The Root Work of Formation

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I never really noticed them on our weekly trips to town, except when they flowered. Their bright red-purple blooms – pillowed atop stout, greenish-gray branches – dotted the high desert landscape of southern Colorado in warmer months. I knew them most intimately in shrub form, but cholla cacti can grow up to fifteen feet in height or live comfortably on a kitchen windowsill.[1] *Cylindropuntia*, the chollas' scientific name, is the genus for a variety of species: tree, walking stick, devil's rope, rosea, cane, rope pear, teddy bear, desert buckhorn, chain-link, jumping, and coyote candles, among others.[2] I still don't know the species of our chollas, but they, their ancestors, and their progeny can be found directly across the road from the Ludlow Massacre Memorial, about three miles west of Exit 27 just off of Interstate 25.

More than the chollas' diverse expressions above the soil, however, I became drawn to what lay beneath the prickly surface. What sorts of roots held and nurtured these stately, many-appendaged creatures? Were they just as barbed? Did they burrow deep into the earth, or did they lay close to the surface to soak up water quickly, like many of their cacti relatives? Were they stringy or stout like their branches? Did they bundle together or carve out a respectable distance from one another?

Roots are the heart of the plant. With every beat, they pump life into the organism. I never understood why seeds get all the press. Jesus talked about seeds – mustard seeds, seeds planted in various kinds of soil, sowing seeds and reaping their fruits. He likened seeds to "the word of God," sprouting within us so that we may better reflect the kin-dom of God in our actions.[3] As a result, the seedling has become a prominent symbol for Christian formation, particularly for children and youth in the church, and follows "a positive line of progression and growth."[4] We in theological education would not be so naive as to draw upon this metaphor for the formational endeavors we undertake with adult learners, would we?

Figure 1. Chollas with yellow fruits. Across from the Ludlow Massacre Memorial, southern Colorado. *(Photo by Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi.)*

Much of my own role in the teaching and learning space involves attending to student formation through contextual experiences, which are specific learning opportunities beyond the space of the classroom related to students' vocational directions in ministry. At my particular theological school, and in many other theological institutions, such contextual learning is completed through a months- or year-long internship at a church, hospital, or other nonprofit organization. I spend a great deal of time pondering the types of theological formation – various species within the genus – that we hope students will engage as part of their contextual learning, including the knowledges, skills, and dispositions that will form the habits of their ministry in the world. Deep down (no pun intended), I wonder if there are ways that I erroneously perceive students' formational starting points to be at the seed stage and assume that they will sprout up to a seedling stage of practice in internship. For example, at various moments along the internship journey, we explicitly ask students to identify where they locate themselves on the "Developmental Stages of Internship" map, a linear diagram that begins with the Anticipation Stage in beginning weeks, then moves to the Disillusionment Stage, Confrontation Stage, Competence Stage, and finally the Culmination Stage at the end of the experience.[5] Seed to seedling, seedling to plant. Most models of experiential formation follow similar patterns, beginning at a pre-formed stage and ending up at the mastery level.

Figure 2. A cholla beginning to bloom. Ludlow, southern Colorado. *(Photo by Terry Forbes.)*

While this resource actually is a helpful self-reflection tool, and while I believe wholeheartedly that contextual learning must involve increasing capacities for ministry leadership, the structures themselves easily perpetuate the myth that formation is only seed sprouting work when, in fact, *theological formation more often involves root work*.

Adult learners enter theological education with myriad life experiences, values and commitments, and patterns of reasoning and behavior formed over decades. The roots are weathered, having endured cycles of rain, snow, and drought. As a result, theological formation becomes more about noticing the color and texture of our roots and how they are differentiated from – or have become entwined with – the roots of others over time. Or, noting in which conditions the roots thrive and what conditions leave the roots exposed to greater harm. Or, exploring the depths to which the roots have descended and identifying the ones that remain as enduring tethers to our sense of ourselves and our place in the ecosystem, as well as the ones that have just begun to dig their heels into the dusty rock near the surface, tendrils of who and how we might become.

