

From Accidental Academic to Living and Leading Lifelong Learning

LISA KIMBALL

I had used up nineteen of my thirty pre-paid minutes at an internet café in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala when I read an unexpected email from the academic dean of Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS). Several people had suggested my name for a faculty position as Director of the Center for the Ministry of Teaching and Professor of Christian Formation. I probably wasted two more precious minutes staring at the text before I quickly crafted a polite, “thank you, I am traveling in Central America and will be back in touch when I return home to Minneapolis.” In that moment, I was grateful for the excuse of my travels to postpone what would inevitably become an awkward “thank you, but no thank you” conversation. Or so I thought.

While senior leaders in lifelong learning at ATS accredited schools are credentialed in a variety of academic disciplines with diverse work experiences, in 2008, sitting on an uncomfortable chair in a Guatemalan café, I had a litany of reasons why my particular life story and academic training would not be a good fit for a denominational seminary faculty. Aside from the fact that I was happily ensconced in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota, I had no formal theological

education. My interdisciplinary Ph.D. is in community education and informal learning. I only sought a PhD, after years spent working in and for the church, after I was fired from a position I loved by a bishop because I and others told him truths he did not want to hear. I thought, back then, that by pursuing this degree—focusing on critical theory, informal learning, and community youth development—I could get away from professional “church” work and its often insular, even toxic, culture that has become structurally and imaginatively dispirited by creeping secularism. But God had other ideas.

When I reflect on the path of my vocation to seek and share lifelong learning on the landscape of theological education, I see, hear, and feel stories and sages that knit together the narrative of my adult life. At times these vignettes appear to my imagination as dominoes that fall onto one another in sequential order of a life unfolding. At other times the voices I hear, the faces I see, and the choices I made do not fall neatly into a linear timeline of growth but rather circle back and forth in rhythms and seasons of intensification, proving T.S. Eliot’s wisdom,

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(T. S. Eliot, “Little Giddings,” lines 181–84)

Therefore, in this chapter, I use autoethnography, a genre of academic writing, to provide a structure to interrogate dimensions of my personal experience in the context of a rapidly changing North American theological education landscape for the purpose of revealing characteristics of sustainability in lifelong learning for ministry. For lifelong learning initiatives to flourish in the dynamism of increased uncertainty and ubiquitous change, more is needed on the part of individual leaders and their institutions than the corporate values of “agility” and “strategic innovation.” It requires personal, institutional, and religious reflexivity, and enough humility to acknowledge limitations. The chapter ends with signs of hope for future sustainability in lifelong learning for ministry. I believe that with God’s help, and our hard work, these sustainable possibilities are an imminent reality. It is my deep longing that readers of this volume may experience resonance that invites and challenges you and your institutions to flourish in today’s complex ecotone.

Autoethnography

Just as lifelong learning is an ecotone, a transitional space with its own distinct ecology, autoethnography holds a distinct space in the landscape of social science research. Through retrospection and systematic analysis it “challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). More specifically and appropriately for this investigation, autoethnography demonstrates the significance of personal experience in the creation and workings of culture and social structures. It foregrounds embodied personal experience as a credible data source and context for research. It offers a method for grappling with the subjective, everyday, and emergent aspects of lived experience and bridges the personal and the political, showing how being and becoming with others (people, other species, the planet) helps us co-create a better world (Jones and Adams 2023, 425; see also Adams et al. 2015).

My decision to engage this methodology is derived from two lines of reasoning. First, the work of lifelong learning for ministry is grounded in the spiritual and theological work of ministry. My road from the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota to retiring as the Vice President for Lifelong Learning at Virginia Theological Seminary has had no end of twists and turns. By offering glimpses of my spiritual encounters along this road, I hope readers will experience something of the I-Thou encounter in their own spiritual and vocational journeys (Buber 1996). In the words of Wendy Anne Bilgen, “The qualities of the I- and Thou encounter are mirrored in autoethnography as the autoethnographer (*I*) and the reader/participant (*Thou*) share a numinous, sacred, spiritual exchange rooted in story and reflection upon it. Processes inherent to autoethnographic work enable the conditions wherein the sacredness of I-Thou encounters are nourished” (2022, 1). Second, the work of lifelong learning for ministry is systemic and contextual, grounded in the realities of the people we serve.

