Surveying the Inner Landscape: Self-Understanding, Supervision and Formation for Ministry

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Abstract

This article argues that self-understanding is fundamental to ministry effectiveness. It examines barriers to self-knowledge – fear, perfectionism, cultural resistance, and time constraints – and identifies practices that cultivate it: intentional reflection, engagement with others, the arts, spiritual direction and counseling. It then describes how McMaster Divinity College's field education program structures these practices for student formation.

Keywords: Formation, Reflection, Ministry, Personhood

INTRODUCTION

People who sense a calling from God to enter full-time, vocational ministry need to come to that calling as someone who is ready and willing to undergo a lifetime of ongoing formation. It may begin in a seminary degree program and continue well past graduation as their knowledge, character, spirituality and skill level continue to develop throughout their career. It may take place in any number of other ways as well, but formation in ministry is part of the calling that people respond to when they decide to follow a path toward and continue in vocational ministry. Indeed, being open to formation is crucial to the success and longevity of any ministerial career. However, while ongoing formation is part of the journey, no one comes to ministry without having already been formed in certain ways. As we sometimes say, "No one is a blank slate." We all bring ourselves to every ministry context that we find ourselves in. In fact, that may be the only thing that is sure. Whatever else is true about engaging in the work of ministry, the skills and knowledge we have or lack can all affect our effectiveness in ministry, but in many ways we have limited control over those things. No matter how much time we devote to seeking training and knowledge, there is no guarantee that our efforts in those directions will be sufficient for the immediate situation we find ourselves in. The one thing that is indisputably true is that in, any given situation, we bring who we are. To use a double

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negative, you cannot *not* bring yourself to any ministry situation or context. When we show up to serve, we bring ourselves – all our gifts, talents, strengths, personality, prejudices, foibles, neuroses and brokenness. This is the only sure thing. We come as we are; even if we are trying to present as something else, we come as we are.

This is why the journey of gaining self-knowledge, or self-awareness, is fundamental to ministry. Thomas Oden writes about the call to ministry and the need for ministers (pastors in particular) to understand their vocation and themselves in light of their self-knowledge: "The self-understanding of the pastor precedes and shapes all pastoral acts. The identity and inner strength of the provider of care is prior to any act of caring."[1] Oden captures the concept of *being* preceding *doing*. That is, who we are will inevitably affect how we engage others in a ministry situation. The inner realities of our life directly impact how we conduct ourselves in the external situations that we encounter. For those of us tasked with helping people in the process of training for ministry, or continuing their education while in ministry, a significant part of our work needs to be focused on helping them lean into the process of gaining a deeper awareness of who they are and how they have been formed. The landscape around us, or the physical context of ministry, is crucial to understand if we are to engage in ministry effectively, but the inner landscape of our interior lives is even more significant in cultivating a healthy ministry in any context.

This article addresses this aspect of formation for ministry by exploring some of the reasons why self-understanding is so important in ministry, key practices that aid in cultivating self-understanding, how ministry supervisors can help facilitate growth in this aspect of their supervisee's overall development and how those in charge of theological field education programs can structure their programs to maximize their effectiveness in aiding students as they travel the path of self-understanding.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING

As I have already noted, there is little, if anything, more important for the ministering person than to know themselves. In ancient times, Greek philosophers thought that all understanding was self-understanding. Plato believed that all human knowledge was primarily about self-understanding and moral formation. In his writing, the figure of Socrates asserted that an unexamined life was not a human life.[2] This ancient idea speaks directly to the important work of seeking self-understanding in the life of a ministry practitioner today because it highlights the idea that inner formation is the human being's greatest goal and the ultimate end when it comes to the pursuit of knowledge.

To know ourselves is a great gift, maybe the greatest gift for any person considering or practicing ministry. We need to know our driving passions, our sins, pain, motivations, doubts, neurotic edges and temptations. We also need to have an accurate knowledge of our strengths, gifts, aptitudes, interests, temperament, family of origin and natural inclinations. All these things, and many others, make up who we are and what

we bring to ministry. To understand ourselves releases us to be the person and leader that God has created us to be. Parker Palmer echoes Oden when he acknowledges that the most important calling we have is to live into our true selfhood. He writes, "Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we *ought* to be."[3] As does Plato, Palmer emphasizes the pursuit of self-understanding as one's primary calling because it can liberate us from conformity to an image that is not true to who we really are – or at least long to be – and into an authenticity that allows us to function in a way that is less encumbered by the expectations of society or others.

