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# Pilgrims at Fresno Pacific: 1960-1980

DALTON REIMER

Seeing life as a pilgrimage is a historic concept in Christian thought, made famous by writers such as John Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Pilgrimage connotes a journey with all of its twists and turns, ups and downs. It is the narrative created through living, embracing both being and doing, but with an end, or *telos*, in mind (e.g. Matt 5:48). A pilgrim does not wander aimlessly without a transcendent purpose and direction.

## The Institution as Pilgrim

At Fresno Pacific, the original *Idea* statement (1966) set the stage for various expressions of pilgrimage.<sup>1</sup> The statement begins with the declaration that “Fresno Pacific College is a deliberate and continuous attempt to realize a certain idea through theory and experience.” It concludes with the observation that “the Fresno Pacific idea is only a partially realized idea. But it is the idea that gives Fresno Pacific reason for existence, courage for growth, and stimulus for adventure.” Although “pilgrim” and “journey” language were not used at the time, the notion that the institution itself is on a pilgrimage toward a vision of what it might yet become is inherent in these statements. While current needs and trends may be considered along the way, the *Idea* portrays a transcendent vision toward which this pilgrim institution seeks to move.

## Faculty as Pilgrims

Members of a pilgrim institution are likewise engaged in parallel pilgrimages. In a learning community, some are more senior pilgrims and others more junior pilgrims. Faculty pilgrims serve as models for student pilgrims. In the original *Idea* statement, this orientation is expressed as follows:

While the college is not interested in forcing the student to subscribe to the teacher's point of view, it intends the **teacher to serve as a model** for the student through his own life and as a catalyst for the student's thinking through the exposition and defense of his own position on various issues. The college assumes that learning involves interaction between people and ideas and encourages learning that will result in

worthwhile and intelligent commitments... As a college committed to Christian revelation, Fresno Pacific seeks to **educate the whole person**, nurturing every phase of man's free and creative development—spiritually, morally, intellectually, culturally, and physically.... (my bold)

This view is further elaborated in describing the desired community of the college.

The **college strives to be a community** where interpersonal relations play a vital role in the process of education. The college believes that disengagement from people is an evasion of the real task of education. It intends rather to foster an open, free, honest, and creative interrelationship among all members of the community.... (my bold)

These early statements run counter to the common notion that the teacher's task is simply to cultivate the mind of the student, with the rest of the teacher's life off limits and therefore invisible to students. If social scientist Albert Bandura is correct in observing that "most human behavior is learned by observation through modeling," then restricting such modeling to the cultivation of the mind leaves the rest of life open to alternative influences.<sup>2</sup> If, on the other hand, the mission of an institution, as stated in the *Idea*, is "to educate the whole person, nurturing every phase of man's [and women's] free and creative development—spiritually, morally, intellectually, culturally, and physically," and if the teacher is intended to serve as a model, the model must be holistic as well.

How, then, does this happen? It happens in many ways, through both word and deed. Even occasional glimpses into the life of a professor can be compelling for a student. I will always remember that fleeting moment in mid-twentieth-century theologian William Hordern's class at Garrett Theological Seminary, while a Northwestern University graduate student, when he revealed that in addition to his teaching and writing, he was part of a pastoral team who visited the sick in the hospital. As a graduate student, I found that exemplary, and was impressed that he would move from the lofty heights of his writing (e.g. *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology, Speaking of God*, etc.) and seminary teaching to spend time with the sick in a hospital.

In another Garrett class, noted pastor and teacher George Buttrick shared an experience from his time as chaplain at Harvard University. One day, a Harvard

student positioned himself in front of Buttrick and proudly proclaimed himself to be an atheist: “Why don’t you describe the God you don’t believe in,” Buttrick responded. “I probably don’t believe in him either.” Avoiding argument, Buttrick chose another path. He invited the student into his home, guessing that the student was probably deriving some of his notions of God from poor parental relationships. Buttrick’s home provided another model of relationships and served as an indirect form of witness. While Buttrick might have counseled his seminary students simply to avoid argument in such cases, his modeling through story was more compelling than a thousand didactic words. And while Buttrick had an impressive résumé – pastor of churches including Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, chaplain at Harvard, editor of *The Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, author of multiple books - it was this short story of only a minute or two that provided a glimpse into his life and thinking, and so served as a model.

