

Learning and Discerning: A Conversation About Education and the Spirit

by Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann, Sarah Simone, and Virgil Zanders

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Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann: Good morning.

Audience: Good morning.

Rabbi Patricia: This morning we have the unique opportunity to have a conversation with a few of our students about learning and discerning, education and the spirit. I hope that as you listen to the wisdom of these young people, you will also be asking yourselves some of the same questions. Whether you're a student, a parent of a student, or a lifelong learner.

Several weeks ago, I participated in a conference with an organization called "Bringing Theory to Practice." In that conversation, they talked about three qualities of an education in the liberal arts -- transformative and engaged learning, public good or civic engagement, and well-being. When I think about education and the spirit, about learning and discerning, all three of those components are present.

My own education was comprised of several strands of spirituality--a commitment to faculty engaged in the big questions of life; for the first time, as a New Yorker, I was in a place with mountains. So, the Psalmist's, I lift up my eyes to the mountains, had reality for me in a way it hadn't previously; The study of religious figures as moral exemplars and the expectation that I would write the narrative of my own education. The upshot for me was a thirst to know more about my own religious community, tradition and practices, which ultimately sent me off to rabbinic school.

It's certainly not a given that either of you will find your way into the clergy. It's clear from the various connections that we've had that education is infused with spirit for each of you.

My first question is, when you think about those words, education and spirit, learning and discerning, what it is that come to mind for you? Simone, would you like to start us off?

Simone Hudson: I was thinking about faith and education and what I've learned from practice of prayer and my thought goes to the very start. We bless the source. We say, "Thank you God. Thank you Creator for what you've given us."

The blessing goes toward that very process of creation. The emphasis is there. It's not on what's being created. As I go about my educational journey, I've been thinking about this emphasis on process over product and how I find this beautiful example in every

prayer that I have of thanking the Creator, not the created.

Actually, that makes failure and mistakes much easier and much more integrated into anything that I do because instead of worrying about what might be the result. I'm instead expressing gratitude and praise and putting my emphasis and energy into the process of learning, the process of creation. Not the product. If the product doesn't go so well, that's OK.

Rabbi Patricia: Well, part of what learning is about, is having those opportunities to have approximations and then being able to learn from them.

Simone: Virgil, did you have a thought about that?

Virgil Zanders: Actually, I have a couple of thoughts in a slightly different direction. For me, education has taken on a completely different role as I've become a lot more comfortable with my spirituality. I think as a young kid, when I was 16-17 years old, I had a very clear understanding as to what I wanted to do with my life.

It was very selfish-focused ambition into starting a certain company by a certain age and reaching a certain level of success by a certain age. It was just simply embracing a lot of the notions of what success is based upon society's definition of what success is. As I've gotten older and become a lot more comfortable with my spirituality and my relationship with God, it's very clear to me that God has a plan for myself specifically and my education as well as for all of us.

I had now basically two objectives in life. One, I think is to achieve certain specific goals for myself. Well most importantly, two, to understand what goals God has for me and how I'm going to use my education to be able to achieve that objective as well.

With each day that I go to class and I study and I learn, I find that becoming more scholastic and just simply focusing on the lessons I'm learning as a student. It helps me to be able to achieve both objectives. Because I'm learning from my professors how to be a scholar, but, I'm also learning from God as I edify myself educationally what I'm supposed to be doing with this education to be able to sort of do God's work.

Rabbi Patricia: I'm struck by, Simone, you're thinking about prayer, which is something that you're initiating as it were. Virgil, you're talking about those moments when God is communicating something with you. I'm interested in the difference between the prayer and the receiver. Simone, when are the times when you feel you receive God's word? Virgil, when are the times when you feel you initiate some contact with the Divine?

Simone: Do you want to start?

Virgil: I can start. I have a very strange metaphor. I sincerely believe that God speaks to me, specifically, through everyone. The reason why, I think, that's pretty obvious, is when I have questions about certain things in life. I'll pray and I'll ask God for guidance. God seldom will speak from the heavens and talk to me directly. We're all a family, we're all God's children. God will actually give me messages through communications that I have with people.