This all feeds into how we function in foundational areas of ministry. Who we are in our essential being affects how we lead, what strengths and weaknesses we bring to a ministry situation, our security or insecurity as a leader, how we handle criticism, how we work with a team, how we build a team and many other things. No matter how we are trained to serve in our particular ministry, our vocation will be influenced in practice by how we have been formed in our inner being.

Similarly, our work with people in the area of pastoral care and counseling will be shaped by our internal realities. Things like our capacity to care, our own triggers that can be set off by other people's issues, our ability to set good boundaries and our ability to address certain issues in an unbiased way can all be affected by what is true about us deep inside ourselves. For those whose ministry includes preaching and/or teaching, our inner formation will affect our style of teaching and our sense of self-confidence and security. Especially in the face of criticism, our hobby horses and axes that we are tempted to grind from the pulpit can come out of our inner state of being. Our spirituality and how we relate to God and thus how we talk about God in our work with others can be influenced by the realities of our psyche and background. Our personal growth and development is affected by our self-knowledge or lack thereof in that it is in knowing ourselves that we gain a clear sense of where we need to focus in terms of our ongoing progress in our personal and professional lives. All of these things, as well as others, are affected by an honest sense of self-knowledge.

In many ways it seems quite clear that this is true. Most people, let alone ministry candidates or practitioners, would not dispute this. Yet, there are ways in which we resist the pursuit of honest self-assessment that leads to a greater sense of knowing ourselves. What keeps us from wanting to know ourselves? Are there barriers that hold us back from engaging in this fundamental journey?

At least four things work against our pursuing an honest sense of self-knowing. The first is fear. Our fear of facing issues that have affected us deeply but are painful for us to confront can certainly dissuade us from engaging in deep self-reflection. We may fear facing our perceived failures or shortcomings. Sometimes we are aware of ways we think that we have failed, or perhaps others have told us that we have failed, and reflecting on these failures is difficult. Sometimes we are just afraid to be alone with our

thoughts. For the reasons already stated (and a myriad of others), we do not like to spend too much time engaging in introspection. These ideas just scratch the surface of why fear holds us back from exploring our inner landscape, but it is not the only reason we hesitate to go there.

Second, perfectionism can affect our pursuit of self-knowledge. This is connected to fear as it speaks to the apprehension some may feel toward being brutally honest with themselves in a way that ultimately reveals that we are all flawed people who are in the process of evolving toward becoming even more like the person we were created to be. While there are positive attributes linked to perfectionism, it can thwart self-reflection because it can lead us into harsh self-criticism that can be very painful and can foster anxiety and burnout. When expressed in an unhealthy way, perfectionism can inhibit the self-reflection that leads to an honest self-assessment. It can also be rooted in a kind of pride that resists correction or admitting weakness. When this is true, we naturally resist exploring the inner recesses of our lives that lead to a deeper knowledge of self.

Third, we often are not encouraged toward self-reflection by our culture or by those around us. For some people, pursuing self-understanding is not a priority or even something that they think too much about. There is a tacit understanding that "I am who I am." I know myself, I understand how to relate well to others, and that's the end of it. I don't really need to plumb down too deeply; I am already quite self-aware. This kind of attitude can be abetted by the church culture we come from. Some traditions emphasize a triumphalist theology that encourages an embrace of victory over our past rather than a dwelling on it. Other traditions prioritize activism and say little about the value of contemplating oneself. Some people come from traditions that value performance and always offering a positive view of things. Further, people who think this way don't understand why anyone would want to spend time on this kind of introspection. They are doubtful that it will yield good things and thus believe there is little to no point in thinking about it too much. This view can be conditioned by a legitimate suspicion toward a culture where focus on the "self" has at times been overemphasized. If we have a natural inclination away from self-examination and we don't have people around us encouraging us to do some inner work, then there is a good chance that our inner landscape will remain largely unexplored and our depth of self-understanding will grow very slowly, if at all. Field supervisors need to find appropriate ways to address this attitude when they see it in the lives of their students. By employing some of the strategies offered below, supervisors can begin to address possible resistance within their students toward deep, honest self-reflection.

Fourth, for most of us time and energy are always at a premium. It is easy for us to get caught up in the day-to-day demands that we face and that leave us little time for quiet thought or prolonged reflection. The tyranny of the urgent will never leave room for this kind of activity. Even if we believe in the importance of growing in our self-understanding, it can take effort to carve out time for thinking, reflecting and solitude,

which are essential disciplines for developing a grasp on who we are as people engaged in serving others through the work of ministry.