In John R.P. French, Jr. and Bertram Raven’s classic study of “The Bases of Social Power,” they suggest that social power exists where persons allow themselves to be influenced by others.<sup>3</sup> Influence occurs when I accept that the other is in a position to coerce me to do something, provide me with a reward of some kind, is in a position of authority that I view as legitimate and accept, has information I confirm as valid, is an expert I acknowledge, or to whom I am attracted as a model. The bases of social power, then, may be coercive, reward, legitimate, informational, expert, and referent (or modeling). But the greatest of these is when I am attracted to the other as a model, what French and Raven call “referent power,” for then I may allow the other to influence me in many ways, even as students may be so “captured” by a professor that they imitate the professor’s mannerisms and walk.

Influence through modeling, moreover, is more likely to happen when persons are allowed into the “backstage” of people’s lives. In media studies, it has been noted that characters who are portrayed only on the “front stage” are less likely to be identified with than characters who are also portrayed behind the scenes, or the “back stage.” For faculty, the front stage is the classroom. Back stage spaces include faculty offices, homes, restaurants, recreational spaces, and even stories of life beyond the boundaries of academia.

By now there is abundant research validating that the faculty of greatest influence interact with their students outside of class and on back stages. In a

post 2000 article, Joe Cuseo, professor emeritus of Marymount College (California), has summarized this research.<sup>4</sup> As examples of positive outcomes of such contact, he provides an illustrative list of eight: “(1) retention/persistence to graduation, (2) academic achievement/performance, (3) critical thinking, (4) personal and intellectual development, (5) educational aspirations, (6) satisfaction with faculty, (7) college satisfaction, (8) perceptions of college quality.” All are positively affected by contact outside of class.

Cuseo’s summary of a large body of research was already known in part during the 1970s. At the time, we drew significantly on the work and resource persons of The Center for Research and Development in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley. Early research on “Teachers With Impact” reported in “The Research Reporter” (1972) of the Berkeley Center provided confirmation of the role the Fresno Pacific faculty envisioned for themselves at the time. Indeed, the realization of such outside-of-class contact between students and faculty at an institution like Fresno Pacific was more likely to occur than at a large research university. Warren Bryan Martin of the Berkeley Center, in a scintillating 1970s College Hour address, began his address by noting that “students at UC Berkeley are like pigeons to a cathedral.” Although it may have been a bit tongue-in-cheek, since he was from research-oriented Berkeley, he could get by saying that to the small college we were at the time. After highlighting the virtues of a small college like Fresno Pacific, students gave him a standing ovation unusual for College Hour presentations at the time.

### **Faculty Pilgrimages**

Although brief glimpses into the larger lives of teachers occur from time-to-time in the normal course of academic activities, longer narratives of faculty lives are rare. As early as 1974, faculty pilgrimages began to appear on Fresno Pacific’s College Hour schedule. In the fall of 1974, Hans Kasdorf and I were the first to share our life stories—making visible what previously had been largely invisible to our students. Kasdorf had an amazing and inspiring story of overcoming adversity as a child immigrant along with his family from Siberia to the rain forest of southern Brazil, where he grew up in challenging circumstances as his family eked out a living as homesteaders. He was 16 before he owned a pair of real shoes, as compared to earlier bare feet and makeshift clogs. From this beginning, he moved to North America to pursue education,

and ultimately found his way to the faculty of Fresno Pacific. And 1974, it turns out, was not the end of his story, since he ultimately acquired two doctorates and moved on to the faculty of what is now Fresno Pacific University Biblical Seminary and became a noted missiologist.

As part of the holistic modeling motif of the college, the College Hour Pilgrimage provided the opportunity to share with students and other members of the college community alike the larger narrative of a person's life. Those narratives of 1974 and thereafter were, of course, not narratives of completed lives, but narratives of lives in progress, deeply rooted in the inherited past. If "the child is father [and mother] of the man [and woman]," as William Wordsworth declares in his poem "The Rainbow," there is already much to say when a person joins the faculty of a college or university. Students are interested in knowing the life journeys of their teachers, as student evaluations of College Hours at the time strongly confirmed.

