



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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A Best Practice: Inclusive Learning

In the past year, theologian Matthew Fox wrote about the death of his brother, Tom Fox, “an Educator Par Excellence.” (<https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2024/09/07/the-passing-of-my-brother-tom-fox-an-educator-par-excellence/>)

As I read his reflective tribute, I wonder: what might these approaches and teaching ideas tell us about adult faith formation?

Matthew Fox said of his brother: “My brother’s passion was education. Or “edGe-ucation” as he put it in his book that appeared just weeks before his death. The book, *On becoming edGe-ucated*: asks how uncertainty can link the frontiers of expert inquiry to the education of all.

It is a fitting summary of his life’s work that began with 8 years of teaching sixth graders but doing so in uniquely creative ways and with uniquely striking results.”

Let’s look at some of the examples which Matthew Fox shares about his brother as well as some of Matthew’s own thoughts/reflections (in blue print) ... and then ask how these realities and methods might apply to our adult faith formation endeavors today (black print).



“To teach physiology, he had the students build skeletons—but first study the body in depth.

Result? He received a phone call one night from a father of one of his students that went something like this: What did you do, teaching my daughter? I teach in the medical school at the University of Wisconsin. I

quizzed her today and she knows more about the human body than my students do after their first year of med school.”

- What does this method spark for your efforts in adult faith formation?
- Before inviting your adults to do or live something, how do you share with them the background ... the hows, the whys, and whats of our belief and practices?
- Does adult faith formation always include a doing element, a practicing element through activities such as painting, clay or chant, photography, music, poetry or sculpture, etc.? Science students have laboratory as well as intellectual classes. Does adult faith formation?



“To teach about the Middle Ages, he had them convert the school room into Chartres Cathedral and the students chose their particular interest: stain glass or flying buttresses or sculpture, etc., to contribute to the building. He went to the library, came back with a stack of books on flying buttresses, left them on his desk and said nothing.

The next day they were all gone. Three weeks later, he quizzed those students on the flying buttress team and concluded that they knew as much about flying buttresses as any engineer in America.”

- How might adult faith formation incorporate this method?
- Students chose their particular interest in this broad project. How do adults choose their area of interest?

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- Are there ways we can make the resources available and say nothing ... knowing that adults will choose what they need?
- The students not only concentrated on head knowledge but constructed something in real life. What might adults “build” as they’re learning?



“He had a day each week called “Think Day.” On that day there were no rules but one: Jot down your thoughts to share with the class the next day.

One student around 10 AM said, “Mr. Fox, I think I could think better today if I went home.” Tom said, “Okay, but bring your thoughts to share tomorrow.”

Arriving home, his mother said, “What are you doing home from school?” “I’m thinking,” he said. He decided he could think better downtown, took a bus, walked through the capitol building, and now walking on the other side of town at about 2 in the afternoon, a cop car pulled up. “What are you doing?” asked the policeman. Said he, “I’m thinking.” “Thinking? You’re supposed to be in school!” shouted the cop who put him in the police car and raced him to the principal’s office.

The principal was ready to fire my brother who called a meeting of this student and his parents in the class who had heard of the ruckus as a last-ditch effort to save his job. At the meeting he had the boy get up and tell the story and when he came to the punch line, “Thinking? You’re supposed to be in school,” the parents got the message.

And my brother wasn’t fired until two years later when the janitor was working in his classroom late at night with bad lighting in the room. He stumbled over the sandbox (built by the kids to re-create civil war battles) and, falling, he instinctively reached out and grabbed - you guessed it - a skeleton, one of many that was hanging over the sandbox.”

- Do these experiences remind you of anything you have planned (or could plan) in adult faith formation?
- How do our adult faith formation efforts provide time for thinking and reflection?
- Does adult faith formation happen only on the parish grounds? Where else might it take place?



“Tom Fox steps out of the usual posing of the educational problem in his book and, in a typically creative way, proposes that the key to education is uncertainty, not certainty. That the systems we have set up are about passing on what we know (or think we know) about reality and this ultimately renders learning boring.

