**October 5th**

This semester has been so ridiculously busy so far. I think I say that every semester, and sadly, I think it’s true every semester. But here’s the thing: I’m taking 12 hours of grad school (even if 6 of those hours are classes that don’t meet every week) and trying to do well and stay caught up with my homework. I’m working as lead TA for Mike, with 9 TAs and 270 students to manage, doing a job that is new to me and quite intricate at times, as well as time-consuming. On top of that, I’m also *teaching* a section of students, which is not actually required of me as lead TA, but I’m doing that for the same amount of pay. I’m working with MLI, or at least trying to, though my over-commitment keeps me from engaging that as well as I’d like, which is frustrating in general but particularly worrisome because it’s part of my field education and therefore part of my grades. I’m working through the process of moving myself and my fiancé into a new house, trying to get it habitable. I’m going kind of crazy in the St. Ann Community, to the point that Rosten and I had to tell the community just the other day that we’re stepping back, at least until the wedding, but probably through Christmas break or longer. And oh yeah, and I’m planning a wedding and doing everything that goes along with that, including being driven insane by my mother and her incessant questions.

I say all that to say two things.

First, I’m really hoping that my life doesn’t ever look this crazy again. It’s exhausting. And I often wonder how to balance accomplishing the things I need and want to accomplish with having the kind of sane life that Kent talks about all the time. I want that. I just don’t know how to do it well.

And second, I’ve been feeling pretty bad recently about the quality of teaching (or perhaps lack thereof is more accurate) I’ve been giving my JUST students in Mike’s class. I remember that two years ago I’d spend at least 2-3 hours per week planning the lessons I’d teach my students on Fridays. This semester it’s just kind of been fly by the seat of my pants most every week. And I still do all right, I suppose, because I’ve got two years worth of teaching the same or similar lessons behind me. Maybe that’s a good thing, or at least an okay thing. But it sure doesn’t feel good. I feel disheveled, disorganized, disrespectful, and even a little lazy, though I know that’s not my reason for not investing in these lessons like I once did. It’s all the crazy busyness of this monumental semester. And it doesn’t feel fair. I feel like I’m cheating my students somehow by not being as organized and competent as I should be. Sometimes I sure do wish I got paid more and could claim this as my full time job rather than a part time job on top of all the other things I’m doing. And other times I’m just exhausted by the thought of that. Not sure what to do with all that, other than perhaps simply recognize that this is a semester unlike most others and that while it perhaps indicates my performance under extremely high stress, it doesn’t indicate my typical performance. Or at least I hope not.

**October 12th**

Joined the JUST group on a trip to Dallas today. Started early (6:00 — too early!) in the morning in order to get in a full day’s worth of activities. We gathered together and Stephen prayed before hitting the road. He talked about God opening our eyes and our hearts to what we’d experience. I like that. In the van on the way to Dallas, I had a really great conversation with Stephen and a couple of students. We talked about all sorts of theological things, including the narrative of the church and its mission, relating to God and one another, and so on.

One student, Josh was particularly engaged as we talked for probably an hour and a half about the experiences that led him to participate in JUST. He told us about his family and his parents’ faith, as well as about his own journey to faith, and about one particular time in his life recently where God just really seemed to connect with him and instill faith in him. From what I’ve seen of him in class and on this trip, Josh seems like a really passionate guy with a big heart for God. He seems to want to engage deeply in relationship with God, and to do so he practices spending time alone with God. If he weren’t in JUST, he’d be a really great candidate for MLI. I think his passion is great, and with some guidance and perhaps some more discipline, he could really go far missionally.

When we got closer in to Dallas, I started asking Stephen about what he was hoping the students would gain from this trip to Dallas and from their engagement with JUST in general. He talked about the following:

attentiveness

discernment (individual and collective)

ethnography

vocation in mission

team formation

critical thinking

problem solving

“creative solutions in the mission of God”

theological anthropology

This isn’t exactly verbatim, but it’s what I could scrawl on my computer as he talked; he said that he was hoping to “form students who will offer who they are, their sense of what they know, their ability to think critically, what they can do, their skills in a particular discipline or area, their passions, what they care about, and what God has placed within them… to offer them for the sake of the world, particularly in its most broken places.” He talked about missional vocation and forming an imagination for mission in the world, all through the students’ vocations. He talked about participation in the mission of God as an acceptance of hospitality and called that “a game changer” because it’s not the paradigm the students are used to working with (typically they’re the ones offering something, not receiving something).

When we got to CitySquare’s main building, and after/as we had a third breakfast/snack, John Siburt explained to us what the day would hold and suggested for the students some questions to ponder the help them “have their researcher caps on.” Stephen reminded them, “You’re investigators. Think about the kind of information you’re gathering. Listen in a certain kind of way to be able to recall.” Hearing him talk like that really brought back memories of being in Contexts of Ministry class with him. It’s interesting to me how professors have their pet ideas (often very good ones!) that they run with. I wonder what mine are…?

