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CREATIVE WRITING IN MINISTRY PREPARATION: NARRATIVIZING FORMATIONAL REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT. This paper is part proposal and part example. Our proposal, in essence, is a challenge to faculty to consider the value of incorporating various forms of creative writing into the ministry classroom. Incorporating creative writing can serve as a means for equipping students in their own spiritual transformation through the practice of narrativizing formational reflection. Our theoretical framework for using creative writing as a pedagogical tool is built on metacognition as classroom practice, which challenges students toward reflection and internalization. Following our proposal, we provide two tangible examples of how this proposal has been implemented in a seminary-level classroom. The first example uses a narrativized autobiography to challenge students to think through their life and ministry direction. In this assignment, they are tasked with writing their obituary, as it pertains to their ministry influence. The second writing example, which took place in our course on spiritual formation, uses C. S. Lewis' fiction to challenge students to think through their own spiritual blind spots as a means for guarding against temptation. Following these classroom examples, we provide pedagogical and professorial evaluation as we reflect on student and faculty perceptions of the success of these assignments in the ministry classroom.

KEY WORDS: creative writing, imagination, spiritual formation, metacognition, C. S. Lewis

Introduction

This paper is part proposal and part example. Our proposal, in essence, is a challenge to faculty to consider the value of incorporating various forms of creative writing into the ministry classroom. Incorporating creative writing can serve as a means for equipping students in their own spiritual transformation through narrativizing formational reflection. Our theoretical framework for using creative writing as a pedagogical tool, is built on metacognition as classroom practice, which challenges students toward reflection and internalization. Following our proposal, we provide two tangible examples of how this proposal has been implemented in a seminary-level classroom. The first example uses a form of spiritual autobiography to challenge students to think through their life and ministry direction. In this assign-

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ment, they are tasked with writing their autobiography as it pertains to their ministry influence, but specifically they are to write about their ministry life from the point of their seminary graduation forward. The second writing example, which took place in a course on spiritual formation, uses C. S. Lewis' fiction to challenge students to think through their own spiritual blind spots as a means for guarding against temptation. Following these classroom examples, we provide pedagogical and professorial evaluation as we reflect on student and faculty perceptions of the success of these assignments in the ministry classroom. In summary, Laura Foote's reflections are helpful as she says that, "through self-written narratives, adult learners can critically reflect upon prior learning experiences in ways that allow them to 're-story' their lives" (Foote 2015: 125). The following will nuance her recommendation focusing not on the re-story(ing) of student lives looking backwards, but as a proactive, metacognitive, and formational tool to encourage students toward pre-story(ing) their lives of ministry and their call to holiness. Foote finds application of her thesis and begins foreshadowing this pre-storied potential saying, "Finally, students can develop narratives that identify how they would do things differently in light of biblical injunctions; this process allows for application of learning that promotes renewing the mind and leads to further development of Christian identity" (Foote 2015: 124).

Metacognition as Theoretical Framework

Our proposal for creative writing is rooted in a metacognitive framework aimed at spiritual reflection. Metacognition has commonly been defined as "thinking about thinking" (Dimmitt and McCormick 2012: 157). Without detailing the nuanced definitions that have proliferated in this field, we rely on John Flavell's foundational definition that "metacognition refers to one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them" (Flavell 1976: 232). Put differently, "Metacognition describes the awareness and control of one's own thoughts" (Ku and Ho 2010: 252), and according to Lovrich (2004), "Introducing students to metacognition allows them to discover the value of reflection" (56). This echoes our own sentiments regarding the relationship between metacognition and reflection. Reflection can be a metacognitive process equipping individuals toward pre-planning (or in this case, pre-storying). Simply, our intent in this process is that students will identify spiritual goals and the necessary steps to reach those goals. In the proposals below, these goals are ministerially and formationally directed by the student based on two imaginative prompts. Thus, metacognition, for the purposes of this presentation, is the process whereby students consider, reflect, and think about *what* they learn, *how* they learn, and *why* they learn.

