

The convergence

By JANET FARRELL
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Sunday, I will participate in what Greek Orthodoxy calls Chrismation. When a baby is baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church, she or he is simultaneously baptized and Chrismated. For the convert, like me, it is a day to "put on Christ." I took off Christ many years ago. I was raised Catholic, went to a Catholic elementary school and was confirmed within the Roman Catholic Church some 30 years ago. I do not remember ever having a positive response to religion as it was presented to me at St. Thomas Aquinas. I went through the religious rituals because it was expected of me. When it came time to marry, I married in the Greek Orthodox Church, not because I preferred it, but because it did not matter to me. My husband was and is Greek Orthodox and we decided that his religion was more important to him. I did not convert then and I remember feeling excluded from that which was ritualized before me. That was almost 20 years ago and I am now entering the Greek Orthodox Church because I choose to.

We moved to a new community two years ago. On my husband's birthday, he announced that he wanted to go to church. We had never attended church in this town. His birthday coincided with Greek Orthodox Palm Sunday. I agreed to accompany Chris because it was his birthday and this is what he wanted to do. I never expected to receive something for myself. The congregation was kind and welcoming. We decided to stay for the lunch that followed the liturgy. People talked to us and we felt like we were accepted. I had never before experienced hospitality in any church. I read in the Church bulletin that the Agape Fellowship was sponsoring a choir from Juniata College and still needed a few more host families for the students. I attended graduate school at Penn State and had two close friends who teach at nearby Juniata College. I had even guest lectured in my friend's class at Juniata. We volunteered to house two college students for the weekend. The experience was delightful. There was a beautiful

potluck dinner the night of the concert that seemed to come together without effort. The students gathered in a circle around the church and surrounded the congregation with song. I felt like we were surrounded by angels.

The next week, I initiated our visit to church. I had begun to look forward to attending church on Sundays. I began to talk to my students about the man that I met who was a gifted rhetorician. At this point, I did not tell my students that this man was a priest and I was responding to his homilies. I was still uncomfortable with the whole idea of church yet something was happening in me. Each time I listened to Fr. Ernest Arambiges speak, I cried. Something in me was breaking.

This time, instead of resisting it as I had done in the past, I decided to accept it, trust it and follow it. I mentioned to my husband that I was interested in joining the church, but I first wanted to speak with the priest to find out if they would receive a non-Orthodox in their midst. We arrived for our meeting with Fr. Ernest one evening in April. I told him how out of character this initiation was for me and that I did not know what I was doing there. He told me to let God work in his own way.

He then told us that he was brought out of retirement as an interim priest for this church. He said, "I do not know what I am doing here either. I do not know why I am in Rye. Maybe it is to meet you." I remember thinking that this was one of the most gracious people I had ever met. When we left that meeting with Fr. Ernest, we knew that he would be leaving in July to return to Baltimore and I would begin religious instruction with him that week.

He gave me a text and we agreed on the first assignment. Fr. Ernest anticipated my question and reassured me by saying that when we came to the end of our meetings, it will be my choice whether or not to contact him. Whatever I choose to do would be fine with him. There was nothing expected of me. I felt relieved knowing that I could let go of any attachment to outcome.

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Part II

I met with Fr. Ernest Friday afternoons for two months. I never could have expected nor predicted what happened. I was moving in a direction that I had never moved before. I did not know where I was going but I knew that I liked it. I enjoyed the readings and I loved the discussions with Fr. Ernest. I am a professor of communications at a community college in New York. The semester at school was coming to an end. The semester's end is often bittersweet. I am delighted to have some time to think, read and write, but leaving my students is difficult at times.

I left each meeting feeling fed. Our meetings were sometimes didactic and sometimes an easy exchange of stories. Once when we were discussing prayer, I told Fr. Ernest that I did not pray. He said, "Let's stop here. Tell me about that." Fr. Ernest, like other exceptional teachers, has the unique ability to teach didactically while still creating a space for the student. As an educator, I know that it is the relationship that the teacher has with the subject that is most instructional. In Fr. Ernest's presence, I learned what it meant to have a profound relationship with one's God. I have been lucky enough to know teachers of tremendous integrity where what is taught is integrated into how one lives. I had never encountered someone who could accomplish this within a religious institution. Fr. Ernest shared aspects of his life with me and I shared stories of my life with him. I liked the person I became in his company. He brought out in me my capacity to be accepting and flexible — qualities I do not always exhibit. The word 'educate' means to lead out from darkness. The excellent teacher does not add something to the student, he or she brings out what is already there but may lay dormant.

