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Experiencing God's Presence in the Life of Academia

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Experiencing God's Presence in the Life of Academia

Abstract

"God's presence breaks through in good times and bad."

Posting about making time for spiritual reflection from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/experiencing-gods-presence-in-the-life-of-academia/>

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Comments

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Experiencing God's Presence in the Life of Academia

 [all in allthings.org/experiencing-gods-presence-in-the-life-of-academia/](https://allthings.org/experiencing-gods-presence-in-the-life-of-academia/)

Benjamin Lappenga

I wish it was true that because I am a Biblical scholar, experiencing the presence of God in the life of academia is easy. Sadly, the demands, competitiveness, and critical rigor required of graduate work and scholarly research sometimes cause me to keep a critical distance from God's Word. If asked about the effects of academic study on my faith, however, I report with full honesty that I have grown in my faith and in my sense of God's presence throughout my studies.

What from my experience might be helpful for others who are in the thick of research, study, and writing?

There is no magic formula.¹

Perhaps the only practical advice I can give sounds rather old-fashioned: cultivate what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the "arcane disciplines."² These are practices that are indispensable for Christians, but rarely seen by those outside the church (cf. Matt 5:5-6): worship, sacraments, prayer, Scripture, service. The rhythms and deep-worn patterns established by these quiet (but often communal) disciplines shape the desires of our hearts and establish life-giving airways in our congested lives.

What do these secret disciplines have to do with experiencing the presence of God in the life of academia? For me, these disciplines prepare me to recognize chapters and moments in my life (in the present or in retrospect) where the Spirit's presence was active in special ways. Let me briefly share two stories that illustrate how God's presence has come to me in my academic journey.

The first came at the very beginning of my graduate studies and involved a sense of *calling*. After college I spent eight years pursuing a music career, so although I was curious and hopeful, I entered my first graduate classes with uncertainty. One morning early in the semester, I was listening to a lecture on hermeneutical methods, and I suspect that this was the least exciting part of the course for many of my fellow students. The professor wheeled in a cart containing a number of dense lexicons and anthologies of ancient writings and proceeded to pick them up one-by-one and describe how one might use them in the study of Scripture. Something hit me deep in my bones: *this is what I am supposed to do*. Certainly it was the culmination of a long process (I had majored in classical languages a decade prior, after all), and perhaps the Americano from the local Seattle coffee shop had readied my senses for a revelatory morning. But somehow, I knew in that moment that I was in the presence of the Comforter.

This surge of joy, possibility, excitement, and wonder hits me unexpectedly from time to time in my studies, and I know from conversations with other scholars that something like this is by no means unique to those studying theology. Christians in all fields of inquiry report similar experiences while gazing through a telescope, sketching a proof, sifting through a treatise, designing a bridge, or composing a poem.

The second story comes from the middle of my Ph.D. studies, when I took a difficult language exam right before leaving on vacation to visit family. Soon after, I received a cryptic email from one of my supervisors saying that although I had passed the exam, a face-to-face meeting was needed to discuss it. Since I was out of town, the meeting had to be put off for almost a month, during which time I became a disquieted wreck. Had I barely passed? Were there ongoing concerns about my proficiency in this area, which was supposedly a strength of mine? Whatever it was, something wasn't perfect, and the insecurities came flooding in. In the end, things weren't quite as dark as they seemed, although it wasn't the academic slam

dunk I had hoped for, either.

Yet, in these very different circumstances than my sense of calling at the beginning of my studies, I once again experienced the presence of God in a profound way. This time it was far from dramatic, and it occurred through some simple words offered to me by my brother. After hearing of my anxieties, my brother (himself having journeyed through medical school) calmly said, “At some point in grad school everyone has moments where simply passing is good enough; take it and move on.”

What might seem like just a bit of good advice communicated something profoundly and spiritually comforting to me, and in the weeks and months ahead I became aware of God’s presence in my daily academic activities in ways I had never done before. My character was being nudged in slightly more appreciative, humble, and gracious directions.

Many more anecdotes could be shared from my own life and from those of others, such as the story of one of my doctoral supervisors, who felt a physical weight being lifted off his shoulders as he walked down the hallway at a new institution after years spent in a stressful academic environment. I’ve not experienced anything like that, but episodes like those above have taught me that God’s presence breaks through in good times and bad, in times of hope and times of despair, directly and through others. Our ability to attend to the Spirit in these times, I propose, is intimately connected to the arcane disciplines we have established in our lives. That is, I may have experienced excitement and received bits of good advice, but without the steady, slow incubation of spiritual disciplines in my life (including the conscious decision to be in authentic communion with fellow believers), I am confident I would not have the clarity and confidence about the intimate presence of God in my academic study.

I don’t know what form God’s presence will take for you, but I encourage you to take some time to reflect on moments both big and small. Don’t over-spiritualize, but don’t under-spiritualize, either. Most of all, without making a show of it, without seeking a spiritual high, cultivate a life of prayer, seek out mature Christian fellowship, participate regularly in the sacraments, and practice service to others, especially when the demands of academic life are at their highest.

Footnotes

1. I highly recommend, however, reading some reflections from Christian academics on this topic; e.g., Richard J. Mouw, [Called to the Life of the Mind: Some Advice for Evangelical Scholars](#) (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2014). ↩
2. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, [Letters and Papers from Prison](#) (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 365. ↩