My story is distinct, but not entirely unique, and when examined closely reveals themes, decision points, practices, risks, and failures that other leaders and institutions will recognize. “Autoethnographers see the world-in-relation, connecting a researcher’s interest or stake in a particular experience to other people, communities, institutions, economies, and contexts” (Jones and Adams 2023, 426). I would not be who I am today—as a teacher, scholar, administrator, or Christian—in

isolation. People I have encountered along the way as colleagues, mentors, collaborators, and even competitors have inspired me to dig deeper and imagine farther.

At our best, leaders in lifelong learning know that we are interconnected and interdependent. Our bodies know that wonder and human flourishing are deeply intertwined (Schinkel et al. 2023). To watch a person learn in any stage of life, especially at times when they thought they were “done with” or too old for new learning, growing or changing as they age, is to watch a person give birth to a deeper, more aware and more true version of themselves. Often these new versions of former lives are more generous, more patient, more humble, and more curious versions than anything that came before. Leaders in lifelong learning have seen these transformations, and this witness of new lives born bonds us as practitioners in awe and reverence for the beauty of human flourishing in all stages of life.

From There to Here

Looking back at the arc of my formal education and professional life, it makes sense that I feel at home in these two in-between worlds of lifelong learning and autoethnography. I have never had a job that has been done or modeled by someone else before me; each job description was aspirational, innovative, and shaped largely around my gifts. I have consistently been drawn to work that is patched together out of pressing need. I can also now see that—although I have made objectively foolish financial decisions in doing so—I was accepting these patchwork positions because I trusted I was following the call of something beyond conventional—or even exclusively human—wisdom.

When I reflect on the lifelong learning and continuing education programs I know best—that are meeting the needs of ministry leaders today—I see creative, responsive, resilient, research-informed structures and approaches that remind me of my undergraduate transcript: a meandering but intentional journey across disciplines, especially when compared to my classmates who chose a predetermined pathway toward specialization and expertise. To be clear, I am not suggesting that leaders in lifelong learning lack intellectual depth or expertise. Rather, I recognize a community of rigorous interdisciplinary thinkers whose expertise is grounded in praxis,

which in turn informs their theory and theology. As such, many of us identify as practical theologians who embrace the classic praxis-theory-praxis rhythm of being and knowing, with roots that can be traced to Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* (knowledge as a form of practical reasoning or perception.)

I vividly remember one of the turning points that led me down this path. In graduate school, fifteen of us were being guided through an experience of phenomenological interpretation by the Canadian scholar Max van Manen. I can see the clock on the wall of that windowless basement room, and I can still hear my gasp when I realized that it was 10:00pm. Class had begun at 6:30pm and should have ended at 9:30pm, but all of us were in flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2008), fully immersed in the experience, and had completely lost track of time. Being pressed to find words to describe what is essential about a ubiquitous material object such as a chair or the human lived experience of grief was simultaneously an existential crisis and vocational awakening for many of us. Postmodernism had already shaken our attachments to certainty, but now we were being invited to reflect systematically on our conscious experiences in order to uncover the rich, contextual meanings and deeply ingrained structures that lie behind the daily lived experiences that many of us take for granted.

From that semester on, promises made at my baptism took on new proportions. I began to interrogate deeply what it means to “love my neighbor as myself” and “respect the dignity of every human being” (The Episcopal Church 1979, 305) as a white, Western, cis-gendered, upper middle class, well-educated, non-disabled person. Analogously, economic forces of globalization were radically disrupting hegemonic assumptions about work and learning. In the late twentieth century, programs of “continuing education” for ministry usually occurred in pre-determined, gathered, and highly structured environments, but by the early twenty-first century, it was becoming clear that those expectations did not serve the needs and realities of most ministry leaders. The knowledge economy continues to become monetized and stratified. On-demand digital content proliferates on a massive and incomprehensible scale. Pedagogy in general is increasingly—and rightly—being held to higher standards that account for the realities of cultural and neurological diversity. In such an environment, it is no wonder that defining even the “essentials” of learning for ministry leaders has become an ongoing and contested debate.

