

Uniting Knowledge and Vital Piety: Linking Learning Styles With Our Spiritual Type

by Diana L. Hynson

We humans are complex beings who experience the world in many ways. You are a leader in Christian education and formation in the church, and it is your heart's desire that each and every person in the church have a meaningful, maturing relationship with God. *Yet, we're so different*, you may be thinking. *How can I provide something that will be effective, even transforming, for everyone?*

SPIRITUAL TYPES

Yes, we are different. You may already have learned about and implemented in your education and formation ministry the seven ways of learning (more on this later). Did you also know that each of us has a preferred style or means of relating to God as well? Educator and counselor Corinne Ware, in *Discovering Your Spiritual Type* (Alban, 1995), explains the typologies developed by Urban Holmes. (Ware's book contains the inventory questions that will help you determine your own type or spiritual preferences.)

As with most preferences, we do not fit in one neat little box that describes the sum of how we relate to God. We instead find ourselves on a kind of continuum of preferences: we like many things and can experience God in many ways. What seems the most touching, or effective, or satisfying, or moving will help determine our main preference. I, for example, am strong in and typically operate out of the rational part of myself and tend to think about and relate to God from that perspective. What really pulls me to experience the presence of God in a worship setting, however, is not the sermon – as one might expect. It is the music that touches my spirit, but not just any music. I will return to my own preference for illustration later. First, a simple explanation of the ways preferences are identified.

THE CONTINUUM OF PREFERENCES

Imagine a circle that is divided into four quadrants. The vertical line that divides the circle into right and left halves is the continuum that describes *how one goes about knowing God*. “North” reflects a *speculative* knowing. We use our intellect and cognitive abilities to relate to God. “South” reflects an *affective* way of knowing God. We feel God's presence in our hearts.

The circle is also divided into upper and lower halves by a horizontal line. That “east-west” line describes *how we conceptualize God*. “West” emphasizes the *transcendent* identity of God—a God who is experienced as in control, but “out there”—a mystery that is above and beyond us. “East” describes a God who is *immanent*; that is, revealed and knowable.

THE QUADRANTS

Quadrant 1 is the upper right one, the **head spirituality**. This form of experiencing and knowing God favors what it can touch, see, and imagine. Content and order, alignment of ideas and concepts with each other, satisfy the Quadrant 1 person. This type of student will like Bible study that digs deep. (What happened? What was life like for the biblical community when a given book or passage was written?) This student is theologically reflective; and it is God, not the devil, who is in the details! The danger of a Quadrant 1 spirituality that is not tempered by other means of experiencing God is that it can lead to an overly rationalistic approach that lacks feeling.

The second quadrant, the lower right, is **heart spirituality**, which emphasizes the constant presence of God. Scripture is central and serves the purpose of revealing God so that God can be known intimately. A Quadrant 2 type will witness and testify to God's presence in anthropomorphic terms, as in "my daily walk with Jesus." The person with heart spirituality can experience great highs and lows that are very persuasive to others. This student will appreciate the stories that describe God's interactions with and interventions in the lives of the faith community and will enjoy hearing about how any Scripture passage helps him or her live a more faithful life. Application is important here; information for the sake of information (which may energize a Quadrant 1 student) can deflate the interest and enthusiasm of a Quadrant 2 student. A danger in an exclusive heart spirituality is excessive pietism that is exclusivistic (you have to relate to my God my way) and closed to new thought.

Quadrant 3 (lower left) moves to the transcendent way of knowing God and is called the **mystic spirituality**. Mystics, according to this typology, experience God as a union with the holy that powerfully affects and renews the inner life. They hear God, in addition to speaking to God, who is vaster than anything else known. This spirituality is inspiring and uplifting, comfortable with the unknown. One danger of a very strong Quadrant 3 type is spiritual passivity and an exaggerated retreat from the world. (Historically, however, the great mystics who retreated were also very much engaged with the world.) This student will appreciate an educational setting and lesson that allows him or her to empty the self and be filled with God, who infuses everything.