Most students enter into the internship with a belief that the central formative elements of these experiences are the practical skills they will develop – an above-ground expansion of their branches and a blossoming of their fruits. In reality, the most salient learnings are the abilities of students to connect their own identities, histories, traumas, and generative experiences with how they show up in the world – their actions and relationships with others. This is critical root work, a mining of what lies beneath. Sure, what exists above the ground is more accessible and easily observed. A cholla reaching toward the sky, branch by branch, until yellow-green fruits appear like butterflies resting on the edges is breathtaking, but it is because of her roots that she endures.[6]

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My mother was captivated by the chollas, but they did not proliferate where we lived. The difference was nearly one thousand feet in elevation between the Ludlow cacti field and our house five miles up the road. That didn't stop my mom from coordinating a massive effort involving our neighbors, their equipment, and their blood, sweat, and tears to transplant several of the chollas from the field to the hill next to our home. My mother loved working in the "gardens" on our property, which included an array of colorful and shapely large rocks, deep-green glass insulators, old railroad spikes, and other assorted collectibles. Smaller cacti, bachelor buttons, cosmos, and purple and white irises would grow between the spaces if there were enough rains in the spring and summer.

The uprooted chollas were a sight to behold. Half buried in the clay-dirt clump with which they were excavated, the roots were shallower than I imagined, though it's likely that several roots had been severed in the digging process. It was hard to distinguish the roots themselves from the dirt and parts of the trunk surrounding the roots, but their hardiness seeped through the mass, which was about eighteen inches in both depth and width. Several large strands merged at the top to form the cactus trunk, then steadily unwound themselves into stocky veins that thinned as they descended into gray-brown waves.

Joshua Tree National Park also boasts a variety of chollas, and the brochure about their cactus garden states that the roots "rapidly develop delicate root hairs to absorb moisture when it is available. The water is stored in their fat stems and is given up very slowly, even during the hottest days. In times of drought, the root hairs wither and die to reduce water loss. Meanwhile the roots, protected by their thick bark, remain moist and succulent."[7] I wonder if these microscopic hairs were present on our uprooted chollas, though we were likely digging them up in the heat of summer when the ground itself cracked open. The resilience of such beings to thrive amidst a variety of conditions is a lesson, as we all wondered whether the three plants we plucked would flourish in their new habitat. It took a few years, but I remember with fondness the summer that those red-purple blooms finally appeared.

Theological education also has the potential to uproot in the midst of its formational processes – deeply held beliefs and meaning-making systems, ways of living in community derived from environments of earlier years, and more. These are the relational tethers of familiar soils, bacteria, and microbial creatures among which roots have thrived and become interdependent. Rather than our roots simply existing within the particularities of an ecosystem, these tethers have shaped the roots such that to exist apart from them can be a shock to one's entire being.

My ancestors knew this kind of shock quite well. Both my paternal and maternal grandparents uprooted themselves from their countries of origin to resettle in New York City during the first half of the twentieth century. The hope in such transplantations is that life might reroot itself in new soils, in different conditions, and among more symbiotic microbes for greater flourishing overall. That was my ancestors' hope; and yet, two generations later, I am continually reminded of the relational tethers that were severed by their uprootings – loss of language (Spanish and Italian, as I speak neither fluently), a sense of belonging within a particular culture of place (Puerto Rico and Italy, and later New York), and a connection to people like me (Newyoricans and Italians on the East Coast, largely inaccessible to someone born and raised in the Southwest among Mexicanos and Chicanos). Those who came to the U.S. centuries before my grandparents, by force or by choice, and those who lived on Turtle Island eons before them but endured uprooting after uprooting, have become disconnected from so much more.

While perhaps not as extreme, the "deconstruction" often discussed in theological education is an uprooting force that can create profound shocks for students. Many individuals in my context come from restrictive religious environments in which their gender identities and sexualities were considered "sinful" and "against God." They have sought safety and a space

to dismantle those beliefs, with a distinct longing to relationally tether within an ecology of inclusion and belonging. Uprooting from harmful traditions and cultures of origin becomes critical to the formational process – for instance, encountering subject matter in the classroom that unearths a previously unknown root which has endured trauma. Such a root shows signs of damage in need of repair, yet it also may reveal a symphony of withered hairs that have preserved one's supply of sustenance and ensured survival season after season.

