

June, 2005 – Susan Graham, Theology

Research Tip

I used to give up rutabagas for Lent; now I give up sleep. Seriously, teaching, grading, preparations, committees, all take a good deal of time. So how does research fit in? Sometimes it does not, and sleep is the price to be paid. Nevertheless, research is one of my top two priorities. So, why be so obviously masochistic? Here are some reasons:

Professional integrity. I like my specialty and my scholarship in it is something in which I take pride, independently of all the other things I need to do. So keeping up with the field and staying in the scholarly conversation is a matter of personal and professional integrity. When the going gets tough – when the students start to zone out or, worse, when spring days appear with more regularity--, that integrity keeps me on my feet, and gets me to the library.

Staying sharp. Keeping abreast of my field forces me to stay sharp, creative, flexible. Simply doing so is energizing in itself. Research generates an intellectual momentum of its own, that makes the effort immensely satisfying and produces energy to tackle other tasks.

Utility. Research is instructive. My field, history of Christianity, is instructive. Human nature does not seem to have changed much over time. For every event, there is precedent of some kind. For instance, we can relax about the recent Papal election: most scenarios are based on precedent, and most realistic possibilities have been realized already, at least once. To those who are excited, it is possible to say, “just wait.” For every position, at some point the “bad guys” eventually lose, and the “good guys” eventually win out (Psalms 37 and 73; Wisdom 1-3). Research in Christian history continually reaffirms that perspective. Practitioners of other disciplines can easily find analogies in their own fields.

Fun. Did I mention that I like my specialty? The emergence of Christianity on the horizon of late antiquity, the issues and problems created and resolved as it develop relationships with the Greco-Roman world and with Judaism, provide endless puzzles and brain teasers. At minimum, following early Christianity is like watching a baby learn to walk. More often, it is like a series of detective stories.

Connections. This requires no explanation. Just an anecdote to amuse, then. Not so long ago at a conference, I met a specialist in eighteenth-and nineteenth-century American religious architecture, and we chatted about our respective research findings regarding sacred space. At a breakfast meeting the next day, I chatted with a graduate student living in Manila, who is well aware of the implications of sacred time and space involved in the annual Passion Week

crucifixion re-enactments. Lunchtime brought conversations with a scholar of early Christian art and the archaeologist who discovered the site of a “New Jerusalem,” built by an early Christian heretical group. By dinner, we had constructed a proposal for a wide-ranging session on sacred space for the next annual conference, and I had an armload of new questions to bring back to my own work on the subject.

Professional integrity. Students notice. Even those who are not so very sharp or interested notice. It’s about “walking the talk.” If I claim to be an expert in anything, they dare me to prove it. Those are the ones who want to hear a little bit about conferences and delivering papers, and who are finally convinced when an article shows up in the display case on the first floor of McDermott, or when an example becomes useful in class. They talk about this, and sometimes the talk comes back to me.

Staying sharp. The sharpness, creativity, flexibility, and intellectual energy demanded for academic exchange leak out to teaching areas. I learn things, come across resources and questions and issues, and they come out in class, usually informally. They make teaching more fun for me, and more students “get it.” Students do notice, and they become tantalized.

Utility. Anything can happen in class. No news, there. Deep questions about God, being, creation, and matters so weighty as what that funny hat (the *zucchetta*) is that priests wear with their cassocks in Rome (mostly *wore*, nowadays), why churches are shaped the way they are, what the “Gnostics” really taught, or what actually is in the *Gospel of Mary* (a la *The DaVinci Code*), all come up. My research brings answers to a few of them, and, more importantly for pedagogy, brings suggestions for how they might find answers to the rest. My adventures in research add to their learning process, partly, I suspect, because they feel comfortable asking a question when they know that I ask questions, too. It helps along the “stew” that is pedagogy, and, as Julia Child reminds us, the “nice cooking noises” are important for the progress of a good *boeuf bourguignon*

It doesn’t hurt to share the pain—I mean the experience—of writing up research in the range of forms we all use. Stories about the trashed first, second and third drafts of a paper, or of the umpteenth draft of a dissertation chapter, are at worst funny, and at best reassuring to students agonizing over their own pieces. That fact does not necessarily increase the quality of the papers they submit (sigh), but some take heart and work just a bit harder, with results. This is not news, but bears repeating. There is another useful feature of sharing the research and writing experience with a class: for students intimidated by higher education and the education of their professors, sharing the experience of research and writing offers common ground and begins to bridge the gap so that learning can occur. They talk about this, and that talk comes back around, too.

Fun. Intellectual detective stories, puzzles and surprises spice up class, certainly, and bring our students along on the adventure. They seem to rise to the occasion, especially when they discover that a subject or question is “live” in the academic arena, or that *their* idea happens to have been the focus of an entire session or plenary lecture at a big conference.

Connections. Did I mention that professional connections keep my teaching sharp, too? That conference session on sacred space resulted in classroom conversations, which in turn resulted in a workout for my personal slide collection and some interesting student research projects. It also generated pedagogical conversations. Additionally, it is sometimes worthwhile to direct a student to consult a colleague elsewhere by e-mail. Some have been inspired to seek out such experts on their own. The affirmation, enthusiasm and learning generated by these contacts, spill into the work they submit. In turn, the students raise questions and new mysteries that send me back to do more research. It all comes full circle.

In the end, it is worth losing that sleep to keep up the research, writing, presenting. Some people, after all, stay up all night to finish reading a mystery.