Here and Now

In 2009 after I had, in fact, accepted the faculty and administrative position at VTS, I inherited a continuing education program which had been well known as a certificate-granting evening school for commuters, with excellent classes taught by both seminary and adjunct faculty. By the time I arrived, it was collapsing. Our first, urgent priority was to examine what the church actually needed, while taking into account the seminary's core mission, available resources, and an operative dialectic between global and local learning. Questions of access, language, and pedagogy were pressing, and we were not alone. Diminishing distinctions between home-life and work-life, formal and informal learning were occupying scholars and practitioners around the world (Cooper and Walters 2009). The democratization of learning—with its shift from teacher-centered, content-focused pedagogies to learner-centered, dialogical, and collaborative approaches—was both invigorating and destabilizing. Dedicated longtime employees across theological continuing education programs were scrambling not only to integrate these fundamental shifts to their baseline assumptions but also to keep up with the flood of digital tools (and the skills needed to use them)—and all of this with increasing pressure to generate revenue.

One of the best decisions I made early in my tenure at VTS was to hire Kyle, a young MDiv graduate, former engineer, and writing coach, as the Digital Missioner. I made up his job title to reassure an anxious bishop that the position was worthy of ordination! In retrospect, we invented what has become a critical role in twenty-first century religious practice: a theologically trained chief technology officer. With extraordinary grace and patience, Kyle guided the transformation of an analog operation into a hub for collaborative digital formation.

As foot traffic into our physical Christian education resource center completely dried up, the Center for the Ministry of Teaching became known for eFormation, research, and teaching on faith formation in a connected, digital world. Our websites evolved from static information storage into subscription-based blog sites. A beloved print magazine became a digital newsletter, reaching more people for less money but in different ways. We invested in new audio-visual equipment to create compelling digital content. We hired student workers with skills none of us had ever imagined. We pushed the limits of existing

seminary policies and procedures, not out of willful disrespect but out of necessity. If our work were to be timely and responsive, we had to move more quickly than a legacy institution prefers.

I recognized that my leadership role was rapidly changing. I was still “the boss” and most often the only PhD in the room, but no one assumed I was the most knowledgeable member of the team. As colleagues at other seminaries described similar tectonic shifts in their roles, I remembered hearing the phrase, “in command, out of control,” that had been popularized in 2002 by U.S. Marine General Paul Van Riper. That was what I was experiencing at VTS and what I heard my colleagues describing at their own institutions. Futurist and founder of *Wired* magazine Kevin Kelly (1994) applied the concept to understand how complex, self-sustaining systems, like biological organisms and computer networks, function through decentralized, emergent processes rather than central control. Kevin Gaskell’s chapter, “In Command, Out of Control” in *Inspired Leadership* (2017, 157–72), and Margaret Wheatley’s extensive writing on leadership systems substantially anchored my lived experience in leadership science. I began to feel strangely relieved and more comfortable in my skin, so much so that in 2016, without institutional permission, I began describing the work of our growing constellation of ministry areas, as the Department of Lifelong Learning. My choice of nomenclature was based on the concept of lifelong learning I had been following closely since the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report, *Learning to Be*, also referred to as the Faure Report (Faure et al. 1972). One commentator even called the concept a Copernican revolution (Hummel 1977), but the United States, and certainly the church, had been slow to adopt the framework.

Across theological education, people like me who had always functioned at the messy margins, as interlocutors between traditional higher education and practitioners on the ground, are now needed as curators and convenors, catalysts for action research and innovation. The competencies that many of us in lifelong learning developed naturally over decades have come to be described as new leadership literacies. According to Johansen (2017), effective leaders anticipate change through reflection, practice adaptive and low-risk experimentation, inspire without direct control, project influence virtually, and sustain contagious energy that empowers their organizations. When theological education, and North American Christianity more broadly, were in a spiral of decline, leaders in lifelong learning were rewarded for taking risks and performing at the edge of our

expertise. There were always more questions than answers—questions that are still relevant today—about audiences, demographics, access, and sustainability. How can we honor religious tradition and centuries-old practices of discipleship in a digitally-augmented landscape scarred by injustice and competition?