In adult education, metacognition includes the students' ability to consider their own learning process and what is needed for their education, maturation, and transformation (Dimmitt and McCormick 2012: 157-187). Thus, seminary students are able to self-identify necessary aspects for refinement in their ministerial and formational training. Creative writing can harness this metacognitive maturity allowing students to “pre-story” their reflections on the Christian life and their approaching ministries.

Narrativizing Formational Reflection

C. S. Lewis's *Great Divorce* offers not only a diagnosis of the danger of over-intellectualization for theologians; its specific literary form suggests that one way for transmitting the “affect” of the Christian life may quite possibly be through the genre of Lewis's own writing—narrative. Creative writing and fictional narratives can be a metacognitive tool useful in equipping students to pre-think about the Christian life as a journey and how they will travel the roads that lay ahead. Not only can creative writing be a useful tool for learning in the fields of literature and the humanities, but also in theological education and ministry preparation.

Heather Walton, professor of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Glasgow, has wrestled with finding the intersection between theology and creative writing. Her reflections opine that “few people have thought or written about this intersection”, and yet she is resolute in her search for such a juncture (Walton 2012: 210-218). While her epistemic foundations and directional conclusions are significantly different from ours, we too think that there is a *useful* intersection between formational reflection and creative writing. However, the differences in our approach and goal may be highlighted as she reflects on her approach to finding this nexus and teaching this subject. As Walton maintains, “Although I am not sure exactly how I want to go about this, I know very well how I don't want to proceed. I don't want to start with St Augustine's *Confessions* (I don't want them in the middle or at the end either). This is not because I don't like Augustine. I am actually very fond of him *despite* the awful legacy and the pretty terrible things he did while he was alive as well!... But what *Confessions* represents is the antithesis of all I am trying to achieve. The work strains and groans to discipline the flesh: ‘subdue my desire’; ‘discipline my intellect’; ‘don't place the fruit within the reach of my hands’” (Walton 2012: 211). Our approach is contrasted in that we are attempting to achieve something akin to Augustine, as we equip students with the metacognitive tools to discipline their flesh in the present for the sake of the future and their continued journey toward holiness.

In our estimation, this juncture marks the place where story resonates with personhood and individual personality. This is because stories, as

Middleton observed, “not only take us outside ourselves, into other lives, they also challenge us to read or interpret such lives graciously” (Middleton 2008: 8).

James K. A. Smith argues that the purpose of a Christian education is *more than* (but certainly *not less than*) a biblical worldview (Chatraw and Smith 2017: 24-26). Accordingly, he writes, “Christian education cannot be content to produce thinkers; it should aim to produce agents” (Smith 2013: 12). While our paper will not explore Smith’s argument about the role of liturgical practices shaping spiritual formation, we affirm his conclusion that pedagogical attentiveness to the imagination can help correct an overemphasis on the intellect that occurs by force of habit and conditioning. This pedagogical value of imagination then becomes important for understanding our proposal and how creative writing might become more than just empty activity, but an active tool for formational reflection. According to Smith, imagination is “a kind of faculty by which we navigate and make sense of our world, but in ways and on a register that flies below the radar of conscious reflection, and specifically in ways that are fundamentally aesthetic in nature” (Smith 2012: 19). Thus, imaginative reflection opens up the possibility of creative participation, and thus new ways of understanding, most notably by positioning us within a narrative structure.

Narrative encourages spiritual formation because “it is stories that train and prime our emotions, which in turn condition our perception and hence our action” (Smith 2012: 38). They do so because their meaning is on a “register that is visceral and bodily, more aesthetic than analytic, ‘made sense of’ more by the imagination than the intellect” (Smith 2012: 109). Imagination requires human engagement with story, as narratives include but also transcend the intellect. Creative writing, thus, harnesses this use of story as the means of a visceral, radar-evading reflection that can cement formational ideations into the psyche (and disciplines of life). Similarly, Dave Harrity argues that creativity is at the center of our being, because we are creatures made in the image of our creator God (Harrity 2013). He continues by advocating that activities such as writing and storytelling tap into one’s creative possibilities and provide an avenue for better apprehending the Kingdom of God, recognizing our place in this kingdom, and developing as its citizens. This creative work, when guided by right doctrine and modeled after biblical exemplars and stalwarts of the Christian faith, encourages and embodies holistic worship of God, involving mind, body, and spirit. It noticeably combines devotional practice with imaginative reflection—drawing on scripture, poetry, nature, memory, and theology.