We were accompanied on the trip by Bill Rankin and Susie (their sociology professor; I don’t know her last name), and they each offered some questions for consideration too, questions related to what the students were doing in their classes with these professors. How is South Dallas shaped by outside factors? How does changing the look of the neighborhood affect individuals in it? What patterns emerge—verbal patterns of phrases that emerge, traffic patterns, trash patterns? And what do those things indicate about the community? How do they help you understand the community in ways that you might not otherwise?

That morning Stephen also introduced us to the man and woman who’d be following us around all day with a camera and video camera as a media presence. Though I understood the justification for their being there (helping the ACU community understand what was going on with JUST), it seemed like all of us, especially as the day wore on, were quite annoyed by their omnipresence. The guy asked a lot of questions that were perhaps good questions but were quite intrusive. Their whole presence seemed intrusive, particularly at times when we were trying to blend in (or at least when I and some of the other “adults” felt like we should be trying to blend in).

From there we went on to meet with five community leaders from South Dallas. One whom I recognized immediately was my former professor on social justice, Robert Foster. It was good to get to see him and catch up a bit, and it was great to see him investing his time and energy in a place and a people that he’s so passionate about. Anyway, we divided up among tables with these five leaders and spent a while talking with them. My table got Robert, and we talked about his experiences and what he’d learned from them, and the students asked him some questions. Eventually, the tables shared what they’d talked about, and the following seemed like relatively accurate summaries of their conclusions: A holistic model is necessary. It’s *all* political. Relationship, not charity. Remove the problems, revitalize the inner city. Relationships with neighbors. John Siburt described these men as the “model of what servant leadership looks like,” saying that it takes courage, strength, patience, and perseverance.

Sharon Grigsby from the Dallas Morning News joined us and told us about the columns that she’s been writing for a number of years now, comparing North and South Dallas. She said they focused on the truth and the potential of South Dallas. She talked about the state fair and how the Fair Park area (in which we were spending most of the day) was a “symbol of everything that was done wrong to this predominantly African American community.” She talked about some of the other issues and possibilities in South Dallas and said that South Dallas has strong advocates but that they don’t live there; there is little local leadership and (excluding the men present that day) selfishness and corruption characterize much of the “leadership” that is present.

Leaving that area, the group stopped in the midst of the entry to the apartment complex to pose for a photo op. This was particularly conspicuous and obtrusive, in my opinion. It made me and some of the non-students cringe.

After a rapid and confusing stop at McDonald’s for lunch (which also made me cringe for a variety of reasons but was necessary as we were running behind), we went to BC Workshop, where we talked with Brent and his team about their housing design justice work throughout Dallas. (The day with JUST was focused on housing, as a follow-up to their previous visit, focused on hope and a forerunner of the later visits, focused on hunger and health.) Brent and his team talked about their projects and their methods, advocating humility and restraint and doing things on the community’s terms when coming in to a new neighborhood. For them it’s about getting in, being open minded, listening, and following that in a non-fearful way. It’s social justice, empowerment-related work, so it won’t move forward without community approval. It’s about increasing the livability and viability of neighborhoods. It’s about discovering, sharing, and making, which I noted was similar to ethnography/observation, incarnation, and redemption. They talked about engaging people by building trust through listening. You have to develop trust to be effective in situations of justice.

When we left their place, we dropped John Siburt off back at City Square and headed towards the state fair. On the way we stopped by the apartment complex where the students will be living next year. It’s a place that ACU’s apparently buying and renovating specifically for this purpose (and maybe with some other things in mind too, as it’s bigger than the JUST students will need). The students were pretty excited about getting to see their future home, but some of them became pretty concerned about it all when they realized that there were currently people living in the apartment complex, that it wasn’t just a deserted building. A couple of them made sure to ask Stephen what would happen to the people who were living there now, if they’d get kicked out if they’d get to stay. I’m not sure what Stephen’s answer was, but I found it notable that the students would care enough to ask. Once they’d had a chance to look around just a bit, we piled back in the vans and went to the fair.

The purpose of our visit there was two-fold, I’d been told. One part of it simply was to have some fun after a long and busy day, to let the students (and sponsors) unwind and connect in a different kind of way. But more important than that was the students’ assignment at the fair. We’d been talking all day long about how the presence of the fair affected the Fair Park neighborhood and its residents negatively. It’s a kind of run-down neighborhood that once a year gets a huge influx of people who leave a huge mark. So the students were supposed to be observing the impact — overcrowding, noise and light pollution, trash, smells from the animal barns, etc. There might have been a few positives too: limited attention to that neighborhood might be better than none at all, and some local residents could make supplemental income by working at the fair or offering parking in their yards. But what was the overall effect? This is what the students were to be considering.

When we got to the fair, I hung out with Stephen and Susie (Bill had left earlier to catch a flight), and we wandered around trying to find some of the best food options. And once in a while we’d run into groups of students who, in my opinion at least, seemed to be having fun more than doing ethnographic observation. Who can blame them? They got a free pass to the fair, plus some free food as part of their class. And it had been a long day. It’s possible, I guess, that in the van on the way back to Abilene or in class the next week they all discussed what they’d observed, even if implicitly. I didn’t join them for the ride back, however, as my husband was picking me up so we could go visit his family east of Dallas. (I noticed in my attempts to meet up with him that the fair was affecting me negatively, as we both got completely turned around and swamped in traffic and remained quite separated from each other for the better part of an hour, until a policewoman kindly escorted me back through the park — to jeers of “Ooooh, what has *that* bitch done?!” — so that I could meet Rosten and, quite atypically for me, break down in tears of exhaustion and frustration. Not a good ending to the day, but reflective of something, I think…)

At some point in the day, one student, David, asked Stephen the question, “Is our goal basically to be ambassadors between South Dallas and ACU students.” Stephen’s answer was, “Yes, secondarily, by telling the story.” That’s interesting to me, but I’m more curious to know what Stephen’s explanation to David of their primary goal would have been.

