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Called to Teach: Brief Essays on the Meaning of Teaching



Called to Teach

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“I was born to be a point guard; but not a very good one.” I wish I had written that line. It certainly sums up my college basketball career. But as you can see it is in quotation marks. It comes from one of my favorite authors, Pat Conroy. Before I read any of his novels—*Prince of Tides*, *The Great Santini*, *Lords of Discipline*, or *Beach Music*—I read his memoir, *My Losing Season*, about Conroy’s role as point guard of the 1967 basketball team at The Citadel. The quote is the first line of the book.

I came to Baylor as a junior transfer in the fall of 1976 precisely because I had grown up in cold, cold Michigan dreaming of playing basketball at a Division 1 university in a warm climate. Recruited by no D-1 schools out of high school, I went to a small denominational college that offered me a scholarship, Spring Arbor College. There I became friends with a classmate from the Detroit area who was Baptist and whose parents wanted him to transfer to Baylor. In February of 1976, he came to Waco for a campus visit and returned to Spring Arbor with eight Baylor t-shirts for his friends and reports of 75-degree weather. That night I walked to the college library, found a copy of *Peterson’s Guide to Colleges and Schools*, looked up the address of the Baylor Admissions Office, and sent off for an application. My main goal was to make the basketball team, and after sitting out the required transfer year, I did. My claim to athletic fame at Baylor was that I guarded Vinnie Johnson in practice. Vinnie was an All-American who went on to a long and productive NBA career, winning two championships, fittingly with the Detroit Pistons, my childhood team.

So, it was basketball that led me to Professor Bill Pitts’s church history class, where I was a not-very-good point guard masquerading as a religion major. And something happened. I got the

academics bug, at least enough to do well in my major courses, even as I floundered in subjects I mistakenly thought irrelevant to my life goals. I planned to go into the ministry, but eventually came to believe that the call I felt on my life was to teach, not preach.

Coming to that realization, however, took time. After undergrad, I returned to my hometown of Flint, Michigan, and for a year took a position as Youth Activities Director at a large, downtown Presbyterian Church. I then attended Fuller Seminary, where once again I had a sterling church history professor, James Bradley. In my first and only year at Fuller, I made the final decision to go the academic route, with the goal of becoming a college teacher. I returned to Baylor for an M.A. in Church-State Studies, then headed to Manhattan, Kansas, to study at K-State with Robert Linder. When I entered the K-State history Ph.D. program in the fall of 1983, I had one goal: teach history on the college level, preferably at a Christian liberal arts college where I would have ample opportunity to teach American religious history and have an impact on the intellectual development of Christian young people. By the time I left K-State three years later as an ABD, I knew I would never be satisfied if I were not a regularly publishing historian as well as a classroom teacher. Through skilled and intense mentoring Linder had instilled in me a love for research and writing in addition to teaching and mentoring.

For me, the call to teach came through these three very different professors—Bill Pitts, James Bradley, and Robert Linder. From Pitts, I learned how to trust the story. History itself is interesting enough to sustain the narrative. It need only be organized well and presented clearly. Beyond the content of the lectures, we read interesting books that had clear arguments we could discuss together, knowing our positions would be dignified by our professor. Even a proverbial jock like me (i.e., student-athlete just trying to maintain eligibility) felt safe speaking up. Somehow, Professor Pitts's classes were rigorous and non-threatening at the same time.

Professor Bradley, training preachers at a seminary, began classes with a devotional. Through these we learned a bit of his spiritual autobiography. Here was a rising young scholar of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British church history telling us about his youthful days as a hot-rod car enthusiast and budding alcoholic—how his mother patiently took him drunk weekend after weekend believing he would one day see the light and come home to Jesus. Bradley seemed to approach teaching with a sense of gratitude and reverence for the fact that God had transformed him—from a boozing drag racer to a seminary professor. And he knew that transformation was both spiritual and intellectual because the two can never be separated.

And, then there was Linder. From my classes with Pitts and Bradley I entered the Ph.D. program at K-State with a fairly good knowledge of church history. Because I had not majored in history as an undergrad, however, I had some catching up to do and so sat in on Linder's Western Civ courses. Linder was and is legendary at K-State, where just last month he retired at the age of eighty-three after fifty-three years in the department. On at least two occasions in the 1970s he rode his motorcycle into the lecture hall on the first day of class just to get everyone's attention. I saw him do

an Indiana Jones routine, complete with a bull whip and a real pistol that he fired (with blanks, of course) at a planted former student who stood up to harass him. Linder's undergraduate teaching was a frontal assault on intellectual and moral complacency, but his work with grad students was about mentoring, and that started and ended with his spending immense amounts of his time with us. Our seminars went from 7:00 pm to roughly 11:30. I did independent readings with him that would go on all afternoon. He drove us from Manhattan to Fort Worth for the Conference on Faith and History in 1984. When we left Eisenhower Hall, the history building, after studying past midnight, the light would usually be on in his office. Woody Allen may have overstated the case when he said, "Ninety percent of life is showing up," but from Linder I learned that to truly mentor students, we have to put in the time with them. When I was at K-State, I had no idea I would spend the bulk of my time and energy over the next thirty years mentoring grad students.

Only later, reading Pat Conroy, would I understand how these three professors, and many others along with them, helped me realize that while I was born to be a point guard, I was called to teach.