Contextual experience is itself an uprooting activity within theological formation, as it asks students to enter into – and spend a significant amount of time within – a setting that may be unfamiliar. Roots may cling more tightly to any variety of soils and climes: the comforts of academia with its descriptive syllabi and clear expectations; the familiarity and belonging of a faith community of origin; preconceived notions of what a particular vocational path entails; and more. In these instances, there is risk and uncertainty, the potential to be further dislocated from what is known.

For many flora, however, uprooting is what ensures the proliferation of species. It is actually quite difficult to grow chollas from seed. The best (human-involved) way to proliferate the cactus is by replanting one of the branches into new ground. Another example of transplantation beyond seeding is sweetgrass. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, botanist and Citizen Potawatomi Nation member Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, "Sweetgrass is best planted not by seed, but by putting roots directly in the ground."[8] She continues, "The plant sends up flowering stalks in early June, but the seeds it makes are rarely viable. If you sow a hundred seeds, you might get one plant if you're lucky."[9] While the sweetgrass possess a better way to multiply beyond seeds, it's more difficult for them to do so given human-induced impacts on the environment.[10] As a result, uprooting and rerooting some of the sweetgrass ensures its survival.

The key question when uprooting takes place then becomes: What conditions make for a successful rerooting? Knowing that the exact conditions from which one is uprooted can never be replicated, identifying and cultivating *ideal* conditions constitutes the bulk of the work.

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Like three elders whose wisdom emanates from their weathered faces and withered hands, the chollas rest along the hillside next to our family home in southern Colorado. They've been there about thirty-five years now. With red-hued rocks and iris leaves dancing in between, the cacti have made their peace with their neighbor-relatives, including silt-clay, grasshoppers, and the occasional rattlesnake family seeking harbor. It has been nearly eight years since my mom passed, so no human tends to them now. They only rely on one another for what they need, save for the infrequent rains and ever-present sunlight. Cacti do not tend to form strong root connections between plants, as each must retain the moisture it needs to survive. But the same bees bounce from one cholla blossom to the next, so they relate with one another at some level. Since they live only feet apart from each other, I like to think their roots share a parcel of the same space, hairs touching ever so slightly. After all, they have been cohabitating for over three decades.

For many plants and trees, roots form part of a complex communication and nutrient sharing network that ensures the flourishing of entire ecosystems. In *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*, scientist Suzanne Simard reveals that fungi create neural networks allowing trees to share messages back and forth, similar to neurotransmission processes within the human brain. Simard says, "The older trees are able to discern which seedlings are their own kin. The old trees nurture the younger ones and provide them food and water just as we do with our own children."[11] Furthermore, when the older "mother trees" die, "they pass their wisdom to their kin, generation after generation, sharing the knowledge of what helps and what

harms, who is friend or foe, and how to adapt and survive in an ever-changing landscape."[12] The trees do not simply coexist; they rely upon one another for survival. In other words, they cannot *be* without each other.

One of the enduring fallacies underlying theological education is that community is only *tangentially* related to formational processes. While theological institutions obviously constitute communities of teaching and learning, adequate attention is not always given to how such communities shape those who reside within them or, more directly, how they impact beingness itself. For example, relationships with faculty and peers can make or break a student's sense of their own capacities, understandings and presencing of particular identities, and abilities to learn and thrive within the classroom. *How* one learns and *who* one learns alongside are just as important as – or maybe more important than – *what* one learns, remembering that the how, who, and what are symbiotic, much like tree root and fungi systems.

This same fallacy exists within contextual education. Every year, there are students who envision internship as an individualized opportunity, giving little thought to the kinds of environments and relationships that will foster root-based learning. For this reason, students sometimes pitch "internships" that are more akin to research assistantships or apprenticeships that center on working with a single teacher or expert, rather than working within a setting in which they will become part of a community, with its messy mix of people holding both shared and divergent beliefs and practices. As a result, the task of a contextual educator is to help learners envision their personal and professional formation as a networked endeavor, co-created within and among the forest of religious meaning making and reflective practice.