As much as Walton has wrestled to find the nexus between creative writing and theology, her article substantively failed to offer how these disciplines could be integrated into the classroom. However, Laura Foote does

make some generic suggestions regarding how this could begin to filter into student practice by suggesting that Christian educators might use narrative prompts focusing on three dimensions of Christian identity formation: 1) self-perception and self-affirmation, 2) participation within the Christian community, and 3) Christian practice (Foote 2015). More specifically, Sherry Jordan has provided concrete examples of creative writing used in her classroom. For her, creative writing is a tool that requires students to view theology as more than dates, times, and events. Her approach challenges students to see history as a place and time made up of people—and the decisions that people have made during significant points in history. Creative writing, then, is a tool to facilitate deeper thinking about a lived-theology. She provides several examples that have worked in her classroom such as: 1) “Write a conversation with John Calvin on predestination. (He will be defending and explaining his views in response to your questions and objections)”; 2) “write an email exchange between yourself and your Lutheran cousin on the topic of justification”; and 3) “write a news blog to a group of people who recently moved to Geneva, explaining why Calvin was exiled and describing your reaction to his return” (Jordan 2012: 355). In reflecting on the experiences of using these prompts, she notices:

Students read the texts more carefully, think about them more deeply, and are better prepared for class discussions. I use the assignments in class by having students debate issues or adopt the persona of different historical figures. In an anonymous survey, students reported that they found the assignments helpful in learning the content of the course and their attitude toward writing in this course significantly improved (Jordan 2012: 355).

The way in which she used creative writing was in a historical, dialogical fashion. Her approach seems to be sound and beneficial for her students; however, this historical engagement is not quite what we will be proposing below. Instead, our approach is creative *and* proactive writing as students project their future and reflect on their current (and coming) spiritual location.

A Pedagogical Proposal

With a model like Lewis in mind, and the construct of imagination as a means for cementing formational ideations into the psyche from Smith, we will share two examples of how we have used a form of pre-storying at the graduate seminary level of education for the purpose of cultivating spiritual and ministerial formation. The first course that has integrated this type of writing is a course titled, *Research, Writing, and Ministry Preparation*. Theoretically, this is the very first course students are supposed to take in their mas-

ter's level program. In all actuality, faculty colleagues and the school's administration would be content with the results of this class if students were equipped to research, write, and replicate proper Turabian formatting. However, an entire course dedicated to these outcomes alone may not assist our retention goals and a course like this *could* discourage new students who are transitioning to theological education from a different educational background or career. So, it has seemed important to us to integrate a formational thread throughout this course to begin to cultivate in students a vision for their formation and ministerial futures. This is accomplished through journal prompts, what we have termed a family-integration paper, and their standard research paper in which they are to explore the prayer of Solomon in 1 Kings 3, the prayer of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 1, or the prayer of Paul in Colossians 1. All of these assignments are intended to equip students toward excellence in research, writing, and Turabian; however, they also weave this formational thread into the student's "academic" education. One assignment in this particular class also integrates a form of creative writing, a type of spiritual autobiography, which we will outline below.

The second course that has utilized creative writing is our spiritual formation course. Here, we borrow a Lewisian approach to creative spiritual writing for the sake of pre-planning how to face the spiritual battles that wage around us. In the remainder of this presentation, we will explain these assignments, provide examples of student work, and reflect on student evaluation as well as professorial evaluation of such integration between creative writing and formational reflection.