While there are clearly things that can inhibit the pursuit of self-knowledge, it is imperative that we address them as needed and move forward in the life-long journey of deepening our knowledge of our self, particularly as we seek to serve others through the practice of ministry. The work of ministry supervision can play a crucial role in encouraging this kind of inner work. There are a number of ways that we can engage in the pursuit of self-knowledge and guide others along their own journey of self-discovery.

KEY PRACTICES IN DEVELOPING SELF-KNOWLEDGE

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And at the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.[4]

This verse from T. S. Eliot speaks to the idea of how a journey of exploration inevitably brings about change. Whether it is a physical journey or a journey largely fueled by our inner lives, any experience of exploration will bring us into new vistas of knowledge, including self-knowledge. As Eliot's verse points out, at the end of the journey we may be situated in the same place that we started, but we are different, and because of that we engage that place in new and different ways that have been informed by what we have gained from our explorations. The journey of exploration has changed us, hopefully (and usually) for the better.

For the ministering person, and those who are supervising people in ministry, there are some practices that we can engage in, and encourage others to engage in, that aid our exploration of the self and lead to greater awareness of who we are, how we exist in this world and what we have to contribute to it.

Intentional Self-Reflection

Self-reflection is the art of pausing to think about who we are and why we are the way we are. This is the most important practice to engage in on the journey of self-understanding as it intentionally brings us to a place of deep introspection that leads to new insights of self-discovery. The key is to make the discipline of self-reflection an *intentional* part of our lives. This means deliberately setting time apart to reflect on various experiences and activities in our life that cause us to pause and ask important questions about what happened, how we responded, how we felt, what our thought patterns were, why we did what we did and what the results were. At the core, it is engaging in the action-reflection model of learning, where we reflect intentionally on our experiences in life and, as relevant, our experiences in ministry.

For those supervising students or people in ministry, it is important to create spaces for supervisees to reflect on their experiences. At McMaster Divinity College, where I teach, we have utilized several different approaches to draw students into intentional self-reflection. In some cases, students engage in small reflection groups where we offer self-reflective, written assignments that invite them to consider their actions, thoughts, feelings and the results and then receive input from colleagues that inspires further reflection. At times, students engage with an external mentor, an experienced practitioner from outside of the seminary who meets regularly with the students for in-depth reflection on issues of formation and experiences. Also, students are connected to an on-site supervisor while engaged in their practicum. The overarching goal of this relationship is also reflection on experience and its formational influence on the development of the student as a ministering person. These are intentional relationships that are designed to help cultivate self-understanding in students' lives.

The Voices of Other People

All of these relationships work from the premise that we need the voices of other people speaking into our lives if we are going to be formed well and grow in our own sense of self-understanding. This is true because we cannot see our own blind spots without the "other." In Western culture, we have come to believe in the idea of the strong, independent individual as the epitome of maturity. The ability to handle things ourselves or get by on our own is often seen as a sign of strength. While there is certainly some truth in this perspective and individuality is not a bad thing in and of itself, author Domenic Ruso reminds us that one's true self is only revealed to us through relationships with others that we trust. He draws from the wisdom that we need trusted people in our lives to help us reflect more deeply on our experiences and reflect back to us what they are seeing and hearing based on their observations and insights.[5] This is certainly a role that a supervisor plays in the lives of students and mentees. Others, such as peers, teachers and friends, can also play this significant role in our lives. Embracing the perspective that we need the voices of the other and then intentionally finding ways to engage with those voices is essential for individual self-development as well as for any kind of field education program that is forming people for ministry in whatever shape that may take in their lives.

Engaging with the Arts

Another way of encouraging self-understanding is by engaging with the arts. Good movies, music, literature, visual arts and other forms of artistic expression can all help us gain insight into our own lives.[6] Those supervising ministry candidates should encourage interaction with the arts in the lives of those they are mentoring. We can learn things about ourselves from the experience of a character in a novel, a relationship depicted in a movie, a poignant song lyric that illuminates an idea for us in a way we have never

quite thought of before or a painting that causes us to pause and drink in its meaning; all of these are potential vehicles for insight into ourselves and, thus, we should pursue interaction with them. In supervisory relationships, reading a novel together, watching a movie, going to a play or engaging in any other form of mutual artistic engagement can yield opportunities for self-reflection that can generate new insights into ourselves, others and the work of ministry.

Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction is another form of self-discovery that can be very useful in ministry formation. Spiritual direction is not counseling or therapy, although there is certainly some overlap in terms of the core skills that a therapist and spiritual director may share.[7] The goals of spiritual direction are not primarily self-discovery. However, spiritual direction invites unto a contemplative and, often, introspective space that inevitably leads to a deeper sense of who we are and where God is at work in our lives, both past and present. A spiritual director listens, asks good questions and offers guidance in the exploration of our inner lives. While the benefits are potentially numerous, spiritual direction offers a context that creates the opportunity for growth in self-knowledge. Sometimes a ministry supervisor can play this role in a supervisee's life, if they are comfortable in the role and qualified to do so. Other times we can offer a gift to our supervisee by suggesting and encouraging them in this direction. Here, the voice of a trusted supervisor can point someone in the right direction toward a greater sense of self-understanding.

Counseling or Therapy

Personal counseling or therapy can be another important avenue for growth in self-understanding. This is still stigmatized in some circles, especially as it pertains to people in or preparing for ministry, and sometimes we ourselves may be resistant to it. Yet very often many of us come to a place in our lives where the help of a professional can be exactly what we need to unlock areas of our inner selves that need to be explored but require the guidance of someone who is skilled in providing such guidance. The voice of a wise supervisor can be enough to help someone see past their initial apprehensions and embrace the potential of seeing a trusted professional to do some needed inner work that brings healing and fresh perspectives to who we are and what we have to offer. If needed, and where possible, the provision of financial resources to aid the supervisee to access appropriate services can be an additional gift.

HELPING STUDENTS IN A FIELD EDUCATION PROGRAM DEVELOP THEIR SELF-UNDERSTANDING

As I have already established, if we are going to serve others in a way that is healthy for ourselves as well as for others, our self-understanding in ministry is utterly crucial.

Further, there are a number of key practices that we can intentionally engage in that will contribute to our development in knowing ourselves better. With these concepts as the foundation, it is essential that theological field education programs provide ways to help students intentionally engage in activities that directly help them consider issues of self-understanding.

I have already shared a few of the ways that the Ministry Formation program at McMaster Divinity College tries to help students cultivate a degree of self-understanding.[8] The goal of the program is not only to help them capture their current sense of self-development but also to equip them with an orientation to lifelong learning in this area as well as provide them with tools that will help facilitate this kind of ongoing growth. We work at helping students in this area in four primary ways. In no way is this meant to be prescriptive to other programs or to say this approach has all the bases covered. I offer the following as a way to think about assisting students in this area of ministry formation and as a potential resource.

Intentional Engagement with Other Voices

As has already been mentioned, the need for engagement with other people and their input is critical in delf-development. Some of the ways we have done this in our Ministry Formation program at McMaster is by utilizing small reflection groups where students meet weekly with a small group of other students as well as a faculty member and a practitioner from outside the school. Each week, one student is assigned to bring a case study, based on their own personal experience, for the group to reflect on. Part of the assignment asks for students to reflect on aspects of the experience that connect to their sense of self (e.g. why they responded in a certain way, how something made them feel and why). This is a standard practice in field education programs, and it is a good way to intentionally engage students in self-reflection (and of course it is something that can also be done outside of an academic context in an ongoing formation program, either formally or informally).

Another way we have accomplished this is through one-on-one mentorship. Students are assigned a mentor, not their on-site supervisor, whom they meet with several times over the academic year to discuss personal case studies, case studies generated by the school, and other ministry and personal issues that the mentor and student agree to discuss in their meetings.[9] Added to this are regular meetings with their on-site supervisor. While the meetings between the student and their supervisor are relatively informal and structured according to the needs of the student and their experience in their placement, it is expected that a certain amount of theological and personal reflection will take place between the student and their supervisor over the course of the placement. Again, this functions as an intentional way for students to explore their inner landscape (as well as other things).

Personal Spiritual Autobiography

All of our Ministry Formation students are required to write a spiritual autobiography during their first year. This assignment gives students the opportunity to reflect on their own story and personal formation thus far in their lives. Writing a spiritual autobiography invites the weaving together of various elements in our lives, the beauty and the brutality.[10] It invites them to identify the way that God has worked in their lives and reflect on the implications of this in their own theological and spiritual formation. The assignment asks them to identify people, churches or other groups that have had an important impact on them, positively and perhaps negatively. The goal of the assignment is to help students develop a greater sense of who they are as a ministering person and what they bring to the ministry context. This assignment is presented to either their small reflection group or their external mentor (as described above). It is an intentional attempt to help students probe their lives in a way that leads to deeper self-understanding.