The pressure on leaders in lifelong learning to generate revenue and become self-sustaining continues to grow. This pressure led many of us to diversify our income streams to include cultivating a donor base, fee-for-service programming, subscription plans, and grant funding, adding financial acumen to our professional competencies. While generating revenue from multiple sources expands opportunities, it also brings political complexity. For example, VTS alumni are a core audience for our programming, and yet I cannot approach them directly for gifts because—understandably—the solicitation of alumni gifts is the responsibility of the development office. Another example: I am regularly praised by our senior administration for my grant-writing skills and told that our denominational seminary benefits enormously from the research and churchwide engagement my grants support. At the same time, I hear complaints about the strain large grants place on finite human resources in a small institution. Hiring new staff for a grant-funded project is exciting but requires tremendous care if the goal is for them to feel connected to the core mission and people of the institution. What are the ethical implications of hiring the equivalent of seasonal workers in structures still designed for permanent, full-time employees? It is easy for grant work to be siloed, disconnected from the life of the institutional community, and appear threatening to the existing faculty and staff. Even for faculty members who are excited about grant-funded lifelong learning initiatives, becoming involved in grant work outside of a standard course load can complicate annual contract negotiations. There are competing goods at play.

From Here to There

What then do success and sustainability look like? The instructions for my semi-annual departmental board report emphasize metrics over story, brevity over depth. In an over-saturated attention economy—a vast, predatory economic system that has evolved to extract and commodify human attention (Hayes 2025)—lifelong learning for ministry

must establish its distinctiveness in order to flourish. We have what we need to move forward with confidence.

Today, lifelong learning is an established developmental and practical framework—and a growing global field of study from which lifelong learning in ministry benefits and to which it contributes. For example, Theos (the leading religion and society think tank in the United Kingdom) mapped the opportunities and challenges of informal learning about religion and worldviews in the UK. Their October 2025 study, *Beyond the Classroom: Informal Religious Education in the UK*, found that when religious education is intentional, active, lifelong, and evolving, religious and belief literacy increases, social divisions decrease, and communities grow more compassionate and cohesive (Rich 2025). In North America we, in theological education, must make our voices heard. Our shared knowledge and proven practices incarnate hope well beyond accredited institutions and local congregations. We must make the case that our audience includes the public square.

Lifelong learning for ministry is the ongoing practice of culturally contextual theological reflection in community. It is an intentional commitment to accompany people across the life course (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003) to foster learning in body, mind, and spirit that aligns their gifts with God's mission. Over the last twenty years, my vocational posture of generalist was transformed into a confident, interdisciplinary scholar-practitioner because I became immersed in a field that promotes holistic learning for individuals, communities, and systems.

Executive-level leaders in lifelong learning need to be guides, not content creators. We need a different response to chaos than control. Our priorities must build trust, capacity, and creativity across teams. Our foundational practice is listening. As Margaret Wheatley writes in *Finding Our Way*, "Listening moves us closer. It helps us become more whole, more healthy, more holy. Not listening creates fragmentation, is the root of all suffering" (2010, 277). At our best, we lead with curiosity and wonder. "You can't hate someone whose story you know" (Wheatley 2012, 96).

Lifelong learning teams are uniquely positioned to invite host institutions and organizations to engage spiritual practices that foster mutual sustainability. Sadly, many seminaries and faith-based organizations embrace corporate management practices that can emphasize efficient decision-making over discernment and business plans that rarely embrace the radical, counter-cultural dimensions of the Gospel. As such, doing always supersedes being, and the Divine

commandment to keep the sabbath is ignored. God has given us an unfolding, living, breathing system around us at every moment. In listening closely to creation and to the condition of peoples' lives, lifelong learning teams depend on creativity and imagination to offer "programs" to grow faith and form leaders. At our best, we let God be God, and foster practices that allow us as leaders, and our host institutions, to encounter uncertainty and not be gripped in paralyzing fear. By modeling leadership that values diversity, expresses joy and sorrow, and recognizes human finitude, we demonstrate the strength of interdependence and joyful resilience.

Ultimately, sustainability is not a science; it is an art that improves with practice. When COVID-19 abruptly closed churches just weeks before Easter, no one alive had experienced Easter under shutdown. Clergy understandably panicked. I knew my department had to respond. I invited our senior professor of liturgy to join me for a webinar, "Triduum Under Quarantine: Planning Holy Week and Easter Services That Honor Social Distancing." He was reluctant at first, both about the efficacy of an online conversation and recognizing the limits of his own experience. I assured my colleague that my team in Lifelong Learning knew how to present information and facilitate meaningful engagement online. I agreed that there were no easy answers, and argued for the pastoral responsibility to try. Registrations exceeded 1000 in just three days. We had to upgrade our Zoom license. The session was so well received that we offered a second program the next week on how to incorporate music in online worship. Five years later our newsletter subscriptions have doubled, and the VTS development office continues to receive gifts in gratitude for the guidance the Department of Lifelong Learning offered during Covid.