**October 16th**

Just found out this morning that Mike’s not going to be teaching at ACU anymore after this semester. He’d mentioned it to me before as a possibility, but this morning he emailed me to confirm it, though not everyone knows yet. I’m not sure who’ll take over his supersection for the spring semester, but whoever it is and however wonderful they are, it just won’t be the same. I’ve really enjoyed learning from Mike over the past two years. He’s a great teacher, and it’s been a great privilege to get to work with him. Not only do I get to hear him teach twice a week, but I‘ve also gotten to form a personal/working relationship with him, and I’ve gotten paid to do it! What a blessing. Plus it sure doesn’t hurt my résumé to note that I’ve worked with him for two and a half years and served as his lead TA. More than any of that, though, he’s just a really great guy with a really great heart, and I’m going to miss him. A Mike-Cope-less ACU is kind of a sad thought. At least (for now, at least) we’re getting to keep him around town. I’ve learned a lot from Mike and have been shaped a lot as a teacher by him. So thankful that he’s been part of my ACU experience!

**October 18th**

Spent some time tonight putting together a proposal for the MLI large group gatherings for this next cohort. I didn’t want to do it at first, but when I got into it, it was actually a lot of fun. (That seems to be the case with a lot of the things that I have to do in grad school. Wonder what’s behind that…?) I created two documents: one to reflect what we did last year during the pilot year, and one to propose what we’ll do this next time, based upon what happened in the pilot year and what we learned from that, plus incorporating some things we wanted to do previously but couldn’t because of time constraints that aren’t as much of an issue now (since we’ll have a year and a half with this group). I think I put together a pretty good beginning plan, and I’m excited about it. I’ll share it with the team in our meeting tomorrow and see what they’ve got to say. There’s still a lot more to be nailed down and prepared as far as particulars and resources, but this is a good framework, I think. The first semester gives an introduction to individual identity and to life in community, two things that’ll be important for students to have some sort of foundation in as they go through the next semester, which is aimed at sparking their imagination with different forms of missional living. That semester we’ll look at missional stewardship, missional arts, missional business (non-profit and for-profit). Then in the final semester we’ll talk about community dynamics and governance, as students at that point will (we hope) have formed some sort of communal living arrangement that’s informed by their understandings of themselves and their place in the Kingdom. That’ll come during their last semester of living on campus, just before moving off campus in the fall. And it’s all important stuff that I sure wish the St. Ann Community had had more training in before we got started. Could’ve saved us a lot of heartache, I think. Anyway, those gatherings are also framed by three retreats: one at the beginning, one to regroup as we enter the fall (after being gone for summer), and one to finish things out at the very end. And I’m excited to get to put some more time into planning all those things. Not quite yet, though. There’s still some time before we have to have details, and there’s plenty more to do in the meantime. Like finish out this crazy semester. And design a course for next fall with Ben. And get married in nine days. (YAY!!!) You know, just run of the mill kinds of things. ☺

**October 19th**

Had a good conversation with Kent today. We met at the library Starbucks and then headed to the picnic tables outside to have our discussion, since the weather was so nice. We talked about the first couple of chapters of Osmer’s book. I like the book and think there’s some good stuff in it for me to learn. So far I’ve read the introduction and about “priestly listening,” the descriptive-empirical task. In our conversation today we talked some about which of the four tasks appeals most to me and which I think I’m probably weakest at.

I’m not completely sure which will appeal to me most once I’ve read Osmer’s full descriptions of them all, but I’m guessing that it’ll probably be the normative task. I like figuring out what *should* be happening in a given situation. I like working with ideals more than with realities, which actually has showed up as a shortcoming in some of my work thus far in grad school. Seems I’m pretty good at talking about what should be happening and forgetting to come up with concrete, practical steps to help that happen, or sometimes even ignoring the probability that the ideal can’t or won’t happen in a given situation. My case study comes to mind… I spend a lot of time talking about what the “Church for All People” should look like, and not enough time dealing with what it *does* look like and what Bruce might do in the midst of that. A limitation, I know, and one that needs addressing more systematically in my work in the future, I guess, since my own natural inclination is to focus more on the normative than the actual. Guess there’s some of the prophet in me, at least in Osmer’s terms. I’ve always kind of wondered if that was true or if I simply wanted it to be true. But I’m not sure I’ll ever be sure about that. And I’m not sure what to do with that inclination in the meantime, other than discipline it more and supplement it more, I guess.

