

# Perspectives, passion, and persistence: Reflections on fundraising for theological education

By WESLEY F. BROWN

*A perspective is a starting point. When we put things into perspective, we are better able to understand ourselves as well as our contexts. Consider how one comes to be a development officer. Many of us fell in or backed in or we were pushed. In my case, I was sort of seduced.*

In July 1981, I was almost 30 years old and in my fourth year serving a United Methodist parish in rural North Carolina. I was called by the new dean of Duke University Divinity School, who inquired as to whether I would consider taking two years out of parish work to come to Duke and participate in a Lilly program for new development officers in theological education. My wife and I didn't have children yet and the opportunity was extremely attractive, as I would be back at Duke and making almost \$25,000 for each of the two years. Our Lilly group was the final two-year cohort of 12 persons, meeting for a week twice annually in Indianapolis and learning development systematically as a craft while working in our respective seminaries. My colleagues were from all over the map (literally and figuratively), and we were all new at this sort of thing, though several of us had fundraising experience as a necessary part of parish leadership.

Perspective is about relationships and understanding where we are on the proverbial map. In 1981, mainline Protestantism in the United States still enjoyed a sense



of well-being. Women were breaking into theological education in record numbers, as were African American students. United Church and Roman Catholic theological education enrollment was especially strong across Canada. The 1981 *ATS Fact Book on Theological Education* observed that enrollment in theological education degree programs was at an all-time high.

In the early 1980s, the world was very different, and so was the work of development. We used phonathons for the annual fund very effectively, with minimally trained students, faculty, and staff making calls from banks of phones in the press box overlooking the football stadium—Texans calling Texans, Baptists calling Baptists, etc. It all worked very well as we developed loyal and well-informed callers, and after callers became alumni, they looked forward to being called by phonathon students. That generation, sadly, is gone. Calling is churning, using paid undergrads do the work, and so it is not very personable.

Things are different now. And we—along with our seminaries, judicatories, and denominations—are sometimes overwhelmed by the pace and breadth of change.

A recent Nobel laureate observed, back in 1964, “The times, they are a-changin.” That was Bob Dylan, of course, and he/we had no idea then about the changes ahead. For that matter, we don’t now, either. But as professionals with shared ideals and goals, we must try. The song continues: “Oh you’d better start swimmin’ or you’ll sink like a stone.” Even if we are sometimes swimming against the tide, knowing our perspective, our context matters.

That image of water is a strong one, and as baptized Christians we should own it. Every seminary is in deep water now, as are many of our endowments as well as the churches for whom we seek to provide thoughtful, faithful leadership. For some of us, the water is a bit troubled; for others it is rushing through and weakening the foundations. Will we be washed away or can we turn the currents into new energy for another model? Is the glass half empty or half full? Our perspectives provide a sense of who and where we are within the larger realities.

## **Passion**

Whether or not you have a formal theological education, donors inevitably sense your depth of commitment and your understanding of God’s grace and generosity. Your passion is either obvious, or not. Passion is energized and renewed daily by a sense of true vocation, a calling from and for God. Fundraising for us is ministry, and ministry is about a quality of service and presence and deep caring.

If we pay attention, donors have a lot to teach us. In addition to contributions of cash, they are ready to join us in a larger cause. Donors respond to who we are as much as

to what we are trying to represent. They expect us to be spiritually mature and articulate, different in some ways from the fundraisers for other causes, yet also thoughtful and thoroughly professional.

Has a donor ever made you cry? I learned a wonderful lesson from Norman Bisanar. In the late 1920s, he had been given as a wedding gift the Coca-Cola franchise for a small town near Charlotte, North Carolina, by his new father-in-law, who owned the entire region. I met Norman in the early 1990s, introduced by a Duke Divinity alumna who was his pastor. His wife had suffered from Alzheimer’s and died, and he wanted to do something special in her memory. I encouraged him to consider a scholarship endowment and promised to visit again soon. When we visited again a few weeks later, I started to talk about scholarship gift requirements, tax-wise funding with appreciated stock, the necessity

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to complete funding within five years, and so forth. Norman lifted his hand to slow me down while he shuffled over to his desk, picked up a check and handed it to me saying “Thank

you!” with a smile on his face and tears in his eyes. The personal check was in the amount of \$250,000. He knew a well-funded endowed scholarship would be a perpetual and useful commemoration of the life and love of his wife. And I learned what a privilege it is to provide the right opportunity for someone to be generous.