What I'm finding is that I went through life with a game plan. I want to walk on this particular path to get to a certain area. Then, eventually, I will get communications or messages from people about how I can apply my education and knowledge in a certain direction. To be able to do more good for myself, as well as for other people in the community.

Then, it became clear to me, that as God is walking by my side and communicating to me through others. That I have to stop looking at life as being this self-focused endeavor. It's something where I am trying to achieve personal objectives as well as this overarching objective for God's word, for God's will.

It's something that I experience on a daily basis. I'm not quite sure exactly when I'm going to get a certain message from God. I just know that it does happen. When it does, I'm very attentive to it, very sensitive to it. Then, I sort of take note of it and react to it as well.

To answer your question directly, it happens on a regular enough basis since that I know that I'm being communicated to by God. I take that message and that knowledge and I apply accordingly, depending on what the situation is. I believe that we all have this types of this moments, whether we're sensitive to it or not. When you are, I think, open to it, it's a profound change that takes place in life, in terms of what your purpose is.

Simone: the question of when I receive God is a big one. I think about it fairly often. I guess, I think about it more in the language of when do I connect with God? Or, when do I connect with the Divine Spirit?

I actually had the honor of writing a *drash* or a sermon in the Jewish community about this *parasha* (portion of the Bible). It happens right around this time, about animal sacrifice. As a vegetarian at that time, I was a little grossed out by it. Ultimately, what I got from this idea of animal sacrifice was that the Hebrew word for sacrifice is really about offering. Offering is about connection. The root of the word is the exact thing.

It's through giving that we connect. It's through connecting that we give. My relationship to God and my receiving of the Divine, if you will, as you said, comes through connecting with people. Also comes through my understanding of this idea of *Tikkun Olam*--healing of the world. something that was shattered long ago.

Sometimes, that healing happens in a connection one-on-one that if the world is a vessel that was shattered. Pieces get fused back together when we feel personal connection. The pursuit of social justice is also about connection and that's a way we can bring God into the world, I think.

Rabbi Patricia: Because I had the pleasure of hearing that sermon, I know that it was written during finals week. That there was a lot of study and thought that went into it at that quite stressful time.

I'd like to hear from both of you about how it is you maintain your equanimity and your equilibrium in those times in the Stanford calendar when most of the school is going crazy, if you're able to do it. I know in that case you were. It may have been the only time, but, I doubt it.

Simone: I was very fortunate I got to attend a Jewish day school for nine years. My mom, sometimes, tells a story of when I was a little kid I would bring home books from the library, a lot of them. Frequently, I would come home with Jewish cookbooks.

From a very early age, I just knew that what we're doing in educational institutions is not just about becoming smarter, but, is actually about connecting to heritage and tradition and Jewish cooking, and culture, and community. I tried to keep those things as integrated as possible today. I don't get cookbooks on Jewish cooking these days from Green Library.

I do feel very welcome in the Jewish community. I do feel that my practice of Shabbat, the Sabbath, keeps me grounded every week, even if it's a totally crazy, hectic week. I do something for Shabbat -- to take a rest and to take time away from the treadmill, as a professor of mine calls it, "of Stanford life." That actually -- stepping off the treadmill -- my spiritually enables that.

Rabbi Patricia: Yeah, I'm here for you 24/6.

[laughter]

Virgil: One of the things I've always loved about Stanford is, of course, how beautiful the campus is. What has always struck me as being profoundly impressive is the location of the church. Being the center of attention, of course, as you come down Palm Drive, and then, of course, it's really the focal point of the entire campus in the quad.

For me, especially during finals week, when things become particularly hectic. I literally find myself biking through the quad and feel the church beckoning to me. If I find myself feeling a little tense, which happens from time to time at Stanford as a student, I'll park my bike. Sometimes, I won't even lock it. I'll just come inside and I'll say a prayer -- 30 seconds, one minute. It will be whatever sort of comes to mind, but, a lot of it is just simply having a communication with God, feeling the sanctity of the church, and then, asking for peace and for calm. Every single time it works.