Spiritual Gifts Exploration

Another assignment intended to help in this area, which takes place later in the students' academic journey, is a spiritual giftedness reflection that they are asked to write and present to either a small group or their external mentor. This assignment gives students an opportunity to reflect on how God has gifted them for the practice of ministry. It invites them to identify the spiritual gifts they see operative in their life and ministry and how their spiritual giftedness is maturing as they gain more experience in the practice of ministry. They are invited to reflect on their ministry experience as well as the input of others in order to arrive at an honest and accurate self-assessment of who they are and how they sense God has gifted them at this point in their lives.

Summative Reflection

Near the conclusion of their time at McMaster, students are required to attend a half-day retreat where one of the main aspects of the retreat is gatherings in small groups to offer an oral presentation to one another that is a summative reflection on their journey through their seminary years. The purpose of the summative reflection is to provide students with an opportunity to look back and reflect in a comprehensive and integrative manner on their seminary journey – where they were when they began and where they are now. The guidelines for this presentation are deliberately broad in order to give students as much latitude as possible in reflecting personally and theologically on their journey. The guiding questions students are invited to reflect on include promptings, such as, In what ways has my thinking and theology been most stretched, changed, transformed since I first began seminary? What experiences have had the most profound influence on my understanding of myself and the practice of ministry? What have some of my key relationships been during these years, and how have they impacted or influenced me? Looking back on all of the learning experiences, events and people I have

encountered in my seminary years, how have I changed or evolved during my time in seminary? This reflection exercise is intentionally designed to invite deep personal introspection, with one of the goals being a summative assessment of transformation that has and is taking place in the student's life. This, of course, is part of the ongoing journey of cultivating self-knowledge.

CONCLUSION

People preparing for ministry or already in ministry, whose work it is to minister to others as they sojourn through the realities of life, must have a good grasp of who they are as ministering people. This is the one sure thing that we bring to any ministry context: we bring who we are. The better we understand who we are, the more effective we can be in these contexts. Beyond the issues of our effectiveness is the reality that self-knowledge can free us up to be the person God has made us to be. Liberty comes with a clear sense of self-knowledge that allows us to truly be ourselves and make a contribution to the world in a way that reflects God's good intentions for us.

There is a tale of a highly revered Hasidic rabbi named Zusya who grew despondent as he was nearing death. His students, trying to encourage him, told him, "Rabbi, you are almost like Moses to us. You have been almost like Abraham to us. Surely heaven will judge you favorably." He said to them, "When I get to heaven I will not be asked, 'Zusya why were you not more like Moses? Why were you not more like Abraham?' I will be asked, 'Zusya, why were you not more like Zusya?'"[11]

To live life as our true selves requires that we travel on the pathway of ongoing self-discovery. As we do the work of field education and supervising people in their personal formation, we provide them with a great gift as we intentionally create ways for them to delve into the work of getting to know themselves better so that they can be themselves in every ministry situation as opposed to who they think they should be or who others think they should be. As their self-knowledge grows, so does the potential for fruitful, fulfilling ministry as well as the possibility that they will become liberated or even transformed.

NOTES

[1] Thomas C. Oden, *Classical Pastoral Care: Becoming A Minister* (Baker, 1987), 11.

[2] Jens Zimmermann, *Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

[3] Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (Josey-Bass, 20000), 16, emphasis in original.

[4] T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding* (Faber and Faber, 1942), n.p.

[5] Domenic Ruso, *The Bible for a Shifting Secular Age: Hearing the Truth You Need for the Life You Are Meant to Live* (Cascade, 2025), 132.

[6] Zimmermann, *Hermeneutics*, 6. Zimmermann states that in the ancient world and well into the seventeenth century, the arts were considered an important source of knowledge. This notion has diminished in recent times.

[7] Sue Pickering, *Spiritual Direction: A Practical Introduction* (Canterbury, 2008), 14–17.

[8] Much of the approach we employ at McMaster Divinity College is based on the experiential learning cycle as found in David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Prentice Hall, 1984).

[9] At McMaster Divinity College, students do not participate in a group and a mentorship experience at the same time. Over the years, we have used both of these approaches, but never at the same time.

[10] Casey Tygrett, *As I Recall: Discovering the Place of Memories in Our Spiritual Life* (Intervarsity, 2019), 81. Tygrett offers a simple but helpful approach to writing a spiritual autobiography in pages 81–82 of this book.

[11] Sylvia Rothschild, "23rd Elul—The Question We Will Be Asked in Heaven—Why Were You Not You?" *rabbisylviarothschild* (blog), September 23, 2019, https://rabbisylviarothschild.com/tag/why-were-you-not-zusya/.