



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



No Matter How Small: A Lesson From Whoville

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

Blog Series: Notes From The Field

October 17, 2018

Tags: anti-racism | teaching strategies | anti-oppression | teaching and the arts

“Grab him!” they shouted. “And cage the big dope!
Lasso his stomach with ten miles of rope!
Tie the knots tight so he’ll *never* shake loose!
Then dunk that dumb speck in the Beezle-Nut juice!

Horton fought back with great vigor and vim
But the Wickersham gang was too many for him.
They beat him! They mauled him! They started to haul
Him into his cage! But he managed to call
To the Mayor: “Don’t give up! I believe in you all!
A person’s a person, no matter how small!
And you very small persons will *not* have to die
If you make yourselves heard! *So come on, now, and TRY!”*

Horton Hears a Who! by Dr. Seuss

Horton Hears a Who! is a children’s story book by the dependable philosopher Dr. Seuss. In

the parable, Horton the elephant was, on May 15th, having a bath in the jungle. As Horton is splashing and enjoying the moment, he hears a small noise—a faint voice calling for help. The rest of the tale is about Horton risking his life to save the town of Who-ville from those in the jungle who would destroy it. Other characters could not, or would not, hear the Who-villians because they were small in size and their voices were faint. Who-ville is so tiny it can fit on a speck of dust. Dr. Seuss describes the smallness of Who-ville this way--“The elephant stretched his great trunk through the air, And he lifted the dust speck and carried it over, And placed it down, safe, on a very soft clover.” Unlike the other characters of the parable, Horton believed, “A person’s a person, no matter how small.” This is, unfortunately, a contested idea in the story, as well as in U.S. society.

In our conversation on oppression, systemic hatred and violence, perhaps the whimsy of Dr. Seuss allows us to enter into this radical notion of inclusion, compassion, and acceptance with fresh eyes and child-like wonder. Perhaps whimsy can be used in our classrooms to teach people the worth of all humanity.

Rekindling our imaginations for the work of empathy is needed, but fraught with danger. Imagination shackled to hatred is as powerful as imagination perpetuating liberation, justice, and love. Evil itself can be imaginative. The power of imagination is recognized by those who would oppress as it is by those who would liberate. Hatred recruits imagination for propaganda and manipulation. Oppression and its many forms of torture are often creative, imaginative—yet are a machine of hopelessness. We cannot naively think that if it is imaginative it is pointing toward freedom.

Dr. Seuss, the czar of whimsy and imagination is certainly a compass pointing us toward freedom. *Horton Hears a Who!* is the life lesson of advocacy and sacrifice. Teaching for awareness of systemic dehumanization, teaching strategies for re-imagining equitable communities are sometimes enriched with a little help from Dr. Seuss.

For those who believe in and teach toward healthy communities, healthy families, healthy individuals and, for our purposes, healthy classrooms, the social structures that are produced by racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, (etc.) are an illogical, un-reasonable, and counter-intuitive situation. Oppression truncates the imagination of the oppressor. White supremacy and patriarchy distort reality. Internalizing the lie of superiority thins the soul and weakens judgement. Imagination itself, then, is constrained by the maintenance and management of hatred. An imagination tasked with the perpetuation of hatred becomes one more blunt and dangerous tool. Dr. Seuss’s brilliant tale provides insight.

Students who are reticent, unable, incapable, or simply resistant to the conversation on racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia find Dr. Seuss non-threatening and approachable. The whimsy of Dr. Seuss allows students to lower their guard—this is a good thing. Dr. Seuss reminds white students and male students of the imagination they had as children before white supremacy and patriarchy stripped them bare and robbed them.

This semester, I am partnering with the good doctor in this way. My instructions for an in-class activity are:

- Place your feet flat on the floor, take everything out of your hands and relax. Breathe deeply. Breath in through your nose and out through your mouth and relax.
- Get out your reading assignment, *Horton Hears A Who!* by Dr. Seuss (it's on the syllabus as required reading).
- Sit together in a small group (2 or 3 people, no more than 4) and slowly re-read the book aloud to one another.
- As individuals, with crayon, magic marker or colored pen and 8.5 X 11 paper consider these questions:

In your family, church, community, region, or country—who are those who are treated as the small people? Who are the people who are unheard, unseen, or ignored? Who are the small people for which bias and prejudice is often heaped? Who are the small people who struggle to be heard? Be specific—make a list. (I supply the art materials.)

- Gather together with your small group, and without discussing the rationale, compile one list of all of the groups of small peoples recorded in each individual list. Bring a list with no redundancies. Record your group's compiled list on a poster sized paper for display.
- Display the lists and discuss with entire class these kinds of questions:

Why are these groups of people considered “small” in society? Why is bias and prejudice foisted upon these particular groups of persons? Is there a common understanding of who is “small”? Are there any groups to be added to the list? Are there any patterns of prejudice or discrimination which we can see in our lists? Accept all answers (within the bounds of sensibility).

- Next, I re-read aloud the above quote, and then instruct:
- Sit with this quote, reread it and let it soak in. Breathe deeply as you sit and think. Read our list of “small people” and breathe. Think of your interactions with or/as these oppressed brothers and sisters. Keep breathing as you sit quietly. (At least 10 minutes of silence, more if they can take it.)
- For which of these groups of small persons are you and your community willing or able to be a Horton? For whom will you and your community fight? For whom will you and your community take a beating? For whom will you and your community be mauled and caged? For whom will you shout encouragement and freedom? Sit in silence; take notes of your own thoughts if you so choose. (I do not ask students to report on this reflection.)
- Now, consider and discuss aloud: (a) What is at stake if you do not speak for the small people? (b) What is a risk if you do speak for the small people? Discuss for as long as there is energy for this inquiry. In this instance, the professor's role is primarily listening, clarifying and, if needed, introducing vocabulary to elevate the conversation.
- With fresh paper, draw the kind of courage which would be necessary for you and your community should you choose to advocate or should you choose to re-invest in your

advocacy of hearing and fighting for the small people. You may choose to work on individual or collaborative drawings. We will create a gallery of your drawings. The title of our gallery display is "A Person's a Person, No Matter How Small!"

Whether courage can be taught is one of my confounding meta-reflection questions. My answer today is: only if it can be imagined. The last step of this reflection is the point of the exercise; we must be able to imagine ourselves as people of courage if we are to do this risky, treacherous work of raising consciousness, creating relevant and timely strategies for eradication of oppression and learning how to heal the wounds of dehumanization and systemic hatred.

<https://wabash.center/2018/10/no-matter-how-small-a-lesson-from-whoville/>