When you have a relationship with God, the way that you have a relationship with anyone that you love -- parents, what have you -- you reach out for help. Whenever you find yourself in need of a little bit of peace, a little bit of comforting, or just simply you have a need for conversation, the church is here for you. The church is here for me and I take advantage of it. God is always there for me. I maintain calm, I maintain peace by leaning very heavily in that relationship. I also utilize this beautiful facility to help me, oftentimes, feel a stronger connection with God.

I tell you, I have 20 units and lots of pressure. I oftentimes don't feel it mostly because I just rely on the church and my relationship with God to keep things smooth.

Rabbi Patricia: In a sense, you're both talking about religious time, space, and practice, as ways to keep yourself grounded in the heat of the intensity of Stanford. I'm wondering about those moments, perhaps, moments of insight or times when your ideas crystallize or you make connection across classes or experiences when you've gained some perspectives on your life and identified some purpose, meaning, and integration of your learning. Are those moments part of your experience? Can you tell us something about

them?

Virgil: I guess, I can, maybe, lead off on that one [inaudible 14:31] . I'm majoring in Science, Technology and Society, which is one of the most amazing majors in the entire world. I can go into it for hours if I had time, but, what's amazing about it more than anything else is, of course, we're examining how science and technology impact society. Everything is a sociological construct of this wonderful sort of concepts which are new to me.

What's more amazing than anything else is, as I'm listening to my professors going to a lot of the theoretical concepts behind this major and they're just really forcing you to change the way you're think and see the world. I start, then, to think about how, scholastically, as a scholar I can take this education and apply to whatever core objective I might actually have.

More than anything else, I look at each professor and I see how passionate they are about they're scholastic endeavor, about their teaching and education. How they've made so many sacrifices in their own personal lives to be there for me as a student. I take that so personally. I embrace it. I find them...that passion that they have sort of becomes infused in myself. Then, I link that back to my relationship with God and I recognize that this is a part of His plan.

"OK, Virgil. It's OK for you to have that very focused ambition for yourself, but, recognize there's something bigger here, too. This passion that you're developing for your major, because of the passion that you see in your instructors or your professors. I want you to use that, in some way, to do good in the world as well. Stick to your own objective that's fine, but, recognize there's a bigger picture here as well.

That's how, I think, I'm able to link my passion for my school, my scholastic studies to my relationship with God. Then, this overarching sort of purpose that is slowly being revealed to me with each day. It's very profound, actually.

Rabbi Patricia: Thank you. Simone?

Simone: I really like that idea of purpose being revealed, because, when you ask about purpose, I often just think -- I have no idea yet. That's OK, because, I do have lots of beautiful little moments of connection and aha moments of understanding how these various systems crossover. That I'm learning about, at least in my classes, and then, living in my social life and et cetera, et cetera. There's still so much to be learned in terms of what I'm here for. That I think I just have to have faith that there's a bigger picture.

I think about this idea of the long view and it was actually referenced by Oscar Romero in a poem that was read a few weeks ago in a multifaith celebration. This idea that understanding how seeds I might plant in my life, might be sown way down the road, God-willing, be after I'm gone...That holding that long view is a really helpful way of recognizing -- I'm only going to make a small, small scratch in all of these and that's good. Because my contribution exists in a cosmic system of millions, and millions, and millions of contributions. That releases some of the burden.

I was talking with my parents about this too and I think, "Thank God for having parents who are on the page with me about that burden being released. I think it goes back to what we were saying earlier that it's OK to fail. It's OK to make mistakes because this process of learning matters. The small scratches we might make don't have to radically change things right now. It can happen down the line.

Rabbi Patricia: There's a poem that's up next to the telephone in my office. "Patient trust in yourself and in the long slow work of God." (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin) A reminder that we often need to pause, connect, remember that purpose is not just one very thick chain but strands that are braided together and through their braiding, help us to understand, in the words of Frederick Buechner, how to find that place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need.

I'm sure that there's lots that we could continue to reflect on. I'd like to reiterate some of the words of the litany that we spoke earlier today from John Gardner. "Eternal God help us to put together the ingredients of meaning into a unique pattern that will be our lives. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning..." as clearly Simone and Virgil, your lives do and will. Thank you.

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