



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Believe Impossible Things

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Notes From The Field

July 18, 2018

Tags: justice | racism | anti-racism | cognitive dissonance

*Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things."*

*"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen.*

*"When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."*

-- Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

The matter-of-factness of the Queen's statement about believing impossible things is her formidable strength. My contribution to a society that must take seriously its issues of inclusion, equity, eradication of poverty, economic justice, and ecological ruin is showing my students that belief in impossible things is their prophetic obligation. I want to teach my students to be more like the Queen, and less like Alice.

The current hegemonic reality would have us believe that the current state of things is all there is. And, how it is now is as it should be - and anything else is impossible. We are distracted from imagining a world of communal mindedness and cooperation. We are taught that justice is impossible, improbable, and, I dare say, imprudent.

For some students, the challenge to believe impossible things is the immediacy of being taught by an African American, female professor who has, by the position she holds in the school, authority over them. *"How is it possible,"* I hear them attempting to reconcile their cognitive dissonance, *"that a person deemed by society to be inferior can be in this place of higher education? She must be a credit to her race; She must be an Affirmative Action hire; she must have slept with somebody to get this kind of job."*

For other students, the challenge to believe impossible things is when they see someone like themselves—same racial identity, same gender, same hair texture, and possessing the same ability to suck my teeth and roll my eyes like a champ. *"How is it possible,"* I hear them attempting to reconcile their confusion, *"that a person like Her can be in this place of higher education? She must think she's white. She must have left the church—she ain't Christian. She must be sleeping with somebody to get this kind of job."*

If I can press past the immediate narrowness of some students when gazing upon my Black, female body in my own classroom, I am eager to get to deeper urgencies of believing impossible things for social change.

The politics of inferiority, the oppressions of white supremacy, white nationalism, and the current state of misogyny would have us believe, require us to believe, that the current reality is all that is possible. The status quo truncates the imagination as a way of maintaining control. Unimaginative students routinely resist learning about social transformation and the creativity necessary to disentangle and revision society without systemic oppressions.

Every teacher, if you get to teach long enough, develops a shtick. The word "shtick" comes from the Yiddish language meaning "bit"—as in a "comedy bit" performed on stage. If you are not sure if you have a shtick or if you are not sure what it is—ask your students, they know. Or attend the annual end-of-the-year skits where students gleefully parody the faculty. Keep in mind that imitation is the greatest flattery and smile during your moments.

One of my many classrooms shticks goes like this:

With a wry smile on my face and beginning with a dramatic pause I pose this question:

*Which came first - race or racism?*

Some students recognize my wry smile, become cautious--suspicious that this is a trick question. Some students hesitate to answer for fear of getting the answer wrong. A silence wafts through the classroom.

I then answer my own question: *Racism birthed race and not the other way 'round.*

Students' faces signal more suspicion, disbelief, and occasionally . . . curiosity. The silence moves deeper into disbelief and some low-grade fear (like something dangerous is about to happen).

Feeling a teachable moment potentially approaching, I keep going:

*It took the depravity of racist hearts to construct race and not the other way 'round. Race was created as a social/political system whose ultimate and exclusive aim is to create a permanent social under- caste of human inferiority.*

(Dramatic pause, I breathe deeply so students can breathe also.)

I continue: *Given the spiritual evil necessary to maintain the system of patriarchy, white supremacy and white nationalism, it would make sense to assume that the victims of this social system (all women and children, people of color, the poor, LGBTQ brothers and sisters, disabled folks—for example) should be, and many are, either annihilated, embittered, or paralyzed with fear . . . .*

*Yet, the African American men and women I know, while they have suffered tremendous hardship, oppression, and loss, exemplify a story other than defeat. When you are a people who know how to believe impossible things, the reality of a situation does not keep you from freedom.*

I ask for questions and comments, linger only for a little while, and then continue with discussion questions such as:

- *What would it take for you and your people to be able to imagine a more just society—a world without racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism?*
- *What obstacles make imagining this society difficult?*
- *What is at stake for your people if you do not imagine this world?*
- *What is the role and responsibility of church leadership in the more just society?*
- *What skills, capacities, and know-how do you need to assist your people in transitioning into a more just society, church, and world?*

These are not questions proffering a utopian society, nor are they questions for idle flights of fancy or busy-work. Believing in the impossible as well as teaching belief in impossible things is what it will take in order to save the racists and the victims of racism. If we are to teach our students, in the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu, to endure hardship without becoming hard and to have heartbreak without being broken, then they have to have an imagination that can conjure that which evil says is impossible.

<https://wabash.center/2018/07/believe-impossible-things/>

