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# Conflict, Calling, and Kicks in the Collegium\*

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The mix of graduate students entering UCLA's prestigious department of ethnomusicology in 1998 startled me: Lucy, a hispanic woman who adopted Tibetan Buddhism. Danny, an agnostic post-modern committed to Marxist morals. Elizabeth, an observant Roman Catholic. Susan, a warm and unpredictable Wiccan. And then there was me: an Evangelical Christian raised on wholesome Kansas wheat, of perambulatory Swiss Mennonite heritage, working as a Bible translator and ethnomusicologist with SIL in Africa. In this essay, I trace some of the ways God prepared me to integrate into this strange tribe, and how He has extended this integration into an adventure-filled calling of learning from and speaking into the academy.

*Internal Conflict and Vulnerability.* I grew up a Baptist pastor's kid in a strong Christian home, and made my own profession of faith at eleven. I've always been drawn, however, to dangerous questions, the ones whose answers have the potential to undercut my core beliefs. I remember reading Bertrand Russel's essay, "Why I am Not a Christian," in high school. His arguments weren't ultimately persuasive, but they infected me with a vague unease. By my second year at the excruciatingly inclusivist Brown University (Rhode Island) as an undergraduate, this unease had flowered into full-blown agnosticism. It wasn't until God intervened through a challenge in Psalm 119:30-32 to reflect on whether His precepts had been trustworthy in my life (they had), and my Christian girlfriend's threat to drop me (she did), that I recognized the ultimately insubstantial nature of my intellectual questions. I came back to God.

This dynamic remains the source of both my greatest intellectual pleasure and my most unnerving spiritual vulnerability. I love to explore new, hip ideas that expand my perspectives and uncover social or acoustic phenomena that I've never imagined. But I know that some of these ideas carry with them whispers of precepts that, if left unchecked, can enervate my own.

In recognition of this risk, I've developed a three-pronged approach to academic interactions. First, I let myself enter into moments of temporary suspension of disbelief. In the same way that I buy into a story during a two-hour film, I uncritically accept exotic narratives—for example, a post-colonial critique of missionaries—for a defined period of time. This allows me to understand both intellectually and viscerally what the people around me believe. I can then distance myself from aspects that do not correspond to a biblical faith (e.g., a radical rejection of normative reality beyond human interactions), and incorporate those features that help my faith mature (e.g., tools to uncover syncretistic fusions between my faith and the American capitalist ideologies of my home culture).

Second, I form accountability relationships with Christians wherever I live. Even though it seems like we move to a new continent every couple of years, I make it a priority to meet with one or two men regularly, and tell them that they have to ask me brazenly each week what doubts I've been toying with. A narcoleptic pilot should never fly solo.

Third, I try to approach people and their new ideas with both fearlessness and wisdom. Fearlessness, because I know that all truth is God's truth. God is the creator of the

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universe, and all human ideas are merely oneiric representations of His Reality. Wisdom, because I know I'm weak. I don't pursue relationships with everybody I meet.

*On a Mission from God.* After being mildly attracted to the field of ethnomusicology as an undergraduate, God lit the fire in my bones when I learned how it could feed into the expansion and deepening of His kingdom. As my first mentor, Vida Chenoweth, taught me, every group of people in the world has an intense need—a *right, even*—to communicate with God using the language and music that touch their hearts most deeply. If I learned to study and understand local music systems and cultures, she taught me, I would have the tools to help make that a reality for Christians around the world. We would have to fight against the inertia of generations of missionaries teaching feckless translations of *Bread of Heaven* to baffled locals, but our cause was just. Emboldened by this zeal, I completed an M.A. at Wheaton College (Illinois), converting one of my class assignments into my first article, published in *Missiology*. I joined the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM), the primary US scholarly body devoted to the field, and then became a member of SIL. During my SIL training in Dallas, I convinced the school to offer a non-credit introduction to ethnomusicology and missionary applications.

