

Life drawing

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 22, 2011](#) issue

In this issue, several theological educators, authors and leaders [recall experiences](#) that were key in the formation of their faith. For example, Michael Jenkins, a seminary president, recalls a conversation he had with his mother about a verse of scripture and a sermon based on it. Both were "indecipherable for a small child," says Jenkins. But it wasn't the content of verse and sermon that mattered most in the end. What stayed with him was the way his mother responded and her ability to bridge the mundane and the theological.

It is helpful to identify the formative moments in one's life. At a time in my life when I was having misgivings about my vocation, I attended a seminar led by Reuel Howe, a scholarly Episcopal priest who wrote books about and led workshops in what we were learning to call spirituality. Howe taught at Episcopal seminaries and had developed a program in clinical pastoral training.

The seminar turned out to be a crash course in clinical pastoral education. I had never been a part of anything like it. I'm almost ashamed to admit that until that point I had never hugged a man other than my father, and him only rarely. Yet before the workshop was over, all 20 of us participants were hugging each other with abandon.

The exercise I remember most clearly was about identifying and giving thanks for formative moments. Howe passed out large sheets of newsprint and crayons and asked us to draw the floor plan of the first house we could remember and its furnishings. I am usually uncomfortable with exercises that seem manipulative, but I found myself engaged in this one.

I sketched my family's living room, with the worn couch and chairs and large Philco radio; the kitchen, with the sink where I dried dishes standing beside my mother; the dining room, which was used only for holiday dinners and festive occasions and which held the music stand where I practiced playing my trumpet. After half an hour or so, Howe instructed us to go back through our drawings and identify places where we first were aware of God and the people in those places who taught us to believe.

When it came time to share, there were plenty of tears, some long-repressed anger and other powerful emotions. I'm grateful for that seminar and for the opportunity to identify some of my own formative moments.