The final quadrant reveals the one that is the least typical for most people: the **kingdom spirituality** of Quadrant 4. This type will fuse activism with prayer—and prayer with activism. The crusading spirit of a Quadrant 4 type can be single-minded in doing his or her part of bring God's reign to fruition. With God in ultimate control, this student will want to see how Bible study makes a difference. What does the lesson teach us about ushering in justice; about our part in the transformation of sinful activities, behaviors, and attitudes—both in ourselves and in our institutions? While this student will have a passion for taking up the cross to transform society, he or she is in danger of holding an extreme moralistic vision.

WAYS OF LEARNING

If you have recent experience with United Methodist curriculum resources, you probably also have some acquaintance with the Howard Gardner's learning theory of multiple intelligences. Barbara Bruce, writing in several books – including *Start Here: Teaching and Learning With Adults* (Discipleship Resources, 2000) – has focused Gardner's multiple intelligences to help Christian educators develop teaching and learning techniques with a broad level of appeal. (Bruce has also written *The Seven Ways of Teaching the Bible to Children*.)

Gardner initially described seven learning preferences. (More have been added, but are not the subject of this article.) They are, briefly:

- **Verbal/Linguistic** or learning through the written or spoken word (word smart). Learners enjoy words in prose and poetic forms, stories, word games and puzzles, definitions, and so on.

- **Logical/Mathematical** or cognitive and rational learning (number smart). These learners like lessons to be orderly and practical with facts, information, details, and logical relationship between ideas. They will appreciate timelines, forced choice activities, problem-solving games, or case studies.
- **Visual/Spatial** or learning through visualizing (picture smart). Visual learners can do what they can see; and patterns, shapes, and colors are part of their thinking. Picture smart learners like to draw, use graphics, videos, pictures, maps, and other visualizing activities, such as guided imagery.
- **Musical** (music smart). Musical learners employ sounds, rhythms, tones, and melodies to help recall other information and to convey meaning. (Think about how inflection and volume can be used to express multiple meanings of “hmm.”) The fidgeting foot-tapper may take in more than the apparently attentive quiet listener. Musical learners will appreciate background music during a lesson, use lyrics to explain or illustrate a biblical text, memorize a passage or other information using a familiar song tune, and relate to experiences of God evoked through music.
- **Bodily/Kinesthetic** or physical learning (body smart). Physical learners like to manipulate objects and to move around, even if it is just to stretch. Body smart students are not always good sitters. They prefer to get up and will role-play, dance, use relays, sculpt, and so on.
- **Interpersonal learning** (people smart). Interpersonal learners appreciate the social aspect of learning and like to do what they do with someone else. They may be more aware of the personal and social dimensions of a Bible story or theological construct or dilemma. It’s not just a puzzle or a problem to be solved, but something that has an effect on a real person.
- **Intrapersonal learning** (self smart). Intrapersonal learners appreciate having solitary time to process what they take in. You probably know someone who is prone to ask to “just be allowed to read the directions” without a lot of group interference or process. Self-knowledge is a key tool to making decisions. Don’t read the Scripture passage in a lesson to an intrapersonal learner; he or she needs to read it and think about it without “help.”

SPIRITUAL TYPES MEET LEARNING PREFERENCES

Now, how do we make practical sense of all this? (If you are a logical/ mathematical learner, this is *your* question!)

The participants in your educational ministries have both their own spiritual type or preference for relating to God and they have their own preferred learning styles (though, remember, we can appreciate and effectively use more than one). Recall my earlier example of worship and music. I am, for the most part, a Quadrant 1 spiritual type (which experiences the revealed God cognitively, in my head); but some music strongly evokes my sense of mystery and pulls me into Quadrant 3. I may be the least comfortable in Quadrant 2, so I am less inclined to find meaning in popular praise music and choruses. My heart relationship, awakened by theologically powerful lyrics (think “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”), leads me to the transcendent God.

To continue the example, you may have two musical learners (me, for example, and a Quadrant 2 type) who are rarely satisfied at the same time when a teaching activity uses music. So, in short, what this means is that your teaching practices or leadership can be greatly enriched by knowing what spiritual types your students are. The spiritual types offer another filter through which to view the teaching/learning techniques that tap into different intelligences.