But the task we talked about most today, the descriptive-empirical task, is the one that I feel weakest at. I can come up with practical solutions if absolutely must, and sometimes they’re pretty good ones. But carrying out research?? I don’t have any clue how to begin. Oh, I can do the informal and even the semiformal attending relatively well. But the formal attending through empirical research? I’m clueless when it comes to that. And that really intimidates me sometimes because I have a feeling it’ll be important in some way or another for my future in academia (should I decide to pursue that). But I’ve never been taught what to do, even in undergrad, and it’s so overwhelming and intimidating that I don’t really have any clue where to begin or if I even want to… Not completely sure what that means for my future prospects…

**November 6th**

I found out yesterday morning that I’m not going to get to go on the JUST trip this weekend like I’d planned after all. I showed up to Mike’s class and started chatting with my students, catching up with them a bit after having been gone for the last week on my honeymoon. I mentioned that I was excited about going to Dallas with them this weekend, but it turns out that they actually went *last* weekend. Apparently the syllabus and schedule that Stephen gave me at the beginning of the semester wasn’t fully accurate. I compared it to the students’ syllabus, and sure enough, theirs said November 3rd, while mine said November 10th. Not that I would have rescheduled my wedding or honeymoon to be back for the trip or anything like that, but at least I wouldn’t have had the expectation that I’d get to join them. I was actually really excited about that. The last trip was a lot of fun (other than the annoying cameraman and the not so great end to the day with the fiasco at the fair), and I was really looking forward to getting to spend some more time with my students, getting to know them better through the experience and perhaps through conversations like the one that Stephen and I had with Josh last time.

Part of me too, I guess, was hoping to go because it seemed like an opportunity for the students to get to know *me* better too, to like me more and to see me more as a normal person and a friend, not just as their TA. Makes me wonder what the boundaries there are… I wonder how Kent deals with that. And Stephen too, for that matter. Probably a lot of professors, actually. At least the ones that I want to be like. What does it look like to be someone’s professor but to still have a desire to also be their friend or fellow church member or mentor? (Now that I think of it, even my dad had to deal with that a little, with all three of us kids in his history classes in high school.) But more than wondering how that can be done, I guess I’m wondering what’s healthy for me to desire. Should I desire less formal relationships, more like easygoing friendships with my students, in which I can laugh and joke and be silly? Or is there some sort of boundary that I need to maintain that doesn’t allow for those things? Annnnyway…

So yeah, for a variety of reasons, I was disappointed. A little bit frustrated at Stephen too, as he hadn’t included me in any email communication about the trip, so I had no idea that the date was different than I’d thought. Which, I mean, is really not his main consideration, I understand that. But he did know I was using this context for my field education, and as the former field education director, I’d think he’d realize that getting my engagement hours was a relatively important thing. Or maybe he just assumed I’d be gone on my honeymoon and didn’t want to bother me. Whatever the case, it does make me want to be both more assertive and more considerate with my own communication in the future. And there’s still another trip in a couple of weeks that I was for sure planning on going on. Guess I’ll just have to make the most of it.

**November 16th**

Had a meeting last night at Kent’s house with the potential new coaches for the next round of MLI, or Missional Life as I guess I should start calling it. That’s going to be a hard habit to break. I was not particularly in the greatest of moods as this meeting began. It’d been planned while I was on my honeymoon, and I was under the impression when I showed up at Kent’s that it was just another normal meeting with the leadership team. But no. When I drove up and began to see extra cars belonging to people who weren’t part of that team I began to wonder. And sure enough, people started filing in wanting to be all friendly and outgoing, and I was not at all prepared for that. Nor was I prepared to talk to a group like that about MLI. But that’s what happened. And it turned out all right. Actually, by the end of it (though I was quite drained), I was no longer too frustrated and was instead actually pretty excited. Seems like a good group of people to lead some cohorts, and it’s a relief to have more people involved to take some of the weight off of those of us who’ve been in this for a year and a half already. In fact, we had a leadership circle meeting this morning, and that’s really that thing that I emphasized that I’d come away from that meeting with. It’s exciting to have more people, and a greater diversity of people, as part of the Missional Life process.

In fact, having more people is a bit of a relief because I think it’ll allow me to do the kinds of things in Missional Life that I’m better suited to. I’ve been thinking about that for a while, in the context of whether or not I should help lead a cohort this next go-round. It didn’t work out too well for me and Ben last time, but that wasn’t all our fault (though some of it was). But even when it did work out, I didn’t particularly enjoy it. That might’ve been the people who were part of our cohort and that I just didn’t connect well with any of them. But I think that might be the trend in general, given how extreme of an introvert I am. Being in that kind of setting and relationship really drains me, which is funny given some of my thoughts earlier about wanting to be friends with the JUST kids. I don’t know… Anyway, it’s hard for me, and I don’t think it exactly plays to my strengths. I think I’m probably better suited to the role of educational coordinator or something like that. Something that allows me to do the things I’m really interested in as part of MLI: planning the large group gatherings, envisioning what the overall processes of the group can and should look like, working with Ben to develop the course component for next fall, and hopefully even teaching that. (Speaking of which, it turns out Chris wants a syllabus soon. We’re going to try to have a copy of it to him by the beginning of the spring semester. Aaah!) That’s what I really like. That and organizing things. I’m actually thinking I might nominate myself for administrator once the election comes around here in a few weeks. Now that I’m not so overwhelmed with planning a wedding (though there’s still plenty to do to keep me busy with school), I actually feel like I can have the time to attend to that well, and that’s something that I’m really good at and like to do. Plus, to be perfectly frank, though others are decently good at it, sometimes it pains me to see their methods. Quite un-humbly, I’m sure, I think mine are better.