Because Fr. Ernest is honest with himself and others, he creates the possibility for me to be more honest with myself and others. He always accepted what I brought to our meetings. One day I told him that his words from the previous week were unsettling because I felt like I was dismissed. He and I both share a passionate interest in words. I asked him about the etymology of the word "unction." He said that he did not know (which I greatly respected) and immediately looked it up in the dictionary. The dictionary offered the meaning 'to anoint with oil.' It did not tell us anything that we did not already know. I wondered aloud about how the negative connotation of 'unctuous' from the word unction. Fr. Ernest said "How should I know? Do your homework." The comment felt like a dismissal yet I did not say anything when it happened. I felt embarrassed — that what I had asked was inappropriate. I never had this experience with Fr. Ernest before and it stayed with me throughout the week. I was disappointed in myself for not addressing it when it occurred. I noticed something interesting happen that week. I had lost some enthusiasm for the assigned readings. That one interpretation of Fr. Ernest's comment was coloring my experience. This feeling brought me immediately back to my students. How often did I lose students because of an interpretation of something I said? I thought of one student in particular who stayed in the class but I knew the precise moment in the semester when I lost her. I made a comment to her about her unwillingness to try new food. I over-stepped a boundary with her. If I were completely honest, I would have known that I was angry with her for her seemingly rejection of the class. On my arrival the following week with Fr. Ernest, I told him what had happened from my point-of-view. "Oh, Janet, he said, I was attempting to be funny. We need to

interpretations to each other during our time together rather than carry them and allow them to fester. It should always be so easy.

The Lessons

As I began to read and to discuss what I was reading with Fr. Ernest, everything began to fit and fall into place. I saw many connections between what I was teaching, my area of research, how I was introduced to my field as an undergraduate and religion. I teach college level communications courses. I try to invite my students into the relationship that I have with my discipline — a relationship that I was invited to participate in as an undergraduate. The writing of my PhD dissertation was, in a sense, a coming home for me. My meetings with Fr. Ernest were a second homecoming. I was introduced to my discipline by Larry Rosenfield. Larry's area of research is epideictic rhetoric.¹ Although I did not know it at the time, regardless of the course I took with Larry, I was receiving instruction in epideictic rhetoric.

Epideictic rhetoric, according to Aristotle, was one of three types of rhetoric.² Deliberative rhetoric occurs when one deliberates about a course of action such as what occurs in political speeches. Forensic rhetoric occurs when one establishes the guilt or innocence of someone tried in a court of law. Epideictic rhetoric is ceremonial speech and its primary function is to blame or praise. Aristotle said, however, that epideictic rhetoric is not just a type of speech but a way of being in the world. We all make choices to either celebrate or disparage and those choices dictate our attitudes to the world and our place in it. For my PhD dissertation, I returned to the teachings I received as an undergraduate and was able to come to it with a new understanding and appreciation. I applied Larry's writings about

epideictic to the film *Babette's Feast*.³ Although there is much religion in *Babette's Feast*, I stayed away from this reading because I was not a student of theology. I wrote about how the food in the film is a perfect vehicle for conveying an understanding about epideictic.

I now understand that what the ancient Greeks understood as epideictic, we may access through religion. On its most basic level, Church is a place set apart to rehearse us in praising, celebrating, remembering, accepting and giving thanks. These are also the characteristics of epideictic rhetoric. The ancient Greeks talked about the world as veiled. There are moments when that veil is lifted and these are what we would call epiphanies. For a moment, "all things were made new" (St. John). The epiphany quickly fades into oblivion and therefore needs us to preserve it and bear witness to it. In religion, theophany is when God becomes present. We need to hold this appearance and speak it. According to the philosopher Martin Heidegger, all thinking is afterthought because we first have the experience and then we recall it by making present what is now absent. He speaks how thinking is an act of remembrance and how thinking is thanking.⁴ When we think, we are engaged in an act of gratitude.

From my study of religion, the words of grateful response stayed with me. The presence of God in one's life induces an attitude of grateful response. A grateful response to life is what the ancients spoke about when they spoke about epideictic. I teach my students that the etymology of the word 'response' is to pour liquids to the gods.