### **Students are Pilgrims, Too.**

In a 1970s freshman course called *Directions for Learning* (later *Passages to College*), students wrote their own personal "idea" statement. As an example, the fall 1978 syllabus for *Directions* includes the following objectives framed in student terms:

1. To clarify who I [a student] am by identifying those forces and experiences which have heretofore influenced and shaped me, and to record these in the form of an autobiography.
2. To clarify my vision for the future by writing a beginning personal "Idea" statement describing the kind of person I want to become.
3. To chart a path toward the "Idea" by forming a beginning "Plan" of courses and experiences.
4. To understand the nature, values, and possible uses of the "Fresno Pacific College Idea" and resources which are being made available to me to assist me in my personal development."

These objectives were followed by a statement regarding the mentoring role of faculty: “Your faculty Mentor, a member of the teaching team, will help you meet the objectives of *Directions*, and during your subsequent education at Fresno Pacific continue to assist you in the achievement of your objectives.”

In the mid-1970s, before mentoring had become the popular concept it is today, Fresno Pacific faculty embarked on an innovative and ambitious mentoring program. Although pilgrim language was not used, faculty essentially saw themselves as senior mentors to student pilgrims. This vision for mentoring students was formalized in a new “Student Guidance Program” adopted by the faculty on April 3, 1974. On May 16 of the following month, faculty and spouses were invited to a special evening dinner in the ballroom of the downtown Hilton Hotel (now the Radisson) for an inaugural dinner; and here conversation focused entirely on this new initiative, attesting to the importance given to it by the college. Spouses of married faculty were included since they would be affected by such things as entertainment of students in faculty homes.

Several years before in a September, 1971 pre-school-year “Faculty Family Retreat” at Hartland Conference Grounds located in the Badger area of the Sierras, J.B. Lon Hefferlin of the University of California (Berkeley) Center for Research and Development in Higher Education had been our guest resource speaker. For Lon Hefferlin, the view of faculty as parents (*in loco parentis*) needed to be replaced by faculty who saw themselves rather as uncles and aunts. “Avuncular” was his favorite word. The word caught on as it seemed to capture how Fresno Pacific faculty already saw their role.

In 1974, however, “mentor” became the word of choice, although it was still an expression of this avuncular role of faculty. Edward C. Sellner, in *Mentoring: The Ministry of Spiritual Kinship* (1990), later described a mentor as a teacher, sponsor, host, guide, exemplar, counselor, and a “facilitator of the other person’s dream,” surely in line with Lon Hefferlin’s earlier avuncular vision for faculty.<sup>5</sup>

The new mentoring program adopted in 1974 was innovative and ambitious. Freshmen, upon entering the college, would be divided into small groups called collegiums. Each group, not to exceed twenty students, would then be mentored by a faculty member for the duration of their time at the college. When a student declared a major, that student would receive an additional academic advisor, but the original mentor would continue in a supportive role. The ar-

rangement was akin to what has been practiced at some British institutions such as Oxford colleges, where students received two tutors: a “moral tutor” and a “subject matter tutor.”

At Pacific, initially anchoring this arrangement was the beginning freshman course called *Directions for Learning*. The title was somewhat misleading, since it could be understood in terms of the traditional orientation motifs such as “how to study” or “succeed in college.” Rather, the intent was to move away from such traditional orientations to a more substantive reflection on the purpose and meaning of what freshmen were embarking on – namely a purposeful educational journey toward a vision of what might be. A faculty mentor, then, became a “facilitator of the other person’s dream,” as Sellner has stated, helping a student pilgrim on his or her way.

Required readings in the *Directions* course included such books as Pilgrim *Aflame*, Myron Augsburger’s historical novel of Michael Sattler’s 16th century journey as Anabaptist reformer; Albert Schweitzer’s *Memoirs of Childhood and Youth*; Jade Snow Wong’s account of growing up in San Francisco as a *Fifth Chinese Daughter*; and John Miller’s exposition of the Sermon on the Mount in *The Christian Way*.

Noble as our intent was, within time the *Directions* course received significant student criticism. The reasons were perhaps several. For one, asking freshmen to pause and reflect on the endeavor on which they were embarking may have been asking too much too soon, when they were anxious to speed up the process by fulfilling their general education requirements and moving on to a major. Furthermore, the course did not fit any disciplinary category such as history or science familiar to the student. So in the fall of 1979, this introductory, full five-quarter-unit course was reduced to a one unit course called *Passages to College*, but still fronted by a team of mentors working with students in the collegium model. The mentor and collegium concept then stumbled along until it was reconceptualized in 1991 with the adoption of a new general education program. By that time, the concept of mentoring had become more popular in the larger culture. In *Mentoring: The Ministry of Spiritual Kinship*, distributed at the time to faculty, author Edward C. Sellner observed that “there is an emerging consensus in our society and church on the importance of people acting as mentors and guides to others.”<sup>6</sup> Sellner provided confirmation of what had by then become almost a twenty-year tradition at Fresno Pacific.