But at the same time, I’m not sure what to do about whether or not to help lead a cohort. John’s considering it, and he’s looking for a partner. And he and I have talked about it some, along with Shannon and Rosten (our spouses). The four of us would like to spend more time together anyway, and leading a cohort together could be a good way to do that. But I’m hesitant about that because I’m not sure we have the time for it or that I could do it well. And I sure don’t want to do it halfheartedly. I talked to John about it a little last night at the meeting at Kent’s house. I guess I’m willing to do it if it comes down to it, but my preference is to not, and I think that it’d probably be better for the students involved if I didn’t and instead focused on the things I’m better at and passionate about. But we’ll see how all of that develops.

**November 30th**

Spent the day in Dallas with the JUST crew again. This time I ended up riding shotgun in the van that Bill Rankin was driving. Seems he’s a pretty integral part of the JUST expeditions, not just a one-time visitor like I’d assumed last time. Though I recognized his name and face, I didn’t really know him, but we spent most of the trip to Dallas talking. I had a really great conversation with him about the ways the field of education is changing, and I’ll probably spend some more time reflecting on that later. I think he had some really good things to say, things that will probably affect how Ben and I design this MLI course. But for now, it’s on to the rest of the day.

When we got to Dallas, we again met very briefly upstairs in CitySquare’s nice conference room area, and they’d again provided us some snacks for breakfast. We were joined there by John Siburt again, as well as a representative from ACU’s nursing school, who was along for the day to contemplate how the nursing school might also find connections with CitySquare for its students and program. She was there because the whole day was centered around the theme of health. Our schedule ended up deviating a bit from what Stephen had emailed me, but we still squeezed in everything he’d had on the agenda.

So first we went to visit Project Access, an organization that provides assistance to people with no insurance so that they can receive access to medical care. The director and about six of his team members were there that morning to spend some time talking with us. These six ladies were called “navigators,” and they told us about the work that they do and the people that they work with, including some stories about certain cases. I noticed that the JUST students didn’t seem all that engaged in the interaction. I’m not sure why, but some factors that I thought might have contributed were: the early morning time and this being our first engagement; having only a short period of time to spend there total; the cultural and linguistic barriers between us and the navigators, many of whose first language was Spanish; a possible lack of interest in the health field (other than the one pre-med student); the somewhat controlling and (seemingly) patronizing manner of the male director. Who knows?

After we left Project Access, we stopped by the CitySquare health clinic. Other than the CitySquare logo that was conspicuously visible, the clinic looked and felt like any other medical clinic. But the population that it serves is notoriously underinsured and underserved. This clinic, the director told us as she gave us a tour, is rated one of Dallas’s best as far as the quality of medical services provided, even better than the one she personally visits, which is top of the line. The clinic is staffed largely by volunteers, which makes the consistent quality of service that much more impressive. Here the students again were not extremely engaged, though more so than at Project Access. The director commented on that, thinking perhaps we were in need of some lunch by this time, which may have been a contributing factor. But I had to wonder again, what might be causing the students’ disengagement?

After leaving the clinic, we stopped at a restaurant relatively near where the students will be living next year. Here the students finally seemed to wake up. They were more in their element, laughing and joking with one another and with me. I really enjoyed the conversation that I had with the five girls at my table. I did notice, though, that while the woman from the nursing school joined our table, the girls hardly paid her any attention. It seemed like she would have been more comfortable at the “adult table,” but the other adults had all come in later after parking the vans, and she’d already taken a seat with us. Plus, they were all relatively boisterous men, and she was rather reserved. Whatever her preferences and feelings, I couldn’t help but contemplate the dynamics at our table and wonder if the girls sitting there with her and I had even given any thought to her. Though many factors contribute to any given situation, to be sure, I wonder if this was perhaps any indication of the way these girls would treat outsiders and/or strangers in general, and if so, I wonder about the implications of that for their work in Dallas.

When we’d wrapped up lunch, we headed back to CitySquare’s main building. We had a little bit of free time, so people went in various directions. Most of the students headed down the street a couple of blocks because they’d been informed that there was a park nearby. I contemplated joining them; I really do enjoy spending time with them and also wanted to engage the day to the greatest possible extent. But I also know that we still had a couple of hours of interaction in front of us, and my head was beginning to hurt from being around so many people and so much activity. (Freshmen are noisy!!) Plus I had some of my own homework that was demanding my attention. So I headed upstairs alone to spend a bit of time reading and disconnecting. I’ve noticed in general, but particularly in my interactions with undergrads, that I have to have time away from it all if I’m going to be healthy or effective. As an introvert, time with people can be extremely taxing for me, especially if it involves a lot of noise or activity or if there’s no break in the midst of it. If I don’t anticipate it and preempt it, I can feel it coming on when my head literally starts to hurt. If I don’t get away for a while to have some time to myself (or perhaps with one close, trusted friend), things will go downhill quickly from there. So as much as I was interested in hanging out with the students, I knew I needed to take that precious half hour to myself if I was going to be at all engaged in the afternoon and evening.