Epideictic is saying 'yes' to all life brings and maintain an attitude of thankfulness for all that is given us. To be thankful for all and not just that which makes our life easy, is oftentimes a challenge. Within religion, this thankfulness and saying yes is known as faith. Faith is saying 'yes'

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Part III

The Teaching

Of course, the words communication and communion are etymologically linked. I spoke this often in the classroom but when I did, I was speaking of a communion between people and not a communion between God and me. The effect my teaching has had on my students recently has surprised me. One student told me last semester that he began to read the Bible as a result of this class. His response surprised me because I did not explicitly discuss religion in my class. Maybe it is just another example of how students may teach the instructor where she is headed before she realizes the direction herself. One day during a corporate training program, where I was teaching interpersonal communication, one woman said that she felt like she had a spiritual experience in the program. At first, I was mystified by this comment. Thinking it over, I realized that this woman was experiencing pleasure, she was working with others and she was creating. I then came to understand that these qualities are the characteristics of spirituality.

I also had made many connections between the religious instruction and my teaching. In some instances, I gained more appreciation for that which I thought I understood. Looking back, some seem so obvious that I cannot believe that I missed them. This experience, too, connects me back to the experience of the learner. I had known, for instance, and had taught that the etymology of the word Eucharist means gratitude. My students read an article entitled *The Stranger Within*⁵ and we discuss how hospitality is a way to being in the world. The article provides an excellent platform for discussing how we need to choose whether or not to invite the stranger in and make him/her a guest or keep the stranger out and make him/her an enemy. The article speaks about the etymology of the word 'host' meaning guest (as in the word 'hospitality') or enemy (as in the word 'hostile'). I tell my students that there is a third meaning for the word host and that is Eucharist. I tell them, too, that the etymology of the word Eucharist means gratitude but I never before made the connection that Eucharist comes from the Greek *evcharisto*, meaning 'I thank you' in Greek. I did not realize this until Fr. Ernest spoke it. This awareness makes me more fully appreciate that miraculous moment when the student gets what I am teaching.

Connected to the lesson on the stranger, I conduct an exercise on the students' reception to the unfamiliar. I bring in a variety of objects that I think the students will have a difficult time identifying. I have items picked up on my travels to other cultures. Some items come from my Cypriot mother-in-law. One of her items is a stamp used for making the offering bread for church (the *prosporon*). I knew that the stamp was used when the family made the altar bread but I did not know the significance of the symbols etched in the stamp. Once it was explained to me, the object meant more to me.

I introduce my students to the idea of the Greek *logos*. This word is sometimes translated as word, sometimes as meaning but it means both the thought and the word. It conveys the sense that the word is not just something graphed on but is inextricably linked to thought. Furthermore, words are creative – they do things. I had always made a perfunctory reference to the biblical reference... "in the beginning was the word..." But, honestly, I did not respond to the religious reference. I now understand that Jesus Christ is the word of God. He came to earth to be God's "language" in speaking to men and women.

For my students, the notion that they have a choice is an important eye-opener. They do not need to react but instead may choose to respond. A reaction, I teach, is knee-jerk whereas a response considers options and consequences. For instance if someone curses at them, they do not need to retaliate in anger. They each choose whether to help or hurt every moment of every day. This is what the religious literature means by referring to humans as temples, as a walking church. To choose to be a walking church is to choose to celebrate and when one chooses this, one's language will be commemorative. If one chooses to disparage, to knock down, the person usually searches for others with whom he/she may commiserate. These are two ways of being in the world and the choice is entirely our own. Ultimately, we are the ones who create hell for ourselves – through our own prideful rebellion and disobedience (I will say more on this later); we have the choice to create misery or glory.

As stated earlier, the etymology of word 'respond' is to pour liquids to the gods. The etymology informs us that when we choose to respond, we are engaging in a holy act. I believe, in accordance with the philosopher Hans-George Gadamer, words are previous accomplishments of thought.⁶ Martin Heidegger, another German philosopher, believed that through the word we could access the ancient Greek understanding of the world. English words originate mostly from Greek or Latin and if we only stop to wonder about the word, we will be brought back to an ancient or classical experience in the world. Each word contains a story in its etymology and most etymologies are experiential. The words have the capacity to bring us closer to our own experience instead of getting lost in the abstraction. I believe, along with Gadamer and Heidegger, that words contain traces. I resisted, however, prayer and creed as providing us with traces. I now understand that through the centuries, humans have experienced some aspect of God and they have formulated prayers and creeds that bear witness to their experience. Whereas before, I was resistant and treated religious language in the separate category from all other words. I am now more willing to trust the process. I finally realized that I do many things that I may not be motivated to do. I practice yoga, for instance, because I trust that if I commit and practice the postures along with the breathing, something will happen – the results can be neither predicted nor intended. I now enter prayer with the same spirit. It is something I needed to learn how to do.

