

ATS student personnel administrators embrace vocation and nurture well-being

BY SHELLY HART AND MARK BATTEN

“Even during plowing or harvesttime you should rest.” (Exodus 34:21 CEB)

“Many people were coming and going, so there was no time to eat. He said to the apostles, ‘Come by yourselves to a secluded place and rest for a while.’” (Mark 6:31 CEB)

ATS student personnel administrators joined together for a virtual workshop last month to reflect on our own stories and vocations, and to share best practices of self-care and community building. The workshop was inspired by the chapter on nurturing vocation—coauthored by the writers of this article—in the book Transforming Service: Reflections of Student Service Professionals in Theological Education.

How does our calling connect to the values we uphold in our work? What is the “deep hunger”¹ we seek to help fulfill and where is our own “deep gladness”² as we serve in these roles? Workshop participants commented that they found it important and helpful to share with colleagues around these topics, especially amid the stress and social restrictions caused by the pandemic.

Student personnel administrators in theological education serve and nurture the vocations and personal well-being of the students in ATS schools in a variety of ways, but we often undervalue the importance of reflecting on how this unique work fulfills our own sense of calling and vocation. While few administrators imagine such roles



as their calling until they find themselves doing the work for one reason or another, taking the time to nurture our sense of vocation and to intentionally incorporate practices of self-care in the midst of our demanding work is crucial to sustaining that work.

Unsurprisingly, article after article in higher education and business magazines describe the real effects of burnout and chronic stress on our ability to do work effectively, to stay in good health, and even to continue in stressful positions of leadership and service. Since March 2020, many ATS members have had to embrace drastic changes in the way we do business as we reacted at a sprinter’s pace to the pressing concerns of the early days of the pandemic. We now find ourselves in 2022 still pushing along a marathon (or maybe ironman) route that demands constant creativity, flexibility, and endurance in ways we could not have imagined just two years ago.

1 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 118–119.

2 Ibid.

Even those who were already well-equipped to function remotely in their schools in March 2020 have dealt with the consistent stresses the global situation has caused their own families as well as their colleagues and students in their seminary communities. Many have faced the current moment after already having gone through monumental changes in educational delivery or campus settings alongside seismic shifts in the landscape of our churches, denominations, and schools during the past decade.

For an hour in December, workshop participants took time to reflect on their own stories, connect their dreams and the values we uphold within our work and roles in theological education, and affirm how we are making

space for taking care of ourselves. Those gathered were asked to create an image that connected to something they dreamed of doing or being when they were younger.

In reflecting on those images in small groups, participants found that—while our roles in student personnel administration might not seem like an obvious result of childhood dreams of being firefighters or bus drivers or elite athletes among many other interesting aspirations—our work did uphold the values behind those dreams of being helpers, connectors, and parts of important teams. Sharing personal stories and reflecting on our own vocations in community was one way in which the workshop both modeled and provided time for life-giving practices, individually and communally.

Beyond sharing stories, attendees focused on ways to build moments of self-care into our work and life routines.

Parker Palmer asserts, “Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.”³

While we know self-care is important, it is often more easily embraced in theory than in reality. Self-care is

important all the time, but most especially when it seems impossible to make time for it.

The Cleveland Clinic names personal/individual practices like deep breathing, meditation, mindfulness

practices, progressive muscle relaxation, mental imagery meditation, and counseling as ways to help recognize and release stress.⁴ By pairing these with bodily practices like stretching, yoga, or walking/movement meditation as well as faith practices like breath prayer and *lectio divina*, we have a multitude of options to help us practice care of our physical, mental, and spiritual selves.

Communal practices that cultivate connection and laughter are also deeply important for us and for those with whom we share life. Workshop participants used Jamboard—a virtual whiteboard—to share meaningful practices and created a beautiful “wall of wellness” in the process.



“Wall of Wellness”

³ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 30–31.

⁴ <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/8133-stress-10-ways-to-ease-stress>

It is critically important that leaders in student personnel administration (and in other roles) in theological education not only incorporate practices of caring for ourselves but that we model these for colleagues and students, encouraging them to implement and sustain practices of self and communal care for the sake of our common well-being and for the sake of the communities our students serve now and in the future. The creativity with which we can continue to engage our students in community life, worship, and individual stress management and self-care

practices will plant seeds that will grow and positively impact communities for years to come.

Making time to take care of ourselves and to check in on our colleagues regularly will help to sustain us as we live out our own vocations through our work with students in theological education. We hope you will take time today to consider how you might continue or incorporate life-giving practices into the routine of your days and invite others around you to do the same.



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