When it was time for us to get back together, I was feeling a little better. Still not completely excited about being around people, but able to manage it. Thankfully our next activity was to listen to a lecture from Dr. Mark DeHaven. He works at UT Southwestern and heads up the GoodNews program, a faith-based program that focuses on reducing chronic disease and developing healthier people by developing communities that adopt healthier lifestyle choices. It sounds like a pretty good program. But Dr. DeHaven didn’t just talk about GoodNews, or at least a large part of what he talked about could be seen as a preface to his discussion of GoodNews. He spent a large part of his time talking about biblical and theological justifications for his beliefs about health. And while I (and it seemed the students, too) appreciated this attempt at theological grounding for what he was doing, part of me cringed deeply at a lot of what he said. My general reaction was something along the lines of “Why don’t you leave the theology to the theologians and do what you’re good at?” I find that reaction from myself interesting, particularly because of my interest in practical theology and in the accessibility of theology. I guess inherent in my hope for theology to be accessible and practical is a desire that it be done well, and (with all due respect for what he is doing in the medical and social field) Dr. DeHaven’s theology seemed awfully biblicist and simplistic. I was not a fan. It is curious to me though, that such good results can come about, even from such bad theology. Makes me wonder what kind of good results would come about from the same kind of initiative if it had better theology…

Anyway, as I said, most of the students seemed relatively engaged in this presentation, though it was tough for some of them because they were getting sleepy after lunch. And I appreciated their attention, but my own hesitations about Dr. DeHaven’s theology made me a little uncomfortable with how readily the students at least seemed to be accepting what he was saying. I wonder what Stephen’s thoughts on that were. Is there a line somewhere that shouldn’t be crossed when it comes to exposing students to good practice informed by bad theology? Is cultivating good practice or good theology more the goal? Or are they inextricable?

After Dr. DeHaven finished up and we mingled for a few minutes, the JUST crew headed back down to the vans to load up for the trip home to Abilene. Unfortunately we were leaving Dallas just in time to get caught in some of the rush hour traffic, but it wasn’t as bad as it could have been. We made a stop at Subway for dinner, and someone commented that they were thankful to eat relatively healthy food after having heard about so many illnesses associated with bad lifestyle choices that day. After a couple of hours in the van, which included more conversation with Bill for me (he told me some about their last trip, focused on hunger, which I was really sad to have missed out on), we got back to Abilene around 8:00. I was quite ready to be home and away from people and conversation. All in all, though, a pretty good day.

**January 4th**

Met with Kent this afternoon to talk more about what all needs to happen to finish up all this field ed stuff. There’s plenty to do. It seems the semester somewhat got the best of me, at least as far as this class was concerned, so I’ve got some catching up to do. I don’t like that trend, and I don’t like having things hanging over my head, so I’m really glad that I’m at least attempting to get all of this done before the next semester starts here in another ten days, but for now it’s a lot of pressure. I’ve noticed, though, throughout this semester and in other experiences as well that when I don’t have hard deadlines, things just kind of keep getting pushed back. And that’s what landed me in this situation now. Understandably so, given what the last few months have entailed. But this isn’t the first time, and I’m guessing it won’t be the last. It sure does help, I’ve also noticed, when I have some sort of guidance. I really can be self motivated to do a lot of things, but when I feel like there’s so much to do that I don’t even know where to start, that’s when I particularly need some direction from a professor or even a trusted friend. Or Rosten. He’s pretty good at that—reassuring me that the world’s not going to end and that I’m competent to do what needs done if I just break it down into manageable chunks and *do* it. I’m sure that if I do go into a PhD program someday, he’ll have to continue to play that role to some degree, though hopefully I can continue to develop better habits of understanding large projects and taking them on bit by bit rather than in a hurry all at once at the last minute.

Anyway, though that came to mind as a result of the conversation with Kent, that wasn’t the focus of that conversation. After figuring out the logistics of what needed to happen as far as finishing this course, we talked about JUST and Missional Life, comparing and contrasting them some. I explained to him a bit more about how JUST is restructuring students’ degrees and entire college experiences. We talked about the value of on the ground learning experiences, particularly ones that happen concurrently with academic education and reflection on those experiences. We discussed the different kinds of diversity and commonality that JUST and ML emphasize and utilize. And we talked some about the different kinds of peer and expert practitioner relationships the JUST and ML students are developing, and how the differences between JUST and ML in that arena reflect something about the differing purposes of the two programs. We finished up the conversation with some discussion of the durability of the outcomes of the two programs and how that may or may not be tied to how much the programs are linked to the church and faith community. I’m not completely sure what I think about that, but it’s something worth reflecting on more.