*Jesus and the Christian Community* was the entry biblical studies course for incoming students in the new general education curriculum inaugurated in the fall of 1991. The course reflected the Christological and ecclesiological/community centeredness of the discipleship theology undergirding the institution. The course was taught by a mentor team with instruction led by a member of the biblical studies faculty. Students were grouped in collegiums led by a faculty mentor, following the earlier model. Modifications have occurred since, which, however, are beyond the purview of this paper.

The original dual mentoring and academic advisor roles did not survive for long either. Soon it changed to the traditional pattern of a beginning mentor followed by a major advisor as soon as the student declared a major. Institutional budget support subsidizing faculty lunches with mentees through the Noon Hour Encounter Program and home entertainment of students reinforced the institutional commitment to this role of faculty.

In addition, for a time during the 1970s, a series of student guidance booklets were published, one of which contained brief, page length faculty biographies introducing students to the larger life narratives and involvements of faculty beyond just the academic. Unlike the usual academic résumés now appearing on the web, these biographies also referenced other aspects of faculty lives such as family, church and community involvements. In the spirit of the holistic development motif of the Fresno Pacific Idea, the larger lives of faculty thus became more visible as senior pilgrims in the college community.

### **The Prospective Faculty Pilgrimage**

On February 5, 1975, the College Senate, at the time consisting of both faculty and administration, adopted the following statement framed in terms of calling:

Pacific College faculty are called to contribute to the holistic development of persons through word and deed...Hence, faculty are called who through faith and action acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, who actively pursue learning and scholarship, who seek to understand and give witness to the relationship between learning and faith, and who declare their willingness and commitment to engage faithfully in the task of discipling persons within the college community.

Fifteen years earlier, in the spring of 1960, Arthur J. Wiebe had been appointed as the president of Pacific College. The institution was transitioning from a Bible institute to a junior college, and Wiebe was appointed to lead in this new venture of a college, although he was still working on completing his doctorate at Stanford. That same year I was completing my master's degree at Northwestern University, and in need of fulfilling my deferred draft obligation, still in effect at the time, as a conscientious objector. I was in communication with Mennonite Central Committee, which had an opening as director of their work in the Washington D.C. area. But with Wiebe's appointment, he began to correspond with me about coming instead to Pacific, which had also become qualified as a place of work for conscientious objectors. Wiebe knew me as his former student while principal at Immanuel Academy, now high school, in Reedley, as well as his nephew. I cite this to note that my coming to Pacific included no faculty pilgrimage. My early hiring, along with others, came largely through acquaintances and connections in the Mennonite Brethren church community. In a 2010 article, Wiebe notes that fifteen Immanuel graduates have served on the Pacific faculty.<sup>7</sup> A number of the early appointees had been his students there and he knew them well, including the families from which they came. These first appointees, then, came to the college board by way of his recommendation.

But as a critical mass of faculty developed, things changed. President Wiebe had a strong commitment to collaboration in building this academic community, and so faculty meetings, including administrators, took on great significance. Faculty and administrators met together on multiple issues pertaining to the development of the college, including the appointment of new faculty and administrators. This appointment came by recommendations from this collaborative group. Although recommendations formally went to the president and then to the board, Wiebe had already been a part of the process and the likelihood of the president vetoing the action of the group was minimal. I do not recall any instance during the 1960s and 1970s when the president overruled this faculty-administrative group on a faculty or administrative appointment.

When the first *Idea* was then developed in the mid-1960s, the view of community expressed therein was what had already been emerging under Wiebe's leadership. In regard to faculty and administrator recruitment, "we" language became the norm in contrast to "I" language. It was the "we" of community

who called new members to join, versus the “I” language of an administrator appointing someone. Though the formal roles of faculty, president and board were recognized and respected, the ethos was that of community. This ethos was sometimes referred to by critics as a “faculty run institution,” not always meeting the pleasure of board members and others who thought that the president should be more directive and controlling. But internally it did not connote a weak president. One does not move from a two-year institution to a graduate level institution in fifteen years, as happened between 1960 and 1975, with weak leadership. Wiebe led by building a consensus in community, though not always with easy agreement, as might be expected in a community of academics.

