ON SHAKY GROUND

Language, courage, and discussions of faith

By Alan C. R. Mueller

"I'M WORRIED about my father," Kim says, holding back tears. With this statement, our conversation, which began shortly after midnight, has taken a significant turn. We are on a student retreat. I'm an advisor, and Kim is one of my students. I find myself sitting, coffee in hand, on the front porch of a cabin in the woods. Even though it is September, the mountains of western North Carolina at night are chilly. I look at Kim sympathetically. Based on the level of emotion in Kim's voice and the look in her eyes, I prepare myself to hear a truly sad story. I imagine what will come next: details about a terminal disease, an abuse of some kind, or a long-standing grudge. So I am stunned when Kim explains, "I believe that my father is going to hell."

To this student in this moment, this fear was real and likely a worse fate than anything I'd been imagining. As the conversation continued, she shared with me her faith, her major beliefs, the conditions for eternal salvation of one's soul, and her family's religious history. Kim's idea of hell mirrors that of many citizens in the southeastern United States. In her worldview, people who have not satisfied one or more criteria of her religion will be cast into a torturous pit for eternity once they no longer live on earth. One such person was her father. Shocked, I realized that another such person was *me.*

As Kim was describing her faith group's criteria for eternal salvation and for eternal damnation, I found that her faith and mine had some distinct similarities and some stark differences. It was in one of these divergences that the conversation was to take root.

I CONSIDER MYSELF a person of devout faith. My theological beliefs are at my core. Through years of struggle, education, and re-education, I have come to a quiet and simple faith. I have a degree in philosophy and religion, but beyond my formal studies, one of my passions has been understanding American denominationalism. In my region of the country, the largest religious faith group is Southern Baptist. Known for independent religious thought and sociopolitical conservatism, most Southern Baptists fall into what California-based Barna Research Group calls "evangelical Christianity." Although Kim is not a Southern Baptist, she is an evangelical Christian.

As Kim described the tenets of her faith, I found that in her world, issues of faith are clearly black and white. Thoughts of William Perry's developmental theory entered my mind. I perceived Kim's thinking as dualistic, and I saw this moment as a chance to challenge her to examine the relative nature of our world. My mind raced as I thought of different ways in which I could engage her. I had a thought. Whether this thought was smart or stupid remained to be seen. I imagined that sharing a look into *my* personal views on faith might help her consider another's perspective and thus see faith in shades of gray. I took a chance. I said, "I am a man of deep personal faith, but by your standards, I too would be condemned to hell."

Kim responded with silence. I realized then that I was on shaky ground. I thought to myself, "Has Kim pondered the fate of my eternal soul? Can I be an advisor or a teacher or a mentor to someone who believes that in one of life's most important decisions, I am in error? What kind of credibility can I have with this student? In the future, now that I've admitted that I haven't

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satisfied all of the criteria of her religion, will she listen to me?"

Her silence, swelling the moment, compelled me to contemplate more questions: "Will this revelation put my relationship with this student at risk? Have I endangered her educational experience through my advising? Have I misjudged her?"

My initial assumption when Kim told me her father was going to hell was that Kim's view of the world was dualistic. All of the surface signs were there: themes of right and wrong and "us" versus "them." But as I paused, I silently questioned, "Do I know people whom I deem developmentally complex who are members of specific faith groups with firm, exclusive doctrinal stances?" I went through a mental list of people I know: campus ministers, clergy members, Christian-influenced Buddhists, Protestant Christians and Catholics, professors, administrators, my friends. It was my turn for a realization. At that moment, I understood that, as Nancy Evans, Deanna Forney, and Florence Guido-DiBrito explain in *Student Development in College,* "individuals who think dualistically and individuals who think relativistically can resemble each other on the surface. Both may demonstrate 'strong' views" (p. 132).

As we continued our talk, I began to see that Kim had likely already dealt with many issues concerning the relative nature of faith. She had struggled and come to difficult conclusions. With my epiphany, I abandoned the teachable moment. I put aside my original thought that I needed to expose this student to something and instead chose to learn something from her. I discovered that this young woman had probably already dealt with the painful transition into relativism and come to a place of what William Perry calls commitment in relativism. Though developmental stage theory is often useful for informing our thought, my thoughts had led me down the slippery slope of categorizing another person.

SO IF IT IS POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS to entertain these categorizing thoughts when engaged with a student, when is developmental stage theory useful? Perhaps the answer is that it is useful in abstraction. Thus, I can use the language of someone like Perry to talk about Kim or to reflect and then develop a deeper understanding of a student. My challenge is to maintain the language necessary to engage a student in the moment, as well as the courage to do so. I don't believe that if William Perry had been sitting on the porch that evening with Kim, his mind would have raced to fit her into his stage theory; rather, I believe that the theory is there to broaden our language, to give us a way to better understand what we are experiencing. This broadening of language and a moment of courage are the key. In my conversation with Kim, this was the point at which theory and practice met.

CAN I BE AN ADVISOR OR A TEACHER OR A MENTOR TO SOMEONE WHO BELIEVES THAT IN ONE OF LIFE'S MOST IMPORTANT DECISIONS, I AM IN ERROR?

I learned that I must renew my understanding of students' faiths and the ways in which beliefs affect their worldviews. I think I often forget that students may have a very complex and intimate theological belief structure that is likely more important to them than college. Understanding the epistemology of religion is essential. I must remember that the ideas of capital "T" Truth and capital "K" Knowledge are central to many religious groups, including the one of which Kim was a part.

Recently, I spoke to Kim. Like many college students, she is questioning her family's faith and struggling with her own. She is committed to this struggle, and it is clear that our conversation made an impact on her, as it did on me. Perhaps we had found a mutual learning moment. It is possible that no grown-up outside her family or her religious group had ever taken the time to talk with her about issues of faith. I did not unlock some magic door that allowed Kim to see the magnificent world of religious relativism; I just took the moment to step on shaky ground, engage her, and discover that she had been on similar ground before.

Note

Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., and Guido-DiBrito, F. "Perry's Theory of Intellectual and Ethical Development." In N. J. Evans, D. S. Forney, and F. Guido-DiBrito (eds.), *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.