I have wondered throughout the semester if it would be good for the JUST students to function as a faith community for one another, especially during the year that they’re in Dallas. And by that I mean something along the lines of what MRNA and MLI are modeling as far as faith community. Something more than students who are acquainted with each other and know that what they’re doing they’re doing because of God-given passion. Something that includes them knowing one another more deeply and spending time in the presence of God, both individually and together. I was hopeful that something like that might be part of the experience back in the early part of the semester when I heard that on their first trip to Dallas they’d be meeting with someone from one of the New Day communities. Apparently the guy was a former student of Elaine Heath’s and lives at CitySquare, where he’s helping form an intentional community among the residents. Actually, now that I think about it, I think the JUST group were supposed to have dinner with this entire community. I was sad to have to miss out on that trip, but I was under the impression (probably just formed because of my hopefulness) that that’d be a recurring event. But that doesn’t seem to have been the case. And I’m afraid that these students won’t have the kind of spiritual support network that they need, particularly when they’re in an unfamiliar place (for most of them) doing demanding work. And there’s so much potential for a rich experience of faith community in a way that most of these students probably haven’t engaged before. But it seems like that’s not the focus of the JUST program and so that’s not something that is a priority. Maybe I should talk to Stephen more about his thoughts on that. And not just because I’m curious about JUST’s aims or because I think it’s important in theory but because these particular students are important to me and I think it’s important for them and their spiritual development and health. We’ll see…

**January 9th**

I’m supposed to call Ben to get together to discuss course development more. But I keep avoiding it, for a couple of reasons. One, he just had surgery two days ago and probably should be resting, though he told me to text him to find a time to get together anyway. Two, I’ve got a whole lot to do on top of that. There’s getting rosters and other details for Randy’s class organized before classes start on Monday. And there’s this, my field education stuff that’s got to be done. Still have a 20 page paper to write. And then there’s quite simply the fact that I think I’d rather begin working on it alone some because it will technically be *my* course to teach, not *ours*.

Ben and I have spent a couple or hours together thus far working on developing the course’s direction and outlining the teaching days. And we’ve come up with some good things, I think. And he’s great. Really. Ben’s spectacular at that kind of thing. Which is a bit intimidating, if I’m perfectly honest. Probably something I need to reflect on more at some point. But he’s also got his pet ideas that he focuses in on so intensely that sometimes I think he misses other important points, sometimes even the main points. A few months ago I reflected some on Stephen’s having pet ideas that I’d heard him repeat over the course of a couple of years. And they’re good ones. And Ben’s are good ones too. They’re just not mine. I still am not sure what all mine are, though I have some thoughts. And I’m not sure how (or even if) I should teach them. Obviously if I’m teaching a class it’ll reflect my biases to some degree. But I don’t want that to greatly limit the scope of what students are exposed to. And that’s one way in which having Ben’s contributions comes in really handy. The two of us together can create a stronger course than either one of us on our own. But it’s not going to be the two of us teaching it, as we’d thought until a few months ago. Since he’s moving, it’ll be me, and perhaps Kent. And as great as Ben’s contributions are, I have absolutely no idea how to teach some of them. And there are others that I’m not sure I want to teach because I guess I think there are other topics that are more important.

Now that I think about it this way, I guess I’m struggling to engage effectively in what Osmer refers to as intradisciplinary and cross-disciplinary dialogue. Ben brings a lot of good things to the table, but a lot of them are outside of my scope. That’s largely just because with the genius mind that he has (literally), he’s capable of grasping a lot more than I am as far as concepts and interconnections. And that’s partly because he’s had more exposure than I have to things like philosophy, systems theory, therapy, cognitive development, pedagogy, and so on. So he’s a great resource, but sometimes he overwhelms me.

I’m not sure what that means as far as the development of the course, though. Does that mean we should fit it to my current strengths and capabilities, or does that mean I should spend a lot of time in the intervening seven months educating myself on the kinds of things that Ben’s bringing to the table so that I’m able to teach them well to the students? Or is there another solution that’s better? And how should I discuss that with him?

He just texted me a minute ago. We’re set to meet again the day after tomorrow for a big chunk of time. I’m a bit nervous about it, particularly because I’m not sure how much time I’ll be able to dedicate to thinking about those questions and the course development in general in the next day and a half. But I guess I’ll just do what I can. Can’t do more than that, right?

**January 10th**

Turns out I never got around to spending any time reflecting on the conversation that I had with Bill Rankin in the van on the way to Dallas. Since Ben and I are supposed to get together tomorrow to do some more work on course development, and since I already spent some time this afternoon thinking about that (a rough syllabus is due in the next week or so — aaah!), I figure now’s probably a pretty good time to do that.

So first, content of the discussion. It largely centered on ways in which the university is changing and what that means for programs and courses now. Apparently the technological revolution is causing all sorts of upheaval in education, and if the modern university is going to survive (at least in Bill’s view), it’s going to have to make some major shifts in how it operates—both in its goals and in its methods. So with the advent of computer and the internet in particular, educational content is available to just about anyone and for free or relatively cheap. And this is reputable content that we’re talking about, from reputable sources like the Ivy League schools that put their professors’ lectures online for free. You can learn just about anything just about anywhere and any time and at a very low cost. So what’s the point of the university when that’s the case? (Perhaps to lend some credibility to a person’s learning, but even that’s being circumvented in certain ways now.) It’s only the universities that offer something other than information (in addition to information, we’d hope) that’ll survive the technological trends. In order to maintain enrollment, then, universities are going to have to attract students with alternative means: networking, practical experiences that strengthen a resume, new and thoughtful kinds of interdisciplinary studies, and so on. And teaching in the classroom is going to have to recognize that, while perhaps still needing guidance toward *quality* materials, students are able to source their education themselves if they’d like; positive classroom experiences will be more about what emerges in discussion and development within a cohort rather than about the acquiring of predetermined portions of knowledge.