Since the inter-and intra-personal intelligences have so much to do with whether the learner prefers group or solitary time, and the other intelligences can be used either alone or in a group (usually), we will continue from here with the other five: word, math, picture, music, and body smart. The visual learners will probably prefer using the chart (below); the verbal/linguistic learners can read on!

How can we meet the spiritual needs of students in an educational setting and also tap into their preferred ways of learning? Here are a few suggestions. What more can you add?

FOR QUADRANT 1 SPIRITUAL TYPES (THEOLOGICALLY REFLECTIVE) WHO ARE ALSO

- **Word smart:** Discuss the details of how God has worked in the life of the faith community. Offer theologically rich information, because it can also lead to transformation. Allow for discussion, even debate, about theological concepts and how they apply to a life situation. Use the creeds or other traditional prayers for devotional time.
- **Number smart:** Be orderly and have an intentional flow to the time together. Use timelines to help keep the content organized and give a sense of wholeness and perspective to what is going on in the biblical story. Dig underneath the biblical story to find out what motivated the people. Examine those motivations and apply them to the situations of the learners. Use the biblical situation to compare and contrast with contemporary, personal issues and engage the biblical learning in problem solving.
- **Picture smart:** Use maps, charts, video clips, and graphs to help place learners in the setting being studied and to place events in relation to each other. Have drawings of “the ways things were” to provide detail in the biblical story.
- **Music smart:** Sing or discuss hymn texts that are theologically well developed, such as those of Charles Wesley, and use them to reflect on our relationship with and understanding of God. Write new lyrics to familiar tunes. Include these works in devotional time.
- **Body smart:** Experience the biblical story through reader’s theater or role-play. Build figures, models, and biblical scenes.

FOR QUADRANT 2 TYPES (HEART-WARMED AND ENTHUSIASTIC) WHO ARE ALSO

- **Word smart:** Use poetry or journaling for devotion or for study. Invite learners to summarize or retell the biblical story from the viewpoint of one of the participants. Witness, testify, or otherwise engage learners in sharing their own story.
- **Number smart:** Give the “big picture” of the biblical story through the personal interactions of the biblical figures. Observe their movements, motivations, feelings, and relationships. Use some organizing principle to create personal prayers, such as A.C.T.S.—Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.
- **Picture smart:** Write or draw images, both personal and conceptual, that emerge during study of a Bible passage. Use guided imagery to help learners visualize how the community relates to God in the situation or setting being studied. Invite prayer with open eyes so learners can see and connect with one another.

- **Music smart:** Sing or say hymns or songs that appeal to the heart, such as praise music, for devotional time and to explore the nature of God. Play music in the background as learners engage in the lesson.
- **Body smart:** Create a liturgical dance or more simple movements to help tell the biblical story and how learners relate to it. Prepare and eat the foods that are part of the setting or biblical story. Make a prayer bracelet (like the WWJD items). Lay on hands during time for prayer.

FOR QUADRANT 3 TYPES (COMFORTABLE WITH MYSTERY AND THE “MAJESTIC” GOD) WHO ARE ALSO

- **Word smart:** Engage in biblical research. Reflect on personal reactions to biblical stories and how they help experience God as Creator/Father. Invite journaling or storytelling that taps into miracles or the mysteries of God’s work in the world. Practice breath prayers.
- **Number smart:** Emphasize patterns and sequences that lead biblical figures into their deepening relationship with God. Have time for silence, both during study and devotion, which aids in reflection and analysis.
- **Picture smart:** Use the biblical story to visualize a better world or situation. Have learners engage in guided imagery to visualize their own relationship to God in the situation or setting being studied. Have icons or symbols to help focus devotional time.
- **Music smart:** Use quiet music, perhaps without lyrics, to set a tone for discernment or for study. Sing Taizé chants or songs for worship or to reflect on the nature of God.
- **Body smart:** Have each learner “become” a biblical figure and act out his or her relationship with God. Bring or create coins, figures, clothing, water, as the biblical story suggests, to get a sense of the ongoing history of the faith community as those items are handled. Walk the labyrinth. Use a variety of prayer postures for private devotions.

