



One final word

Daniel O. Aleshire

June 2017

This is my last blog as executive director of The Association of Theological Schools, and T. S. Eliot was right: “. . . the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

The painting pictured above has been in my ATS office almost the entire time I have served this organization. My predecessor, James Waits, thought that the newly constructed ATS offices should have art and in 1991 arranged for a gallery to bring a range of paintings and prints to the office. Staff members were given the opportunity to choose something for their offices, and of all the art the gallery made available for viewing, this painting spoke to me and has continued speaking to me across these many years. As I leave, I want to tell you why.

This painting makes discernable form and shape by straight lines, some of which continue to a conclusion and others of which fade or blur or disappear altogether before the line reaches a termination point. Straight lines are important in education, accreditation, and the study of value-laden theological disciplines. Some issues and practices in our work are straight: they are right and true and beautiful. Straight lines are not all there is to education, accreditation, or theological studies. Education needs open spaces. Accreditation involves professional judgment that transcends the straight boundary lines. Theology has mystery at the heart of its truth. For me, the artfulness of this painting is its combination of straight lines, blurred lines, and disappearing lines that, together, provide coherence, shape, and form. Good theological education involves ambiguity and surety; good education involves

structure and openness; good accreditation involves attending to normative standards and professional judgment in the application of those standards.

The artist likely painted this picture for beauty's sake, and my interpretation is an imposition of meaning on something intended for the meaning of beauty alone. Perhaps the artist will forgive my meaning-making, but that is what theological educators do for a living. Straight lines alone create rigidity, and in the end, rigidity cannot contain reality. Blurred lines alone, or no lines at all, create openness, but openness without boundaries is vacuous. When straight, blurred, and disappearing lines are present, form emerges, reality is depicted, and meaning can emerge.

I began my service with this painting, and its meaning has only deepened. I see things in it now that I did not see almost three decades ago. Life entails encountering and reflection, then reframing meaning and reencountering, then reflection and new understanding—" . . . the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

The exploration with this painting will not cease. With my gratitude for the thoughtfulness of the ATS Board of Directors, the painting will go with me when I leave next week—a gift with considerable meaning.