To carry out the many beautiful and difficult tasks of pastoral leadership, root work is essential. Holding someone's hand as they take their final breaths, comforting a grieving mother who has just lost her son to suicide, or guiding a divided faith community through a process to declare themselves LGBTQIA+ affirming all require a willingness and an ongoing commitment to root work. And that root work cannot be carried out in isolation. At times, individuals must receive nutrients from older, wiser trees who have built up a store of resources over long seasons. Even the wise trees rely on the network, as there exists a cadre of elders who remain dependent upon one another, being careful not to encroach on one another's sunlight.[13] In the internship, students select a site supervisor, but they also have the responsibility of inviting three to four additional persons to form what we call a Community Advisory Council, a group of people who journey alongside the student as they tend to their roots within the site context. Because internship is often an uprooting endeavor, the goal is to provide as much support as possible for learners to reroot into a network of belonging.

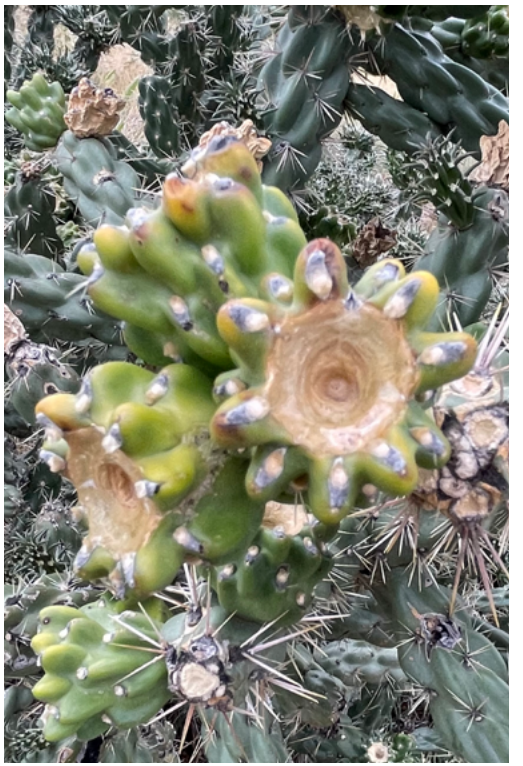

Figure 3. A cholla's edible fruits. Ludlow, southern Colorado. *(Photo by Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi.)*

It turns out that Jesus did mention roots a couple of times in the gospel accounts. It was usually in the context of seeds being planted and not having the right conditions to root, but he definitely understood their importance.[14] When Jesus revealed the meaning of the parable of the sower, for example, he interpreted the seeds sown on rocky ground as a person who has "no root." Jesus continued: "When trouble or persecution arises….that person immediately falls away."[15] The purpose of the seed, therefore, is to create roots and

systems of roots; but without nurturing elements of care, the roots wither and fade.

With an underground network of support and communication in place, contextual experiences can invite (re)construction, the complementary activity paired with theological "deconstruction" in formational processes. Most individuals, after having spent nine months with a specific congregation, hospital, nursing home, nonprofit, community organization, or other relation-filled context, have rerooted themselves within their respective network. In this setting, the roots have been exposed, examined, disentangled, re-entangled, severed, repaired, nourished, strengthened, and otherwise. Students become wiser, more sure of themselves in ways that have inextricably informed their vocational identities and – most importantly – their personhood.

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Irises, like the ones in my mother's garden, have rhizomes, "a subterranean plant stem that sends out roots and shoots from its nodes."[16] Rhizomes may look like roots, but they themselves can *create roots*, reproducing new plants from their stems. Every spring, more and more irises found their way in between the garden rocks until my mom decided to thin the bulbous bunches, especially when they started to crowd out longer blooming species.