FOR QUADRANT 4 TYPES (PASSIONATE CRUSADERS) WHO ARE ALSO

- **Word smart:** Explore how the Bible story advanced the cause of God in the community and how it can be used currently. Use biblical principles and values to lobby for a particular justice issue; use the lens of justice to examine any passage or lesson. Create a “graffiti prayer” to identify and pray for the concerns of the community and world.
- **Number smart:** Develop action plans for change that are biblically based. Examine biblical stories for the “cause and effect” of how they show God working in human history. Create a slogan to use as prayerful “marching orders” as an acrostic, using a key word from the lesson.
- **Picture smart:** Create promotional posters and action checklists for what the Scripture lesson urges. View videos of faith heroes in action or have an in-class demonstration/presentation by a faithful leader. Encourage learners to visualize their life and behavior through a call-to-action prayer or benediction from the psalms or prophets.
- **Music smart:** Create or find hymns and songs that emphasize the biblical call to active discipleship and use them to support the lesson or for personal devotions. Write your own anthem, theme song, or protest song based on the biblical passage.
- **Body smart:** Plan and participate in a march as a representative of the church. Serve meals, build a house, go on a mission trip in or beyond the community (after biblical/theological preparation). Hold hands or link arms during prayer with those who serve and are served.

Remember that all these spiritual types and learning styles have validity in bringing people to an active engagement with the Scripture and in cultivating an active relationship with God. As a leader in Christian education and formation, you have a mighty store of ideas and practices to enhance the learning setting for all.

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SPIRITUAL TYPES AND TEACHING / LEARNING STYLES

SPECULATIVE / INTELLECTUAL

(MIND)

QUADRANT 4

+ *Passion for transforming society*
- *Extreme moralistic vision*

- ☛ **Word smart:** lobbying, using Bible to promote cause, how Bible story advances cause of God; explore justice issues
- ☛ **Number smart:** develop action plans; examine cause and effect in Bible story for God's work in life
- ☛ **Picture smart:** checklists, promotional posters; video or live presentation of faithful hero in action
- ☛ **Music smart:** theme song, anthem, protest song, support chant based on Bible
- ☛ **Body smart:** march, serve meals, mission trip, Habitat, sports team; hold hands or link arms with companions in service

QUADRANT 1

+ *Theologically reflective*
- *Rationalistic*

- ☐ **Word smart:** discussion of data, information, word puzzles, debate, creeds, traditional prayers
- ☐ **Number smart:** lesson to be orderly, well outlined; timelines; problem-solving activities; forced choice and discussion; examine cause and effect, look for motivations in story
- ☐ **Picture smart:** maps, checklists, video to see "how things were"
- ☐ **Music smart:** hymn texts to study God, write new lyrics to reflect on relationship to God
- ☐ **Body smart:** readers' theater, role-play, build figures, village

Verbal/linguistic (word smart); Logical/Mathematical (number smart); Visual/Spatial (picture smart); Musical/Rhythmical (music smart); Body/Kinesthetic (body smart)

QUADRANT 3

+ *Inspirational, uplifting, ok with unknown*
- *Overly passive, retreat from reality*

- ♣ **Word smart:** do Bible research; journal or stories that tap into miracle, mystery
- ♣ **Number smart:** emphasize patterns that lead to deeper relationship with God; time for silence to reflect
- ♣ **Picture smart:** visioning, use Bible to conceptualize better world, guided imagery, use icons and symbols; use of candles
- ♣ **Music smart:** use music to set tone for discernment; chanting; Taizé music
- ♣ **Body smart:** "become" a biblical figure; use various prayer postures; hold objects to focus prayer; walk a labyrinth

QUADRANT 2

+ *Warmth, energy, enthusiastic*
- *Dismissive of theological reflection*

- ♥ **Word smart:** poetry, journal, tell stories, witness/testimony
- ♥ **Number smart:** give "big picture" of Bible story, observe movement, feelings
- ♥ **Picture smart:** banners; use of video; projecting words or images; guided imagery on relationship to God
- ♥ **Music smart:** sing or use "heart" hymns based on Scripture to reveal God or teach lesson; set psalms to rhythms; praise music
- ♥ **Body smart:** lay on hands, anointing; games, movements, gestures with songs or text; liturgical dance; role-play

(HEART)

AFFECTIVE / FEELING RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