Narrativizing Formational Reflection in Pedagogical Practice

Assignment #1: Background and Explanation

The first course to apply our proposed approach for creative writing in ministry preparation did so as a discussion assignment, in which students were to write and then share what they wrote in an online discussion board forum. This assignment is based on one of the supplementary texts required in this course. The book is a short sampling of twenty spiritual biographies titled *They Found the Secret* by V. Raymond Edman. This book provides introductory biographies of Christian heroes such as John Bunyan, Hudson Taylor, D. L. Moody, and Amy Carmichael. The chapters capture their subjects' spiritual transformation through narrative underscored by short, succinct titles like "Oswald Chambers: The Highest Life" and "Andrew Murray: The Abiding Life", each tailored to the unique circumstances of the person under consideration. It is with

this framework that students are then assigned a final chapter for this book.

Assignment #1: Explanation and Student Instructions

For this assignment, students must write a hypothetical chapter 21 for the book, *They Found the Secret*. The subject of this final chapter must be yourselves. This writing assignment is not a testimony paper or a biography paper, but instead a chapter written about your Christian life, following the model of Edman. You should tell your story in the third person, including a subtitle that summarizes your Christian life. The express goal of this assignment is to challenge you to write as if you were reflecting on your entire spiritual journey. This means, you are not to simply focus on your testimony up until now/today, but instead you should focus on your entire journey from justification through sanctification to glorification. Be very brief on the events that have brought you from salvation to seminary and focus the majority of writing on the Christian life you *will* have, *hope* to have, and are *planning* to lead as you leave seminary and follow God's calling on your life. While you are living in the here-and-now, the purpose of this assignment is to challenge you to think about how to get from *here*—to the future and eschatological *there*. The goal is that this assignment will help you to imagine your calling so that you might be able to begin-with-the-end-in-mind and then reverse-engineer how to begin to pursue this calling.

1. A very brief narrative of your conversion experience focusing on your spiritual understanding at the time of coming to Christ. Follow the brevity and voice example in the text. Note that when Edman shares about the character's conversion, he often does so in 1–2 sentences.
2. In a lengthier section, write about how your spiritual understanding described above influenced how you lived your faith throughout the entirety of your life (assume that your whole life has been lived and you as the author can reflect on it in its entirety). It is in this section that you need to write about how you lived the life you described in the subject line. In the example provided, *The Faithful Life*, the focus is on what it means to live a faithful life and how the example demonstrates this character trait throughout the entirety of his life (even though he is still living).
3. Lastly, you will also need to integrate reflections from this textbook and the characters studied in this textbook. Do this by synthesizing how one (or more) of these characters impacted the life you are writing about. For instance, Oswald Chambers and Andrew Murray both

made an impact *The Faithful Life* example (as provided in the course notes).

Assignment #1: Student Examples

These examples come from samples of student work. These excerpts were taken from Ashley: The Proverbs 31 Life, Dean: The Transformed Life, and Lee: The Grateful Life.

Example 1: ...that first led Ashley back to school to major in religion and then on to seminary. She learned, with the help of the Holy Spirit working in her heart through her studies and prayers, that she is complete in Christ. The words of Colossians 2:9-10 are never far from her mind and heart. Paul writes: “For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. So you are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.” The wonderful knowledge of being complete in Christ caused Ashley to take heart in all the promises God made in His Word directly to her. She said later: “Consistent time spent in God’s Word matured my faith and allowed me to finally become what God wanted me to be. Once she learned that the only person she had to live for was Christ, all my other obligations such as marriage, motherhood, homemaking, and ministry became easier to manage. She sought to please God in all she did and as a result she had less anxiety about pleasing everyone else. She recognized that she could serve her family and the people she ministered to with joy and thanksgiving over all God had done in and through her life.”

