that I had to graduate and go back to Texas. I must say that was a somewhat negative move on my part, but primarily because I was told when I left there by a very close friend who said, "If you go up to the commie school, you'll never come back to Texas." So I had to go back to Texas to prove that I could. I became an associate minister of the River Oaks Church in Houston, Texas. I learned that living with a thinking religious congregation was alien to that particular culture, or at least

to parts of it. Before I left Yale, I had studied with a German professor named Eric Dinkler who said to me, "If you ever do graduate work, please come to a University in Germany and do a PhD there." So, after being immersed in the Houston, Texas world, which in many ways was a very positive world but religiously a very negative experience, I went to Germany to be a grad student at the Friedrich Wilhelm Universität of Bonn, Germany. I really enjoyed that work. Eric Dinkler introduced me to Theodore Klauser. Dinkler was one of the Protestant faculty at the University at Bonn and Klauser was one of the Roman Catholic faculty at the University at the time. I worked with both of them, and I was also working in art history. I had other experiences that changed my intellectual trajectory. I made a visit to Salzburg, Austria. I also made a visit to Berchtesgaden, Germany, to the retreat that Adolph Hitler built, and I happened to go on a day when Hitler's elevator operator (who had been freed from prison) was there. The elevator operator knew Hitler personally. It was a wonderful conversation with somebody who had been in prison after the war, got out of prison and declared somewhat innocent of what had happened in the Second World War. Before meeting, I had been at a life changing performance of the opera *Don Giovanni*. When I got up to that lookout at Berchtesgaden I thought, again, I'd been very naïve religiously because I had been on this search, this quest for the way the creative imagination made a positive contribution to the world, to history, and to the church.

Thereafter I contemplated how both Adolph Hitler and Amadeus Mozart, as creative imaginations, were operating and changing their worlds. That "intellectual trajectory" was naïve. I needed to look at something that had been positive creativity of the human imagination. I needed to change that initial impulse and find out what it is that the human enterprise can do to make the world better rather than negative or worse. At that point, I decided to become an art historian and work on why we have a history of art and architecture. About that time at the University in Bonn, Eric Dinkler became very ill. So I decided that what I had to do was transfer my work back to Yale University. The History of Art Department was very open, very progressive, and very flexible. They accepted my previous work. I was planning to work in late antique painting, and I was going to work specifically in the 5th and 6th Century of the Christian tradition. So I decided at that time that I would come back and work with Spiro Kostoff because he was another hero that I had from some reading. When I got to Yale, Kostoff had gone on to teach at other places, to write other things.

I transferred the work back to Yale and had to choose another topic, a subject that represented the expertise of the department. I was accepted in the department to work with Sumner Crosby in the area of Gothic architecture, and I decided to do a study of late Gothic architecture, an interest I developed while in Germany. So my intellectual trajectory had gone way, way, way off course from that initial naïve interest in the creative intuition to the art of architecture. The department here at Yale had open arms about this. They were very kind, very flexible, and very good. Every course I took in the History of Art Department allowed me to adapt the material to

my interests. At the same time I became a faculty member at the Yale Divinity School. The Dean of the Divinity School called the History of Art Department and made arrangements so I could teach my course “Christianity and the Arts” while I was a PhD student in another department.

I stayed at the Divinity School, and I taught there for 27 years. Over those years I developed that course entitled “Christianity and the Arts”. It was a two semester course and it began in September and concluded in May. I would go through from the beginnings (the 2nd century) to the 20th century not because I wanted students to become art historians, but because I wanted young theologians to put material culture of that religion in their minds in order to think about it theologically. I tried to teach my subject to theology students in order for them to be more theological about the material culture of their tradition. I’ve used the phrase “material culture “ twice, and it’s a phrase that I borrowed from Professor Jules Prown because he has worked diligently to show how he uses material culture for information about society, belief, and practice.

A number of things happened then. Because in the Divinity School we were asked to be responsible members of the society, I was very active at Battel Chapel. Bill Coffin was our chaplain. I got a call one day and Bill said, could you be the chair of the board at Battel Chapel. I said, “Bill, I’d be happy to do that but we have to have lunch first and talk.” Bill and I had lunch and we talked about a number of things, and I said “My real concern is that if you’re going to be the Chaplain of Yale University, you’ve got to be there the first three Sundays of the first semester when all those new students arrive, and if you’d do that, I’d be happy to be the Chair.” “Oh yes John, you’re exactly right, that’s what I’ll have to do. I’m sure that’s correct.” Bill said, yes, and I said, yes. The first Sunday came, Margaret Meade preached and Bill was in Hanoi It was a very funny experience to try to follow Bill’s trail for a couple of years. The Divinity School had appointed a number of Deans. I worked under Dean Johnson and then I worked with temporary deans who were filling the gap while other things were happening. Then Leander Keck became our dean and I was teaching art history for theological education. The first thing the new Dean said to me was, “If I had been the dean, you’d never have a job here.” And I thought, it may be that I deal with art and architecture and he thinks it is irrelevant. We never had a meeting of the minds. I thought to myself, I developed a program in religion and the arts and if I want to continue it I’m going to have to move it.

