

THOUGHTS ON PHILOSOPHY
Presentation to: "Mom, Dad...I'm a Philosophy Major"
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Let me start by saying that I do not drink coffee. My last cup of coffee was in an Advanced Studies in Philosophy course at Gustavus in 1960. It was a senior seminar which met weekly in the evening for 2-3 hours and we all drank coffee like mad in that full year seminar. When I finished all of that I had to detox on coffee and have never had a cup since!

I actually dug up my almost 50 year-old transcript from Gustavus and counted that I took 10 courses in my philosophy major and seven courses in my German major. There were reasons for my decisions about major courses of study. It had to do with the fact that when I was 8 years old I decided I would become a pastor. There was nothing mystical about this - no bolt of lightning or anything, but certainly some strong influences from my experience in the church and from my family.

If I was going to do theology, especially in the Lutheran church, I determined that I needed a foundation for understanding the nature of reality and I needed to be able to think in the culture and language of the Lutheran tradition which began with the German Martin Luther.

I am sure that you know the origin of the word philosophy - Greek language origins (which is another language I studied here at Gustavus) - *philos* which means love of something, or taking something into your heart and being, the *sophia* which means wisdom which has to do with being as wise as one can be in the living of life. Sophia also has feminine roots which is something else that we male human beings need to learn from.

My first courses in philosophy were the basics in ancient, medieval and modern philosophy. The head of the department and my first professor of philosophy was Oscar Ahlenius Winfield. He was Swedish and a character. He loved to tell stories and one was on himself - that he was born Oscar Ahlenius, but decided that if he had a daughter she might be called Miss-Ahlenius and he did not want to have her think she was someone to be discarded. Actually, a lot of Scandinavian people in those days changed their surnames. He changed his to Winfield.

I was only 18 years old when I sat down in his class in Old Main. My mind really started going when Dr. Winfield raised the old philosophical questions like – if a tree falls in the woods and there is no human being there to hear it, is there any sound? Or, can God make a rock so big that God can't lift it? Winfield pushed us a lot on what is real. Is the table at the front of the room real, or is it simply in our imagination? Do we just conceive of it as table because that's what tradition has called it. It was part of the Plato and Aristotle issue of whether you start with a description about this four-legged object that you perceive to be real and then give it a name, or do you start with a name or word that this is “table” and then describe it. It's the whole inductive versus deductive reasoning business.

I enjoyed learning about Socrates and the Socratic dialogue process, about Platonic understandings of life which some say were more inductive and about Aristotelian processes which persons will argue were more deductive in reasoning.

This is where you get into the determination of truth and that leads us, in my experience, into the issue of faith. Do we believe what the church says because the church says this is true, or so we look at life and determine for ourselves what is true or not, what is real or not, what is evil and what is good.

It was in my second year at Gustavus that a new person came to the campus to teach philosophy. You may not know the song from the 60's that was sung by the Diamonds, but this new professor was somewhat epitomized by the

chorus of this song which went:

"He wore black denim trousers and motorcycle boots
 And a black leather jacket with an eagle on the back
 He had a hopped-up 'cycle that took off like a gun
 That fool was the terror of Highway 101."

This was Erazim Kohák. He had graduated from Yale with a Ph.D. in philosophy. He did not appear to be like most of the Gustavus faculty. He did indeed have a black motorcycle and a black leather jacket. He was blond-haired and had a flat top haircut. I just do not have time to tell the whole story, but I have to say that this man was responsible for a renaissance in my life. In those days his teaching was based in existentialism. This is a philosophy that starts with human experience – how do I think about, feel about, relate to what I am experiencing in life. Existentialist philosophy was in many ways contrary to what Christian theology traditionally teaches which is that what is true and real is revealed to us by God and it is unchangeable.

Erazim Kohák has become a good friend of mine. We still stay in touch by email. He and his wife, Dorothy, visited Gustavus a couple of summers ago and Janet and I spent a wonderful day with them. These days he is immersed in things having to do with ecology and the environment and has written and lectured extensively on this, including his book "The Embers and the Stars." He has returned to the land of his birth, the Czech Republic, where he is highly respected in both political and academic circles.

But in those days at Gustavus from 1958 to 1960, I became immersed in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, Jean Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger and Paul Tillich. It was a time of transformation for me as I came to see that philosophy can inform me about how I can deal with both the horrors of life and the gifts of life. I am not totally beholden to authority, whether that authority be human, religious, political, or scientific. I learned that this does not mean that I do not take seriously those who arise in the world with direction and determination. I am deeply informed by and shaped by my faith, by my ability to reason, by the insights of others. But in the end I have to decide some things for myself and determine how I will make an impact for change in this world.

I went on to study Biblical, historical and systematic theology, but my philosophical foundation gave me a means to study the basis of Christian faith critically and in ways that are life-giving. I spent 42 years in ministry where I wrestled with issues that face us in church and society and where I as a pastor was called to find:

- a way to respond to the crisis of the family farm and hunger in our world,
- how to help people immersed in the labor union movement in the face of sometimes unjust employment practices,
- how to relate to African American people and other persons of color who have been stomped and tromped upon for centuries and who have amazing gifts to give the world,
- how to apply the truth of God's word of love and justice to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people who are still the victims of horrible systems of injustice in both church and society;
- how to be in respectful conversation with Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Baha'i and others who live out of a different religious base from mine and how I can learn from them and have their wisdom enrich my faith and life, and
- how to learn from and yet inform the disciplines of science which can either imprison us or open up amazing new possibilities.

The study of philosophy which I learned at Gustavus along with superb teaching in theology in the seminary I attended, has been a wonderful gift for me. I think that the study of philosophy can help us in this world to be able to love that which is wise and those who are wise, no matter whether they be women or men, old or young, rich and poor, of color or not, of any and every nation, religion and creed. I commend this discipline to you as a gift for your

life and for your future.

I think that the study of philosophy can inform anyone, whatever field of work or vocation they choose to enter. We need people with a base in philosophy who work in the sciences, who are involved in construction work, who work in government offices, who are involved with the arts - indeed with any aspect of life.

Let me conclude by saying that philosophy and German were not my only pursuits at Gustavus. I was a member of the debate team, I played in what was then called the Gustavus Band, I was program director of KGAC radio when it was strictly an on-campus station. Those were days when students interested in religion would go to visit patients at St. Peter State Hospital. Gustavus was and still remains an enriching experience for me and I hope it is for all of you.

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