I now trust myself to engage with religion. I had to learn to become humble. I did not understand it so I built up a wall of resistance. I did exactly what my students do in the classroom. My job, as an educator, is to break through my students' walls of resistance while respecting the walls. This patience and respect is what Fr. Ernest extended to me. Once a space was created

I was free to change. Early in the school term, contrast the terms process and product. I think that this difference is a lesson for life and one that I am still learning. Most of my students are in college because they have been told that they need a college degree for a high-paying job. They are in school with their eyes focused on the result – the diploma. Few are in school for the pleasure of learning; most students are burnt out from high school. It frequently takes me a semester to convince them that coming to any experience with only the end in mind, is a sure-fire way to destroy the experience. The context of dating usually drives the point home. Those who enter a dating relationship with a focus on marriage or children, end up destroying the relationship. The relationship is usually destroyed because the one who is focused on marriage drives the other away. The same is true with an idea – if we start to think about the application of an idea too soon, it loses its power to generate.⁷

Americans are prone to burn up ideas in the quest for pragmatism. Some ideas need to gestate for a while. If they agree with my claims up to this point, I introduce the parallel to education. If the student enters college focused on getting out, they are ensuring that they will learn nothing. The paradox is that frequently these students do not receive the grades they desire because they are not engaged. Engage with the educational process, I tell them and usually the grades will come. They will get to the end but they will have chosen to enjoy the journey. They may even be transformed through the educational process. This last point is the really scary part. I think that this distinction between process and product permeates every aspect of life. We do not speak words, we are our words. We do not live within cultures, we are our cultures. We do not go to church, we are church.

The footnotes and works cited are on file for review in the offices of The Hellenic Chronicle.

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Part IV

Of course, much of religious doctrines is paradoxical. I arrived for one of my meetings with Fr. Ernest contemplating the words Orthodox and paradox. The root word, *doxa*, figures in my teaching. *Doxa*, in Greek, means opinion and *dokei mou* means 'it appears to me.' Our opinions are based on how the world appears to us. It is important to understand that our opinions are based on perceptions and our perceptions are based on our experiences, background, education, gender, etc. The word 'Orthodox,' as in Greek Orthodox, means of correct opinion. I immediately felt uncomfortable with this meaning since I spend a good deal of time trying to invite my students to understand another's opinion. The text I read with Fr. Ernest, however, did say that the Orthodoxy was correct opinion but it also said it was a paradox, meaning that it was beyond or above opinion.⁸ I felt more comfortable with this admission.

My courses emphasize paradox in the sense of seemingly contradictory statements that may be nonetheless true. As I mentioned earlier, the word 'host' contains paradox. It could mean guest or enemy. The paradox indicates that we need to exercise judgment as to whether we invite the stranger into our homes or keep the stranger at arm's length. There is also a paradox surrounding the Eucharist – when we give of ourselves, we receive. Interpersonally, it is always true that when I give, I receive. I now understand the getting in the giving in the religious communion as well as I understand this concept interpersonally.

Most words have multiple meanings and this is what distinguishes a sign from a symbol. A symbol may represent many things whereas a sign represents one thing. For instance, if I say the word "chair" it could mean a chair in the room we are in, a chair in my home, the head of a committee or department, or even the electric chair. This ambiguity is what makes language infuriating, funny and magical. Many arguments happen because what one person means is not what the other interprets. The etymology of the word 'symbol' means something broken apart and the two parts shared by guest and host. The host would keep half and the guest would be given the other half. Should they come together in the future, they could remember (meaning to make whole) the hospitality they once shared. Our symbols that we share provide us with the story of hospitality in the etymology of the word 'symbol.' In class, I use a cookie to represent the word symbol. I ask each student to take one, break it apart and share it with their partner. The religious and communal meaning was not lost on me but it

is now more rich with meaning.