The reason I could move the program is that in 1973 the School of Sacred Music at Union Theological Seminary in New York City was closed because a number of academics had met as a committee and had told Union that they could no longer afford it. At the same time, the Chairman of the School of Sacred Music was Robert Tangeman. His wife was Clementine Tangeman, the sister of Irwin Miller. Miller wanted a number of things for Yale. He and Clementine gave Yale ten million dollars and the School of Sacred Music was moved with some of its faculty members to Yale.

The Dean at that time at the Divinity School asked me to be, along with Paul Homer and others, the ones who integrated the School of Sacred Music with the Yale Divinity School. That gave me the opportunity to move the Religion and Art Department to the Institute of Sacred Music, and then I changed the name of it to the Institute of Sacred Music, Worship and the Arts. We were going to make a thoughtful academic program for music, worship, and the arts and we were going to think about it theologically. Yale gave us that opportunity, and the great pedagogical task to take something as creative as music, worship, and the arts, and try to deal with them as a theological enterprise with integrity. I became the Director of the Institute and everything was going very, very well until I had to deal with a former Provost of Yale. The Provost was giving me hell, and I didn't know why. One day one of the Associate Provosts said, "Don't you know what's going on?" I said, "No, but I'm going to come by your office and you are going to tell me." He said that the problem is the size of the institute which at that time was just a small saddlebag on the edge of Yale. It was a saddlebag on a professional school at Yale and professional schools did not always get much attention. He said, "given the number of students and the number of faculty, you are the richest enterprise at Yale." That money was really something that had to be controlled by the Provost, and I didn't know that. We were spending 3% of our endowment for everything we had to do as a teaching entity at Yale, and we had enough.

When the invitation came to me to be President of the Henry Luce Foundation, I was very happy because I thought I could make my discipline a part of theological education in other schools. I accepted the invitation. I could teach in the classroom and I enjoyed certain successes in teaching, but I thought that I might be able to have a better impact from the point of view of a foundation in New York City. Today, because of a couple of interventions on our part as a foundation, we had one school looking at the possibility of making an appointment of an art historian in a theological faculty in New York. We had just moved Ms. Robin Jensen to Vanderbilt University, who became a Luce Professor of Art and Worship. Another professor has also gone to the Graduate Theological Union in California, and she's teaching religion and the arts there and apparently is doing a very good job. I decided to retire from the Henry Luce Foundation after ten and a half years. I left January 1st, 2003.

I received a very nice letter from Yale about something called the Koerner Center. Wouldn't I like to have an office as a former professor? I said yes, I need an office and I got it. I work with two disappointments and that's the end of my presentation. One thing I wanted to do when I was a professor before I went to the Foundation was to build the Dura Europos Museum. The Dura Europos collection at Yale is worthy of its own museum, and I wanted to build it on the Divinity School campus because Yale has a wonderful set of paintings of the only 3rd Century Synagogue at Dura Europos. They are wonderful paintings. The last time I saw them they were in the smoking room at the History of Art Department. Yale also has the original paintings of the only Christian House Church that is 3rd Century and unique in all of history. And,

they have the earliest and the best paintings of the Mithreum that was found at Dura Europos. They all need to be together and built to scale in a museum..Yale didn't do it, and can't do it, Yale can't afford to do it, and it will never happen. I'm very sorry.

Second, while I have been at the Koerner Center I've been working on a series for PBS that would look at religious traditions in the arts, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. I have done the outline of that program and I must say it's much too long. But there it is all outlined, and the first photographer who was interested was Rick Burns, the brother of Ken Burns who did a series on the Civil War and has done a number of other documentaries. Rick has committed himself to a number of projects while we've been working on this PBS series. We haven't raised money to do the series. PBS got back in touch with me and said maybe it could be photographed by Helen Whitney, who turns out to be the former wife of Benno Schmidt, once president of Yale University. She is a very good photographer and had done a series on the Mormons that was also published. She said she was willing to do it but her commitments are many. The money is not available, the manuscript has to be reduced and therefore I'm afraid that what I had hoped would be the PBS series will never happen.

Now, no Duro Europos Museum, no PBS series, so I guess I'll go back to teaching the course "Masterpieces of Christian Art and Architecture." I should be satisfied with that. Thank you.