For Tom, it is what we don’t know that gets us excited and motivated to learn and he invokes science to prove his case. He cites neuroscientist Daeyeol Lee, ‘we only learn when there is uncertainty, and that is a good thing.’ When things are stable, we learn less. ‘Activity in the frontal cortex becomes dramatically reduced where there is little uncertainty about an event occurring or not occurring.’”

I wonder if this is one reason why art as meditation is so effective—when you are birthing a picture or dance or clay or poem you are uncertain what it is until it comes into being and tells you what it is.”

- Reflecting on these ideas, what comes to your mind about adult faith formation which you have participated in or planned?
- Does our model of learning rely predominantly on the rational brain or does it incorporate inclusive learning?

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- Do we welcome and respect uncertainty?
- What have you found excites today's adults about learning?
- How have you used art, dance, clay, or poetry in adult faith formation?
- Do we ever study "about" something, but neglect how to live its implications?



"Tom Fox also takes up the subject of wonder and education and cites Nobel Prize winner physicist, Professor Frank Wilzek in his book *Fundamentals: Ten Keys to Reality*. He, like so many scientists, communicates to a reading public the unsolved questions of their times. In the process, Tom says, all [scientists] express their extraordinary wonder in what they have found and are finding. The other message is their increased appreciation - and sometimes surprise - for how capable our human minds have been in building useful and increasingly more accurate understanding of natural wonders.

Thomas Aquinas employs the term 'ecstasy' to name the experience of awe, wonder and the divine. He also talks about getting drunk on the beauty of the universe and employs the term 'intoxication' in doing so, citing the Scriptures: Intoxication is a kind of excess, as the Song of Songs says, 'my beloved, you are drunk with love'."

Citing the psalmist, he offers a one-word exegesis, "They shall be drunk with the beauty of thy house,' that is, the Universe."

If Abraham Heschel is correct that 'awe is the beginning of wisdom,' we find ourselves on sacred ground when we pay attention to our awe as we study the facts of our universe and begin the journey from knowledge to wisdom.

- Does this reflection spark something for you regarding your efforts in adult faith formation?
- What are the unsolved questions of our time? How are we addressing them in our parishes and (arch)dioceses through adult faith formation?
- How do we invite adults to wonder?
- As you think especially about the OCIA process and of sacramental preparation, what might we do so that our formation experiences are not result/product driven? Once celebrated, do people stay with the process to break open the awe? How might start with the awe first? In today's culture, how do we entice our communities into the awe of formation?
- Do our adult faith formation efforts lead people to increased appreciation of and wonder at our universe?
- Is there a difference between knowledge and wisdom? What is the goal of adult faith formation?



Reflective articles from Matthew Fox:

- [The Passing of My Brother, Tom Fox, an Educator Par Excellence](#)
- [My and My Brother's Story in Education](#)
- [G. Thomas Fox on edGe-ucation](#)
- [The "Wow" Factor, Science, Learning & Spirituality a la Tom Fox](#)
- [Some Testimonies To Tom Fox & His Vocation as an Educator](#)

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Past GEMS issues you might want to revisit:

- [Scripture by the Sound](#)
- [A Do-It-Yourself Evening of Reflection](#)
- [The Catechumenate as Model](#): What Does It Mean for Adult Faith Formation?
- [Prayer Forms](#)
- [An Ecumenical Conference and Art Exhibit](#)
- [A Right Brain Process](#)
- [Body and Soul](#)
- [Icon Writing as Formative](#)
- [Soul Friends](#)
- [A Celebration with Art and Tea](#)
- [Spiritual Journaling \(and Sharing\)](#)
- [Gardening as Formative](#)
- [Faith Rituals in the Neighborhood](#)
- [Prayer Stations](#)
- [Parish Advent Workshop](#)
- [Approaches that Have Worked](#)
- [Beauty and Adult Faith Formation](#)
- [Formation through the Arts](#)



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found in:

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*
<https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- *Guided by the Directory for Catechesis: Transforming the Vision and Practice of Parish Catechesis*
<https://twentythirdpublications.com/products/guided-by-the-directory-for-catechesis>
- Lifelong Faith Training: <https://www.lifelongfaithtraining.com/>
- Lifelong Faith: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/>
- Seasons of Adult Faith website: <http://adultfaith.weebly.com/>
- The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation:
https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_faith_journal_special_issue.pdf