Given this communal “we” approach to calling, then, along with the expectation that appointees serve along with other faculty as senior models in the community, the prospective faculty and administrator pilgrimage developed as an opportunity to become more fully acquainted with candidates lesser known than those originally appointed. Traditional processes of résumés, interviews, references, campus visits, faith statements, and the like have all been valued. Adding a candidate’s own telling of his or her story as a pilgrim on the way has provided additional insights as to the fit with the institutional mission and calling, and hopefully the telling has also served to confirm the candidate’s welcome to the community as a whole when appointed.

## **Conclusion**

Fresno Pacific is a pilgrim institution peopled by pilgrims on their way to the realization of a collective vision articulated in the *Fresno Pacific Idea*, along with parallel, personal visions of faculty and students, as well as administration and staff. Pilgrimage implies movement toward some destination vs aimless wandering. Yet pilgrimages are not without possible detours that may in themselves alter direction.

A favorite pilgrim story of mine is told by Leo Tolstoy. Two aging men, Efim and Elisha, decide to leave their homes in Russia and go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Many years before they had made a vow to do so, but the busyness of life had interfered. Now, they agreed, it was time. After making necessary arrangements, they began their journey. On their way, however, they soon encountered a family in desperate need. What should they do? Elisha

could not bring himself to continue without stopping to help, so Efim traveled on alone with the hope that within time Elisha would follow. But Elisha's help of this desperate family went from one thing to another—not only meeting their immediate need, but redeeming their cornfield, buying them a horse, flour to last until the next harvest, a cow for the children, and so on. In the end, his depleted resources were not sufficient to continue to Jerusalem, and so he returned home. In the meantime, Efim completed his pilgrimage by arriving in Jerusalem, and then waited for Elisha. Though he searched for Elisha, he was nowhere to be found except in an occasional apparition that disappeared as quickly as it appeared. Although not in person, could it be that in spirit Elisha, too, had made it to Jerusalem?

Warren Bryan Martin, in his provocative 1970s Fresno Pacific College Hour address, talked about “provisional certitudes.” Perhaps that is the way pilgrims should hold an *idea* or valued destination. Tolstoy's story seems to suggest as much. Surprises, after all, do come ones way.

Michael Novak, Catholic philosopher and writer, has observed that most of life is like the hard work of ascending a mountain, but that there are moments when God's Spirit breaks through in unexpected and surprising ways. He captured this truth in the title of his treatise on religious education, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove*.<sup>8</sup> James Loder, whose pilgrimage included teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote of such breakthroughs in a book he titled *The Transforming Moment*.<sup>9</sup> He begins the book with a personal story of such a life-changing moment in his own journey. So while we as pilgrims may ascend mountains believing that we are on the right path, surprising Spirit-dove transformational moments may well come our way and perhaps even redirect our journey. Perhaps there is wisdom in Warren Bryan Martin's notion of “provisional certitudes,” leaving open the possibility of such moments.

Finally, while the past always extends in some form into the future, each generation must take another look to discern and affirm what remains as good and true. The alternative is passive acceptance or aimless wandering. But with an *idea* that is embraced in view, even if held provisionally, one has “reason for existence, courage for growth, and stimulus for adventure,” as expressed in the original *Fresno Pacific Idea*.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Toews, ed., *Mennonite Idealism and Higher Education: The Story of the Fresno Pacific College Idea* (Fresno: The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1995), 155-158.
- <sup>2</sup> Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought & Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 47.
- <sup>3</sup> John R.P. French, Jr. and Bertram Raven, "The Bases of Social Power," in *Studies in Social Power*, Dorwin Cartwright, ed. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1959), 150-167.
- <sup>4</sup> Joe Cuseo, "Faculty-Student Contact Outside the Classroom: Supporting Evidence & Promoting Practices," <http://uwc.edu/sites/uwc.edu/files/imce-uplc>
- <sup>5</sup> Edward C. Sellner, *Mentoring: The Ministry of Spiritual Kinship* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1990), 25.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 9
- <sup>7</sup> Arthur J. Wiebe, "Education & Entrepreneurship: A Personal Journey," *Direction* (Spring 2010), 84-96.
- <sup>8</sup> Michael Novak, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove: An Invitation to Religious Studies* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).
- <sup>9</sup> James Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989).