Bill and I also talked some about Missional Life and why I’m part of it. He asked what drew me to it and how it connects with who I am. He wanted to know what its goals are, and the goals of the course that I’m going to be teaching. (He seemed like a pretty good resource, and I didn’t want to pass up the opportunity to hear his thoughts on what we’re doing. I’m glad I got to talk with him!) After hearing some about ML, he noted that he’d picked up on the themes of diversity and of identity based on network and practice rather than institution and self. The latter was a trend he said he was seeing in education in general. As far as it goes, he said that we seemed to be reflecting that trend in our emphasis of relationships and on the ground experiential learning. And as far as diversity goes, he noted that you won’t get diverse people out of a course where you ask everyone to do the same thing. (That seems like a really important point to me. We’ve got to respect and cultivate diversity because God’s people simply *are* diverse. But I’ll save more reflection on that for a little bit later.) And he challenged me as far as the fact that I’d basically assumed that as the professor and as the ML team, I and we (the team), would be the ones choosing the resources for the course (books, articles, etc.). I’d already thought some about wanting diverse input on that from the ML team and other sources beyond that, but I hadn’t really thought too much about the fact that (particularly given the probable technological savvy of my students), asking them to contribute resources to the class (and we’re talking extensively, not just minutely) is a way of respecting the diversity of that particular cohort and, perhaps just as important, a way of offering what the students need: reflection and relationship formation rather than just information. (Wow, that was a long sentence.)

So I’m wondering about how to incorporate all that into the formation of a course and a syllabus. I mean, there has to be some sort of standardization for the purposes of fairness and predictability and, probably, for maintaining accreditation. I don’t think you can just get away with customizing every aspect of an entire semester-long class to each student in it, every time that it’s taught, even if you had the time and energy to do that for a 20-30 person class when you’re getting paid adjunct faculty pay. I know I don’t have that kind of time and energy, much as I might like to. (Hmmm… perhaps something to contemplate at some point. What kind of setting would allow me to customize learning experiences in such a way? Something like this field education course does that built in to some extent, but only to a degree, and that’s just one course among many. Anyway, a thought for another time.) So, Ben and I have already talked about having some degree of maneuverability built into the syllabus, with students have a couple of options on a couple of different assignments. And that’s something. Plus I was thinking about having some sort of creative project like Dr. Huddleston asked us to do in Intro to Old Testament, where the student has the freedom to express his or her learning in any number of creative ways (music, poetry, story, painting, collage, dance, etc.) This makes me desire to incorporate that even more than I already did, but perhaps in an even better way, though I have no clue now what that might be.

And Ben and I had talked a bit on how to incorporate technology into the course (use of various media in instruction, video recordings for some assignments, etc.). But I would like to think more about that. Probably not in the next week before Chris wants a rough copy of the developing syllabus, but perhaps over the summer as I’m really fleshing it out. (Oh, and all that makes me think of what we’d talked about regarding the way Robert Foster used technology and its offerings really well for our Justice in the Biblical Tradition class. He incorporated comedians and musicians and other sorts of artists into the class in ways that were still extremely pertinent to the course but that also gave our brains a break from the more traditional learning forms. I want to do that too!)

As a side note, those last two paragraphs and their references to former professors just made me realize something. I’m learning—learning how to design a course well—both by the experience of actually doing it and by doing it in conversation with expert practitioners (albeit somewhat one-sidedly thus far, in reflection on my experiences with those professors as well as in the perusing I’ve been doing of my prior classes’ syllabi). And it’s working decently well, I think, because I’m not just doing one or the other. I’m doing both. At the same time. So I’m bringing my own unique giftings and passions to the table, but I’m also being formed into a better practitioner through my observation of even better practitioners at work. And that’s pretty much what both MLI and JUST are doing. And that’s pretty much how good learning happens, if my conversations with Bill and with Kent are any indication. Hmmm. That’s cool. I guess that’s the point of this whole field education things after all. And I’m not just saying that because I’m writing field notes for a field education class. I’m saying that because while I’m sure I had some sort of latent knowledge of it before, it really just hit me that that’s what is happening here. I hadn’t felt it before. Honestly, I’d kind of felt like I was wandering around a bit aimlessly, not really knowing the purpose of my field education experience, which was frustrating. Seemed like more work for very little reason. But now, in processing what I’m trying to do in developing this syllabus, I finally understand it more clearly. And it’s pretty cool. And it makes me even more excited about continuing to work on developing this course and the Missional Life program and even about PhD work. And I think that’s a pretty good place to stop and go have dinner with my amazing husband. ☺