Conclusion

For lifelong learning in ministry to flourish—not only conceptually as a field, but also concretely as specific systems of organizational practice within and adjacent to established institutions—we must resist the temptation to contain the Spirit and over-define its boundaries. Lifelong learning in one seminary or judicatory or global network will not look exactly like any other, and yet we thrive together in the ecotone, some closer to the shore of formal theological education and others reaching islands and spaces of informal learning.

Leaders in lifelong learning for ministry must continue to establish an academic home in practical theology. This is where many of us already congregate in the academy, but even here we can be reflexively apologetic and marginalize ourselves, perhaps because much of our work takes place in informal and non-formal spaces. I have described myself as an accidental academic for too long. Let us together be bold and recognize that the hermeneutics of practical theological interpretation are at the core of our being. Practical theology welcomes interdisciplinarity and hybridization. The field needs our voices from the ecotone where sacred and secular naturally meet.

When we embrace our multidisciplinary roots and recognize the creativity and uncertainty inherent in accompanying human learning beings across the life course—always with a posture of existential and cultural humility—we will continue to participate with God in the redemption of the world. We will resist the seduction of certainty and hierarchies of power that fundamentally “other” and threaten imaginative, holistic ways of knowing and learning. Our commitments to listening and discernment, to honoring cultural contexts and human diversities, can help guide our schools and host institutions toward more faithful and responsive expressions of teaching and learning. And, yes, money follows meaning when authenticity and integrity inform our work.

At its best, lifelong learning for ministry incarnates wonder and excavates hope by immersing individuals and communities in trusted experiences of love in which all bodies, minds, and spirits can engage in life-long, life-wide, and life-deep learning.

References

- Adams, Tony E., Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis. 2015. *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford University Press.
- Bilgen, Wendy Anne. 2022. "Looking to Autoethnography as Spiritual Practice." *Religions* 13: 699. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080699>.
- Buber, Martin. 1996. *I and Thou*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Touchstone.
- Cooper, Linda, and Shirley Walters, eds. 2009. *Learning/Work: Turning Work and Lifelong Learning Inside Out*. HSRC.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi. 2008. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harpers.
- Elder, Glen H. Jr, Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Robert Crosnoe. 2003. "The Emergence and Development of Life Course Theory." In *Handbook of the Life Course*, edited by Jeylan T. Mortimer and Michael J. Shanahan. Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-306-48247-2_1.
- Eliot, T. S. 1963. *Four Quartets*. Harcourt Brace.
- Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. 2010. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12 (1). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589>.
- The Episcopal Church. 1979. *Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, together with the Psalter or Psalms of David*. Church Publishing.
- Faure, Edgar, et al. 1972. *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow*. UNESCO.
- Gaskell, Kevin, 2017. *Inspired Leadership: How You Can Achieve Extraordinary Results in Leadership*. Wiley.

- Hayes, Chris. 2025. *The Siren's Call: How Attention Became the World's Most Endangered Resource*. Penguin.
- Hummel, Charles. 1977. *Education Today for the World of Tomorrow*. UNESCO.
- Johansen, Bob. 2017. *The New Leadership Literacies: Thriving in a Future of Extreme Disruption and Distributed Everything*. Berrett-Koehler.
- Jones, Stacy Holman, and Tony E. Adams. 2023. "Autoethnography as Becoming-with." In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research, Sixth Edition*, edited by Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, Michael D. Giardina, and Gaile S. Cannella. Sage.
- Kelly, Kevin. 1994. *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World*. Basic Books.
- Rich, Hannah. 2025. *Beyond the Classroom: Informal Religious Education in the UK*. Theos.
- Schinkel, Anders, Lynne Wolbert, Jan B.W. Pedersen, and Doret J. de Ruyter. 2023. "Human Flourishing, Wonder, and Education." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 42: 143–62. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-022-09851-7>.
- Wheatley, Margaret J. 2010. *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*. Berrett-Koehler.
- Wheatley, Margaret J. 2012. *Turning to One Another*. Berrett-Koehler.

