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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Inviting Comparison, Inviting Learning

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Blog Series: Teaching and Traumatic Events
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I don't recall ever meeting anyone who sought out their own trauma. Those most prepared for the causal event were still caught unawares. As I've said before, trauma insists on passivity.

That's why I am a bit weary of valorizing people who did the so-called right thing in the face of trauma. Should we honor the person's resilient responses? Absolutely. Can we do so without reducing their story to a marketable remedy or idol for veneration? If we don't, then we may end up down a slippery slope of objectification. We would do well to learn from people without making them an object lesson or essentializing an ability.

It takes commitment to refrain from tokenizing those dealing with trauma. I see the struggle play out around the water cooler.

Faculty are shooting the breeze in between classes. Small talk turns to a hot-button issue ripped from the headlines or the grapevine. Someone presses the point that the weighty issue should be brought up in the classroom. "But how?" another asks; the quickest solution, leave it to the most affected colleague to lead the way or do it all. They're a natural fit, right? Crisis averted.

Here's the thing—no one's a natural fit for dealing with trauma. The experience of trauma isn't a virtue. It's a burden. And when we add to it, we not only bring insult to injury but also a stumbling block to those committed to addressing it.

I know. I know. In my last post, I emphasized how dealing with trauma isn't always your problem. But struggling to face it isn't a sign that it's not your problem. Dealing with trauma in *your* classroom is hard. And no taught subject is a natural fit for addressing trauma because it stymies the active participation that learning requires. I think honoring this is worth a moment of reflection.

Once you embrace that dealing with trauma isn't a natural fit, what might you do when trauma finds its way into your class? I've found comparison to be a useful too. Comparison thrives in the reality that classification is where humans dwell. When you realize that nothing you do is going to ever solve the thing, you can begin to acknowledge the freedom at your disposal. Put differently, you can talk about the thing without talking about the thing. Here's what I mean.

First, *name the trauma* in a way appropriate to your learning setting. "Do no harm" is a good tact here. Surface the trauma to acknowledge the situation but do so without violating the trust, privacy, or boundaries that bind your learning community. For example, when a "bias-related incident" or climate-changing event happens on your campus, actually acknowledge that it happened.

Second, *name your desire* for the teaching moment. Given the difficulty of this teaching task, I like to lower the bar . . . and then lower it again. I teach on religion and the politics of social difference. I'm not out here trying to bring world peace or end racism. I'm upfront with students that I intend to facilitate a substantive 15-week conversation without a body count. The same expectation holds true for even a single class session. Other than that, if students leave the session asking better questions, seeking sharper answers, or are more skillful in pursuing either given the topic, that is well. Maybe this philosophy won't win you "Teacher of the Year," but I do find that it helps me be present in the moment.

Third, *present something besides the trauma* to discuss. This can be something you find relatively pertinent. It can be a historical example from your domain of expertise. It can be a piece of art or news story that keeps popping into your head. I don't want to put limitations on this because nothing naturally fits. Just make sure that it meets the criteria of steps one and two. For me, I find it least helpful to compare similar type of incidents (e.g. blatant discrimination, sudden death of a community member, a major institutional change). Comparisons that are similar limit the potential of the activity because the similarities immediately standout as co-incidents. Instead, I might set up a comparison based upon what I see as similar power relationships (e.g. feeling of a lack of agency), eerily similar diction across vastly different contexts (e.g, Where else have people expressed an inability to breathe?), or in the case of images, artistic motifs. On this last, I used Romance paintings to help students process the arrest of artist-activist Bree Newsome after she pulled down a Confederate Flag from the South Carolina State House.

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Fourth, *invite your students to reflect* on the thing on paper. You can be so blunt as to ask, "Why am I showing you this?" I like to have students freely associate and hypothesize the comparison for themselves. I think this extends a grace in which students can relish in the messiness of the learning process without pretense or fear of reprisal.

Fifth, *share the grounds* upon which you found your "something" comparable to the named trauma. Why is it that your selection is worth discussing? How do you see its relevance? Is it because of the subject matter or a social dynamic you recognize? Is there a historical connection? Retrace how you connected the dots. One connection will give you plenty to discuss.

Sixth, *give students an opportunity* to reflect about the trauma on paper. You can see that we are now going through the steps backward.

Seventh, *ask what needs further reflection* given the lessons learned from the comparison. Encourage these to be described openly—perhaps with one word. These can be shared aloud and recorded on the board. To maintain the "do no harm" ethos, remind them of your desire for this moment.

Lastly, *let the students go* free to name the trauma (or not) as they choose. Also, give a sense of what comes next in the course schedule. This helps to situate the day's class session within the rhythm of the course, inviting them to make further connections on their own.

For all the steps listed here, this exercise appears more complicated than it is in execution. Take it as an attempt to strip down teaching-learning to the basics so that those involved can recall that there can be possibilities, connections, and community in the face of trauma.

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