Figure 4. Iris Rhizomes. *(Photo by Jamain, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)*

If formation within theological education is about root work in community, my hope for formation *beyond* theological education includes rhizome work. While chollas are not rhizomed creatures, I imagine that iris rhizomes have encountered cholla roots in their search for space to further proliferate in the garden. Perhaps thousands of years from now, chollas will have evolved to create their own rhizomes for species survival. One of my greatest joys as a contextual educator comes when an alum serves as a site supervisor for a current intern. Root work, focused primarily on oneself, then becomes rhizome work, a commitment to the formation of others. Some pastoral leaders create new ministries or nonprofits where none existed previously, forming communities and meeting needs in unexpected places. In a few seasons, a bounty of colorful blooms paints the hillside.

My personal root-to-rhizome work has involved deepening my understanding of the choices of ancestors to migrate across worlds and time zones, and to reflect on what rerooting within lost identities, languages, and traditions looks and feels like for me. This work never ends; tending to the roots abides. I engage in these labors not only for myself, however, but also for my two young nephews. How do I – the mother tree of our family, the rhizome of our stalk – share with them all that has taken place before so that they know the lifeways flowing through their veins? They possess the resilience of generations uprooting and rerooting, making ways out of no ways, adapting and thriving, loving and losing, rising and blooming. One day, I will take them to the hillside near our family home and show them what remains of the gardens. The three chollas will be there to greet us all.[17]

Notes & Bibliography

[1] The pronunciation of cholla is choya (or chȯi-yə), according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cholla.

[2] "*Cylindropuntia imbricata* (Tree Cholla)," Gardenia, https://www.gardenia.net/plant/cylindropuntia-imbricata.

[3] Luke 8:11 (NRSV).

[4] Cindy S. Lee, *Our Unforming: De-Westernizing Spiritual Formation* (Fortress, 2022), 15.

[5] H. Frederick Sweitzer and Mary A. King, *The Successful Internship: Transformation*

and Empowerment in Experiential Learning (Thomson/Brooks/Cole, 2004).

[6] Chollas produce edible "fruits" (flower buds) that can be picked before or after flowering, depending on the species. They are a hearty vegetable that absorbs the flavors of the dish being prepared, yet simultaneously evoke an artichoke, asparagus-like tenor.

[7] "Cholla Cactus Garden: Self-Guiding Nature Trail," Joshua Tree National Park, http://npshistory.com/brochures/jotr/cholla-cactus-garden-2.pdf. In addition, the cholla's "skeleton," which protects many of the roots and comprises the infrastructure of the cholla itself, posseses a patterned hole-filled design that makes it a collectible item across the Southwest.

[8] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed, 2013), 1.

[9] Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass, 261-2.

[10] Sweetgrass produce rhizomes and "can send them many feet out from the parent. In this way, the plant could travel freely along the riverside. This was a good plan when the land was whole." Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 262.

[11] Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (Knopf, 2021), 5.

[12] Simard, *Mother Tree*, 5.

[13] One example is found in the forest network of beech trees. "With his big green boots crunching through fresh snow, and a dewdrop catching sunlight on the tip of his long nose, Wohlleben takes me to two massive beech trees growing next to each other. He points up at their skeletal winter crowns, which appear careful not to encroach into each other's space. 'These two are old friends,' he says. 'They are very considerate in sharing the sunlight, and their root systems are closely connected. In cases like this, when one dies, the other usually dies soon afterward, because they are dependent on each other.'" Richard Grant, "Do Trees Talk to Each Other? A Controversial German Forester Says Yes, and His Ideas Are Shaking Up the Scientific World," *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/.

[14] See Matthew 13:6, Matthew 13:21, and Mark 4:6.

[15] Matthew 13:21 (NRSV).

[16] "Rhizome," Wikipedia, accessed May 12, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhizome.

[17] I am indebted to the following people: Mayra Rivera who read drafts of this piece and offered critical feedback in the shaping of ideas; Donald Quist and Sophfronia Scott who provided guidance in the early stages of the creative process; my cohort peers whose incredible contributions proliferate the rest of the journal issue; and my stepdad Terry Forbes who helped me to remember the ways of the chollas and provided one of the photos for this piece. Finally, I dedicate this article to Matthew Floding, my mentor and friend, who passed from this world on May 14, 2024. The impacts of your ministry, your scholarship, and your encouragement and care of theological field/contextual educators, and of the discipline as a whole, continue to take root and cultivate deep life.

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