The bread and wine in church are symbols, they represent something else. Of course, they represent the body and blood of Christ. Through eating the host, I make Jesus Christ part of me. "Do this" the faithful are told, "in remembrance of me." When I eat I make something outside me, part of me. When I remember, something is made whole and something outside me becomes part of me. This is why we have memorial services so that we bring the deceased back to the community and make the community whole again. The Greeks have a beautiful ritual to commemorate a

to church a dish called *kolliva* which is made from grains, seeds, pomegranates and sugar. Each item of the recipe is symbolic and the congregation will then eat the *kolliva* at the end of the liturgy. I wrote about the role of food as an avenue to epideictic rhetoric within the film *Babette's Feast*. I am now extending my thinking to how food is connected to thinking, remembering and being in the world to other food films.

Fr. Ernest shared with me his frustration that during communion, so few choose to receive. As he put it, the congregation is saying 'no' to Christ's invitation. How often I felt my own frustration when I witnessed students turning down the invitation – the invitation to participate in the class discussion, to respond to each other, to engage with their own education. I also realize that all I can do as an educator is to extend the invitation. I now realize that all these years, I was saying 'yes' to life while still saying 'no' to having Jesus Christ in my life. All of the concepts that I have been teaching, I needed to learn. The concept that best encapsulates this lesson is listening. Listening requires us to step away from our ego and attempt to understand (to literally stand under the other). The etymology of the word 'listen' means to obey. In the past, I would have balked at the word 'obey.' I now understand that the word means to have the humility required to see the world through someone else's point-of-view. When couples married, they used to make a vow to love, cherish and obey. We have removed the word 'obey' from the ritual when maybe we should have rediscovered what the word could mean if we did not interpret it in our modern dichotomy of oppression and subordination. The etymology of the word 'humility' – frequently misunderstood within the same framework – comes from the Latin 'humus' meaning fertile soil. From our humility, we can choose to make connection with our God and our fellow humans. It is our ego that prevents connection.

When the *prosphoron* is cut by the Greek Orthodox priest, it is placed on a *paten* or dish. Each area of the plate is reversed for different groups – the living, the dead, the nine orders and the priest. The plate represents the universe. It is a visual representation of all that should be

remembered through the communion. I have learned through my study of Greek Orthodoxy that the church communicates messages nonverbally. As I enter the church, I am greeted by the icon or the image. I may kiss the icon as I would kiss the host of a dinner when I arrive and I am greeted as guest. Before, I saw the kissing of the icon as idolatry and the label would prevent me from responding. As I stand in the church, I can learn the entire Bible if I choose to attend. The liturgy appeals to all of my senses. The incense appeals to my sense of smell. The icons and structure appeal to my sense of sight. The taking of communion appeals to my sense of taste. Listening to the gospel (meaning the good word) appeals to my sense of hearing. I remember once reading that during a meal, we click glasses when we raise them in a toast to engage the ear and bring all the senses to the experience.

When I teach nonverbal communication, I begin with the nonverbal communication of the campus and the classroom. I tell my students and show them pictures, of a trip that Chris and I made to Cyprus. We visited the House of Dionysos, a museum that was preserved as an ancient house. The house contained the most beautiful mosaics. I was struck by the four panel mosaic that led from the front door to the living

The mosaics contained scenes from mythology that conveyed the message of temperance – the scenes reminded the guest not to eat or drink excessively. This artifact counters our tendency to think us moderns invented an understanding of how environments communicate. I now have an appreciation that church structures participate in a similar ancient wisdom.

On a previous trip to Cyprus, Chris and I were visiting a monastery. I was pulled off a line of people looking at the icons in the monastery. I was told by a monk that the icons were for pilgrims only. I was looking at the icons as I would look at paintings in a museum. I was appreciative but I was detached. I assume the monk who pulled me off the line interpreted my way of looking as brazen stare. With retrospect, I better understand his motivations but the action did push me further away from the church.

Conclusion

I assume that much of what I have written will seem obvious to my readers. I attempted to write what is for me the conversion, the coming together of parts of myself. I am able to accomplish this through the help of a wise teacher and I am left with a deep feeling of gratitude. This Sunday I am to be converted. Sunday will also be Fr. Ernest's last day at church before returning to Baltimore. I will miss him. Our conversation have led to my conversion. It is appropriate that conversation and conversion come from the same root *conversio*, meaning a turning about.

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