After our first term in a language project in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire, at the time), during which I published a few articles in SIL journals, I began presenting papers to academic meetings. My first talk was entitled, "Catalyzing Creativity: Nurturing a Dying Music Through Apprenticeship," at a meeting of the Midwest chapter of SEM. This paper began my practice of communicating potentially controversial aspects of my identity in quiet yet unapologetic terms. When it comes up in private conversations, I describe myself as a follower of Jesus Christ, rather than a Christian; this draws attention to Jesus, rather than the sometimes superfluous and embarrassing activities of His church. In public settings, I state my involvement with SIL in terms like this: "I am a member of SIL. We are in Congo at the invitation of the local Protestant church to coordinate the translation of the Bible into Mono." But even this prosaic explanation at the SEM meeting elicited indignant responses from several attendees, including this: "The whole system of Christianity/capitalism you're a part of undermines your aim of encouraging indigenous music. Your life is a profound contradiction."

Pointed criticism continues as a sub-theme of my academic career,\* but other responses to my identity as a Christian are more common. At UCLA, students and faculty generally accepted me as a spiritual person, a representative of just one of many equal spiritualities. Lucy told her Buddhist group that I was "an admirable Christian," though she was surprised when she realized that I believe God wants and requires a relationship with every human: "You'd actually try to convince people to become Christians?" Others have expressed bemusement at the big deal I make about implications of my faith on my research. After a paper I presented at a conference on applied ethnomusicology, a wizened ethnomusicologist pondered aloud: "My wife and I are Muslim and Quaker....I can't see how it causes us any problems." I don't know of anyone who has become a believer directly through my witness in academic settings, but people have heard Truth because of it. In addition, a number of Christians have declared themselves encouraged and emboldened because of my openness.

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\* See, for example, John Vallier's (2003) exposé of the moral failings of those he terms *ethnomusical missionaries*, and the response that SIL colleague Neil Coulter and I wrote (2003). In our essay, Neil and I faulted John—whom I know, and with whom I am again on good terms—for inadequate research that led to serious misunderstandings and faulty categorizations. We called for increased discussion of the complex issues common to everyone hoping to do good by applying their disciplines in social, physical, or spiritual contexts outside of the academy.

*For Love of the Field.* I've just moved from field to desk work, at a crossroads. Several factors compel me to continue and extend my production and involvement in academia. First and foremost, I am convinced that rigorous research and reflection are essential complements to all cross-cultural ministry goals, be they in linguistics, anthropology, ethnomusicology, or any of the fields that have informed and guided ministry around the world. Not only does scholarly training hone our skills and help us avoid mistakes, it keeps us from slipping into ideological ruts. I'm wary of the ideas of people who have been trained only, for example, in a Bible school, not having benefited from the revealing scrutiny of differently-partisan academic inquiry. We need to keep growing, moving beyond our first ideas (though never beyond our First Relationship). Second, I believe that God has called me to contribute to the lives and ideas of this disparate, needy network of scholars. My first priority is to the deepening worship of language groups around the world, but ministry to scholars is not far behind.

Finally, I'll remain connected to academic communities because it's fun. I feel great satisfaction when I complete a publishable article (especially if it's published). I enjoy standing on my rock-solid conviction of God's transcendent creativity as justification for my inquiries, while others grasp desperately for a moral foothold to warrant their curiosity and instincts to do good. I love to run in circles (literally), chewing (figuratively) on obstinately unrelated phenomena until connections emerge and, *Eureka! I've got a dissertation!* I revel in exposing the world to facts, ideas, people, amazing sounds, and crazily complex systems I've experienced. And I get a rush from being able to communicate deeply with Cameroonians and Congolese friends because I've taken the time to understand the systems that guide and enrich their lives.

Far from a contradiction, God has fashioned the various elements of my life into a profound coherence. Commitment to rigorous, inspired research and its communication ensures the integrity of cross-cultural ministry. It also puts us in touch with people whose ideas enrich ours, and whose lives need contact with the Living Truth. And, well, it's a blast.

## References

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