Gratitude: A Closing Reflection

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When I conclude my work with ATS next June, I will have completed 27 years of service. How does one measure the passing of time?

My first Biennial Meeting as a staff member was in 1990, which makes this my 14th. This year, I participated in my 54th meetings of the Board of Commissioners and ATS Board of Directors. I am not sure how many flights I have taken, how many consulting conversations I have had, how many speeches I have given, nor how many days I have been on the road. I think their number is legion.

One way to measure time is the accumulation of activities that have accrued with its passing.

Early in my years at ATS, I traveled with paper airplane tickets that were delivered to the ATS office by courier from a travel agent. I would come back from trips to a stack of pink “while you were out” message slips recording calls that I needed to return and a pile of letters to answer. Accrediting committees were recruited with phone calls that invariably were placed when the person was not available and returned when I was not available. I had a 12-pound Toshiba portable computer that was too bulky to take on trips but did have an amazing 20 megabits of memory.

One way to measure time is by the changes that have occurred in the way work is done.

Our son had just finished kindergarten when we moved to Pittsburgh to begin work at ATS. He is now 32, with an MBA, and works as associate director of admissions at Boston University. Our daughter was going into the seventh grade. She is now 38, with two master’s degrees, studying for her PhD, and works as the arts integration specialist at ReNew Schools in New Orleans.

The most tender way to measure time is the maturity and accomplishment it brings to those we love.

However the passing of time is measured, much time has passed and, after all these years, I had hoped to come to this moment with some sagely wisdom to share. I have none. The most honest thing I can say is “thank you.” My gratitude extends in so many directions.

The only piece of handwriting I have from my father, who died as I finished eighth grade, is the inscription he wrote in a Bible my parents had given me. It encouraged me to read and heed 2 Timothy 2:15, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” I remember wondering what “s-h-e-w” meant, as the King James has the word, but I got “study” right away. I do not know if I am “approved unto God,” nor that I can say that I “needeth not to be ashamed” nor that I have ever...
“rightly divid(ed) the word of truth.” I do know that I have studied. I have studied the biblical text. I have studied how faith fashions human lives. I have studied the ways in which the work of ministry is learned and how institutions create homes for that learning. I have been given a lifetime of opportunity to study, and in that study, the opportunity of a lifetime. I am so grateful.

My years at ATS have provided exceptional welcomes from Unitarians, Pentecostals, Catholics, mainline Protestants and evangelicals. I have found welcome among African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. More than welcome, I have been invited to moments of tender pain and joyful celebration. I have been moved by personal commitment, missional fidelity, and institutional courage. These moments can only be described as sacred, and the only true response to the encounter of the sacred is gratitude.

You have permitted me to exercise leadership from time to time. After paying attention to issues of leadership most of my years at ATS, I have concluded that a great deal more has been written about leadership than is known about it. A person does not lead because he or she is a leader. Leaders are not always the smartest or wisest person in a group. People lead when something needs to get done that requires a community to do it, and that community accepts the leader’s efforts. You are all leaders, and I will conclude my term of service with equal parts of amazement and gratitude that you have been open to accepting my leadership.

Last fall, I was at an international meeting of theological educators in Turkey. Someone introduced me to a person from another country whom I did not know. We shook hands and greeted one another. After we had stopped shaking hands, our introducer said that I worked for ATS. Immediately, the individual took my hand and we shook hands all over again. I realized that the second handshake belonged to ATS. Member schools of this organization over many decades have contributed to the status of an organization that is associated around the world with quality theological education, quality programming, and quality accreditation. I will give back the second handshake with gratitude that I have been its steward for these years.

No one works alone in the jobs like the ones we have. It would take me far too long to name all the people who have shared this work, and I dare not recite a partial list. My colleagues on the ATS staff have been talented and hardworking. The members of the Board of Commissioners and ATS Board of Directors have been generous with their wisdom and effort, always caring for the schools and the organization. So many persons over the years have led ably as officers and committee members. No one could have sat where I have, seen what I have seen, and not be stunned by the quality of gifts and quantity of effort many people bring to the work of this organization. I am profoundly grateful for each.

My partner in this work has been my wife, Jo Ellen. She has supported my frequent absences and been tolerant of my preoccupation with the tasks of this job when I have been home. She is peer in every way—except that she is smarter that I am. (I gave us both IQ tests when in graduate school.) She has her own intellectual interests and has curated them to the benefit of many. We share one another’s burdens, one another’s brokenness, and our quiet joy. She is a person of many accomplishments, many abilities, many gifts. But the center of who she is as a person is not in any of them. Her center is a quality that Micah used to describe Yahweh—“hesed.” Jo Ellen is steadfast love and loving kindness—with family, friends, and strangers along the way. No words that can be said say enough. She is the source of my greatest joy and the recipient of my deepest gratitude. Thank you, Jo.

Last December, at the end of a good but tiring semester of work, Jo and I went to the Pittsburgh Symphony’s production of the Messiah. The music was exquisite. During the Amen chorus, tears came to my eyes. I am often moved by good music, but the tears surprised me. I wondered at first, then realized why they had come. I had just heard the retelling of the Gospel in all the beauty that it deserves. Voice and string had declared God’s love and justice, mercy, and grace. Crescendo and pianissimo had retraced the story of divine passion and
ultimate victory. This is a life-giving Gospel, and I have been given the gift of being its servant. Gratitude is the only response to such a gift of grace.

Perhaps the wisest thing that can be said is that gratitude undergirds the authentic life of faith. We are grateful because grace bestows what we cannot give ourselves. We are grateful in all things, because ours is “the cross, the grave, the skies.” We are grateful because all of life is gift. I am not grateful because it is the wise thing to do; I am grateful because it is the only thing I can do.

The classrooms at ATS schools don't look much different from the classrooms of any higher education institution. The faculty offices don't look much different, either. The presidents' offices are not as grand as the offices of college presidents, but they are usually the spiffiest ones at the seminary. What distinguishes a seminary is the chapel. It is not just a symbol of a spiritual dimension of life, as it is at many colleges and universities. It is a symbol of the center of life—where people of faith encounter the holy. I want to close this Biennial Meeting the way I closed my first speech as executive director in 1998. With the help of pictures that you sent and the song of Cynthia Clawson, a friend from our days in Louisville, I invite you to the common melody that emerges from varied scenes of worship. Theology, we tell people all the time, is faith seeking understanding. Perhaps even more, theology traces the boundary between our best understanding and God's ultimate Mystery.

   Cynthia Clawson: Sanctus/ Holy, Holy, Holy

Benediction

Go in peace, God will go with you.

Go in hope, Grace makes all things new.

Go with gratitude, we shall be redeemed.