Example 2: Through obedience to the Lord’s leading, as well as thankfulness for his transformed life, Dean was led to work in youth ministry, and it was here that he developed a reputation for being able to reach the particularly hurting teens through recognition of their shared experiences. It was while working with these particular youths that several young men committed their lives to Christ after hearing Dean’s testimony given as he preached a sermon from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

Example 3: He began teaching children, youth, and college age kids how to answer some of the tough questions that would be directed toward them by their peers, and postmodernists. Lee taught them to be proud of their faith and share the love of Jesus Christ demonstrated by His incarnation, His perfect life, His death, burial, and resurrection for the worst of sinners. Finally, he demonstrated through his mistakes that

they should recognize their blessings and be grateful to our heavenly Father early in their lives.

These autobiographical sketches are submitted on a discussion board for other members of the class to read and respond to, and the resultant class discussion connects the historical examples of the Christian faith with current-day personal experience.

Assignment #1: Pedagogical Assessment and Professorial Discussion

There are strengths and weaknesses with this assignment as it is currently conceptualized and constructed for students. From the professorial perspective, the strength of this assignment is that it requires students to think about their Christian life from a perspective other than simply recounting a past narrative. Here, students are required to consider how their past narrative provides a foundation for their future ministry. The weaknesses of this assignment, however, are twofold. The first weakness is that students are not *yet* required to assess the effectiveness of this assignment and what they learn from it. Including a formal or informal assessment would aid students in their metacognitive task that true learning might take place. Secondly, it seems that students struggle with projecting their *future* story. Many students, out of habit, simply recount their testimony in the language and prose of Edman's text. Students struggle with writing about their future from the perspective of a "completed life". It would be recommended that if replicating or revising this assignment that professors clearly explain *how* the student is to write about their future testimony, so that they can reverse engineer the path to get to this ministry end. Utilizing open-ended class discussion before students set out to work on this assignment would be a productive way to clarify the intent of this creative practice. Since we can't foresee all the twists and turns of the future, perhaps the focus of the future oriented narrative should be less on events and more with the principles and guiding convictions that form the trajectory of the story.

Assignment #2: Background and Explanation

The second creative-writing assignment has been used in two different courses. It was first used in an elective course over the winter term, titled *Theology and Apologetics of C. S. Lewis*. Following this course, it was used in a course titled, *Spiritual Formation*. In both classes, the instructions were similar. Students were assigned *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis' imaginative rendering of the correspondence between an elder, master demon and his nephew, Wormwood, on the tricks of the temptation trade. Thus, the letters ironically offer insight for Christians considering the nature of salvation and guidance for spiritual formation and the pursuit of holi-

ness. For those unfamiliar with the book here is a brief sample, perhaps especially pertinent to a seminary audience. Here, Lewis writes in the voice of Screwtape, the elder demon giving advice to his novice nephew demon:

My dear Wormwood,

You mentioned casually in your last letter that the patient has continued to attend one church, and one only, since he was converted, and that he is not wholly pleased with it. May I ask what you are about? Why have I no report on the causes of his fidelity to the parish church? Do you realize that unless it is due to indifference it is a very bad thing? Surely you know that if a man can't be cured of churchgoing, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighbourhood looking for the church that "suits" him until he becomes a taster or connoisseur of churches (Lewis 2013: 93).

Assignment #2: Explanation and Student Instructions

In this assignment, each student has to put themselves in the place of Screwtape, doling out advice to a junior devil concerning a "patient". In this letter, *you* [the student] will be the patient. Each student's own life and experience are to provide the material for the devilishly inverted advice. Each of us knows our own specific points of spiritual vulnerability. Articulating a strategy for our spiritual enemy to exploit should lead to a recognition regarding where we are susceptible to temptation—and hopefully provide clear-eyed objectivity about the nature of and best responses to our own spiritual attacks.

Assignment #2: Student Product Examples

Following are four student samples taken from the two courses that have used this Lewisian letter approach to formational reflection on potential avenues for spiritual downfall.