Over subsequent years, he made additional major contributions. He saved and shared the notes he received from every Bisanar Scholar and followed their careers across the broad spectrum of ministry. And we shared a Coke and conversation frequently when I was in the area. Norman died in 2010 at age 103. Those memories still bring joyful tears to my eyes. He thanked me before I could thank him.

Over the years, I have discovered how many donors appreciate—in the course of our friendship and conversation—being asked: “How did you learn generosity?” “What contributions over the years have yielded the greatest personal joy?” Usually, no one has ever asked them such questions. It gives a donor the opportunity to be reflective and glad in those memories. I also continue to learn and be sensitive to the reality of timing. Most folks with substantial wealth have a variety of favorite causes and loyalties, and your seminary may not yet be at the top of the list. To be deeply enough into a relationship to say, “I know you want to be supportive, and that you also have many obligations. Let me know when you are ready to be asked” is to affirm their philanthropy and to personify patience.

Passion and compassion are closely related. Scriptures help us to remember passion and compassion in important ways through the life and ministry of Jesus who sees the crowds, who sees the individual need, who “has compassion on them” and is immediately in ministry. And “the passion” also introduces the deeply serious and transformative engagement of suffering and death. Passion serves and gives with joyful generosity.

### **Persistence**

“Persistence” indicates that one presses toward a goal despite difficulty, obstacles, and opposition. It has been observed that “A river cuts through a rock not because of its power but its persistence.” Persistence adds the importance of “time” and “patience” to our vocation. We must be persistent in good ways—identifying, cultivating, asking, asking again, following up, stewarding—yet never nagging or being inappropriate. And there is some art to it.

Does one ever achieve the rank of “master” in our vocation of fundraising? Probably not. If so, maybe you get named a seminary president with a whole new set of challenges. Most successful development professionals, though, put in thousands of hours and many years of apprenticeship and practice. We hopefully find a mentor, and later become a mentor to someone else. Persistence

makes us better. It also inevitably moves our donors and our schools along.

Of course, we all have those “almost ready” donors who enjoy the attention but seem never to want to complete the transaction. I worked with an elderly widow, a Duke alumna from the early 1930s who wanted to give a scholarship and had abundant assets, but the time was never quite right. And, yes, I had encouraged her to plan for it through her estate, but she didn’t get around to that either. Then she died. Happily, however, her daughter decided later on that she should make the scholarship happen in her mother’s memory—illustrating why you want to get to know generations. So that particular gift took more than 20 years to be realized. Persistence meant keeping the friendship current with an occasional card or call.

Be persistent. But also be smart. It is easy to get bogged down. We can try to be nice to everyone equally, but our focus finally must be on those in whom we see the greatest intersections of connection, interest, and ability with our seminaries. These top prospects are identified, cultivated, asked, thanked, stewarded, and asked again.

Finally, be persistent together. I encourage you to persist in development for theological education by cherishing the friendship and wisdom of colleagues who are smart, experienced, and glad to help you avoid some of what they/we had to learn from experience. We know things and we have much to share—something I learned at my very first ATS development officers’ meeting in 1982.

Our contexts now require our best. New technology doesn’t make us better; neither does a new leadership paradigm or the latest fundraising gimmick. Faith traditions are always being challenged or, worse, ignored. Yet, thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit, we can affirm that the community we know as the church of Jesus Christ—in all the ways it surprises and sustains us—needs wise, thoughtful, grounded, innovative, faithful leaders practicing compassionate service. Supporting their education is hard work.

What makes us better is the engagement of our vocation “with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). Our opportunity, indeed our calling, is to live into the best days, the present and future days of the church and theological education, moving forward faithfully with realistic perspectives, contagious passion, and faithful persistence—grateful for every blessing.



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