My Dearest Wormwood,

I hear that the patient is growing in his knowledge of the Enemy and will be seeking a job in His ministry soon. You must stop this at once. Keep bringing to his memory his failed past relationship. Past failures can be rich environments in which to affect the future. Stir again those emotions of shame and guilt over the divorce. Create the thought that a permanent "D" [for Divorced] has been placed visibly on his head for all to see. We get much mileage from a person's refusal to move on from past disappointments.

Recently, Junior Demon Smirkblurp has been very effective in his work on Mrs. Martin. She may be quite useful to us. Smirkblurp will provoke her to remind the Church counsel that the patient was divorced and is therefore not suited for any kind of ministry at the Church. Her mercilessly dropping hints, at the most unkind moments, of the patient's past will also serve us well. This should go a long way toward our cause, bringing much doubt of whether or not the Enemy could have any use for the patient, even possibly bringing him to feel quite all together worthless.

Another student reflected on life by identifying potential blind spots susceptible to the enemies attack.

*Wormwood,
If you're really struggling with ways to keep her shoved under her own shame, I'd suggest you tempt her with media. Make it a program that has a little bit of our influence to drag her further into our work. If that doesn't work tempt her with another one of the Enemy's cohorts that seems to have it all together. Little does she know we have her too, and she doesn't have it all together. With the presence of another gal, tempt our subject to post some pictures and make her seemingly artistic life look a little better than it is. Drive the temptation deeper and have her use some of her precious time fabricating a caption that only captures her attempt at living a life reflecting the Enemy. Ah, Wormwood, isn't it so fabulous that we can meddle with our subject's minds without even doing anything?*

You must find the chinks in her armor and you must fire your arrow as soon as the chink appears. You must remember that she wants to be heard, she wants to be listened to and valued and she wants to know that she matters, so shoot her right there. Give her opportunities to listen and instead make her too loud and over bearing. Let her make a joke that not a soul finds funny, and let her wallow in her own picturesque rejection.

Below, a male student reflects on the common temptations he sees in his everyday life—especially pertaining to his call toward a life of singleness.

*Dear Scuttlebutt,
Your efforts to thwart the Enemy's command for your patient not to seek a wife have failed. He has all but surrendered to a life of singleness and settled in to be contented by the Enemy's Spirit for the most intimate companionship. You had prevailed with great success for several years to have him seeking completion and happiness in a spouse, yet always keeping a promising candidate carefully out of reach, so as to perpetually keep him in the state of discontented emotional anguish. It is a great loss for us now that he is no longer affected by*

the suggestions of loneliness, for in the years past, your persuasions had him dancing merrily to the tune of the world and the Christian church culture which sings of the great detriment of the unmarried man or woman past 30 years old....

I am hesitant to advise you further in this area now, for the route of pride may serve us better. Yet, I will enlighten you of the need for subtleties in the spouse seeking area, in the event such an occasion presents itself. Keep in mind the great many clergymen over the years I have enticed through the promise of sexual ecstasy without consequences and brought down not only their own lives, but also the countless others who were or could have been won to the Enemy through their influence. Remember how I taught you: keep the patient aloof to the dangers of what he allows to pass in front of his eyes, and make use of the woman or women who become attracted to the Enemy's Spirit that seeps through his countenance. Although the Enemy Spirit's work in the mortal's spirit is detestable to us, if you watch his reactions to the female's occasional niceness to him and hints of interest, and then whisper to him again his singleness and potential fulfilment in marriage, then there may be a chance to get him back on his own track and off the Enemy's pathway...

Listen, my fine Scuttlebutt, your reputation does indeed precede itself and in the worst way. It is all good and well that you live up to your name, though for this particular patient, you must do your worst on the side of the positive. It may seem like you are helping the Enemy at first and perhaps for a considerable amount of time, but trust me, at the right moment, a kink in the chain can cause it to break and send the hefty load of good repute crashing down all the harder, having hoisted it so high in the air with your persistent hard work and intricate system of pulleys in his life. As you build up the compliments in his head by reminding him of the praise (repetition and replay are key here), he will start to pat himself on the back, looking more at himself than the One who gave and developed his noteworthy qualities and accomplishments. If I may point out the comment from one of your former letters, why not start with his ability to write well? If what you say is true, there is undoubtedly already a concrete foundation of pride in self being poured and set, even as I write this letter you are now reading...

Lastly, in a letter written by an international student and mother of two boys, Wormwood's advice stems from the God-given relationships fashioned between parent and child. It's not sin in the life of a student that provides temptation, but instead the holy parental relationship which Wormwood can exploit for his own purposes.

Next, use your patient's sons to get her mad. Normally teens are a really good tool to use to get moms upset or annoyed. You know teens are great soldiers and faithful friends. ... Usually moms feel terrible and horrible when they lose their influence over their children. Even though this mom is not ready to give her life to our Father-Below, she is completely ready to give her life to her children. That is the temptation with "motherhood" (as the stupid human beings call it). Moms obsess over their children and desperately try to protect them from harm (which you know is not fully possible); however, if you can give them this obsession—then the game is ours!

Assignment #2: Student Assessment and Reflections

Anecdotally it has seemed that most students have enjoyed this project and share transparently and freely. However, some students seemed to find this practice academically challenging as it falls outside of their "expertise", while at least one student felt uncomfortably challenged on a personal level. In this course, following the writing of their letter, students were encouraged (not required) to share their letters with the class. On this self-reporting Laura Foote says that, "because Christian identity is formed in community, class discussions about what students discovered about themselves through these narratives allows students to learn from one another and encourages further reevaluation of self-perception and self-affirmation" (Foote 2015: 124). Our express goals, in this time of sharing, were to help students see that temptation is a common experience, and much of what they are tempted by are the same temptations that face their friends and peers. In an informal, optional assessment only one student didn't think the practice was valuable; however, this student was sick during the week we discussed the *Screwtape Letters* in class and her perspective may have been limited due to the lack of collaborative discussion on the book leading up to the assignment. Other students had the following to say about their thoughts on the assignment:

Student Assessment 1: It took me outside of my comfortable factual box, which probably was a good thing... I thought the personal nature of the letter that it was something that pertained to my own life was helpful. To sort of reflect on personal struggles through the lens of fiction kind of helps us to conceptualize sin and or struggles in a different way. By providing Wormwood with tactics and to encourage him to avoid certain failures or strategies in essence is providing ourselves with defenses and encouragement to stand firm in a way.

Student Assessment 2: Although I was not very comfortable reading the assignment aloud in class, I do believe it pushed me even harder to think deeply about my shortfalls. The challenge of admitting my weak-

nesses made me think through all of them before I began to write. That is not to say that I only discussed my minor weaknesses because I did not. I was challenged to confront them with God's help. Therefore, I do not believe you could have made this a stronger assignment.

Assignment #2: Pedagogical Assessment and Professorial Discussion

As stated earlier, this assignment was first used in a class focused on the *Theology and Apologetics of C. S. Lewis*, but has now been adopted by a class titled *Spiritual Formation*. The professor who first used this assignment in the course on Lewis provided the following *personal* reflection on his perceptions of the effectiveness of the assignment from a pedagogical standpoint.

Each of us knows our own specific points of spiritual vulnerability, and articulating the strategy of our spiritual enemy to exploit that vulnerability lends itself to obtaining some insight about the nature of and best responses to spiritual attacks. It's a useful, active learning exercise and good pedagogy. It requires students to get involved, read their letter to the whole class, exhibit transparency, make it personal, be creative, practice good writing, and think deeply about good theology.

The plan to do this came off without a hitch. In fact, the classroom experience of using this exercise yielded dividends that exceeded my [professorial] expectations. The class happened to be an intensive course that required students to sit in class for eight hours a day for five consecutive days. This dynamic necessitated innovations to encourage student involvement. But it could work just as well in standard fifteen-week courses. It invites students to be active and see the practical relevance of good theology. *Being taught something by one's teacher is a good thing; coming to transformative and significant insights on one's own is even better. And sharing such insights in a nonthreatening community context is empowering, edifying, and deeply educational* (emphasis added).

In addition to this professor's assessment, it is obvious that in these Lewisian rewrites students have reflected on a wide variety of personal challenges, fiendish temptations, and extrinsic means for faith-discouragement. They have highlighted the "temptations common to man", but in a way that has encouraged peers and verbally identified the lies that students (and all people) commonly accept as truth. In the first student's reflection we see a reference to *The Scarlet Letter*. In the modern American church, this letter has often been transformed from an *A* (for adultery) to *D* (for divorce). This student has recognized that this "lettering" from her past has become a means, or at the very least, a possible means, for distracting her from her calling to engage the church and make disciples. In the second letter we see a young student wrestling with identity and distraction. When Lewis originally wrote his demonic communication he could not have seen how tech-

nology would aid in increasing the accessibility of covetousness, but not just covetousness in a materialistic sense, but an existential sense. This student identified the temptation to have a life with the right type of social media “caption” to highlight the success of her living. Elsewhere she acknowledges that this (and other means) of temptation are all a part of her pursuit of communal acceptance and personal identity. Thus, the advice to Wormwood is to let her “wallow in her own picturesque rejection”. Then, we read of a student wrestling with the Pauline call in 1 Corinthians 7 toward chosen celibacy for the sake of ministry. In his reflections, it is evident that he has recognized that this temptation is enough of a distraction, but in addition to the head-on temptation brought about by “the female’s occasional niceness to him” he also has recognized the circuitous route for temptation to come through subtleties via built up compliments and praise “(repetition and replay are key here)”. This last point is valuable for students to recognize—temptation does not always come from frontal attack, but through good things (and even godly things) that can be manipulated into idols or encouraged to become an end in themselves. Lastly, we see how one student recognizes the temptation to idolize the parental relationship given to her by God. In her reflections she understands that the mothering obsession can be a tool used by the enemy for her spiritual distraction (Lewis 1984; Lewis 2015). C. S. Lewis himself showcased the inordinate love of a mother in *The Great Divorce* that, inspection reveals, was more like hate. Likewise, Orual’s “love” for Psyche in *Till We Have Faces* (see Lewis 1984; Lewis 2015). The student writing this letter is an international student who has committed to move to America for ministry preparation. She understands the significance of this call and that great things can distract the time that she has set aside to invest in growing in her faith and her maturity in ministry praxis.

Conclusions

Fiction has been a source of encouragement to many throughout the history of Christian formation. John Bunyan’s work *Pilgrims Progress* has influenced many since his writing in the era of the Puritans. Fyodor Dostoyevsky has similarly influenced literature and culture through his writings and the integration of his religious beliefs in fictional writings. In a more modern sense, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis (and the other Inklings) not only influenced the 20th Century through their fantastical and fictional writings, but they have had a profound impact on the fantasy genre in the 21st Century through the movies that have been made from their books. We are not suggesting that the creative writing of students attains to the levels of these masters, but we do believe that as these masters used creative writing as an outlet of their own formational reflection and communication, so too can

students use creative writing as a means for theological and formational reflection. John Newton, writing a foreword to *Pilgrim's Progress*, expressed his own appreciation for allegorical writing, commending readers to this book as a formational endeavor. He concluded his thoughts by writing:

If you are indeed asking the way to Zion with your face thitherward, I bid you good speed. Behold an open door is set before you, which none can shut. Yet prepare to endure hardship, for the way lies through many tribulations. There are hills and valleys to be passed, lions and dragons to be met with, but the Lord of the hill will guide and guard his people. "Put on the whole armor of God, fight the good fight of faith." Beware of the Flatterer. Beware of the Enchanted Ground. See the Land of Beulah, yea, the city of Jerusalem itself is before you: There Jesus the forerunner waits.
To welcome travelers home (Bunyan 2014: XLIII).

As we've endeavored to show once more, learning to situate our story in His Story is a powerful way to experience real learning and significant spiritual growth.

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