



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Know the Rules, then Let Them Go

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

Blog Series: Notes From The Field

February 18, 2019

Tags: student learning | improvisational teaching | teaching practice

In the late 1980's, the church I served had a large staff and a sanctuary worthy of rental for the filming of a professional TV Christmas special. On an otherwise humdrum day in March, word that Stevie Wonder was in the sanctuary spread like wild fire around the staff offices. Along with the gossip, came the foreboding reminder that staff were not to enter the space since it was being rented. Never having been one to follow foreboding reminders, I used my master key to make my way down the back stairway and into the sanctuary through a little known and rarely used door. The sanctuary was abuzz with a TV camera crew, producers, musicians, and many persons I could not identify. I made myself invisible and sat in a pew behind Vanessa Williams. I looked at the chancel-sure enough, Stevie Wonder was at the keyboard. The Harlem Boys Choir was gathered around the piano and sprinkled in the pews and chancel area. I was wide-eyed and amazed. What a moment!

In not-too-long, the men Stevie Wonder was talking with left the chancel. Stevie Wonder started playing the keyboard. He looked up from the keyboard and called over to the church's organist who was seated on the organ bench. Stevie Wonder said, "I feel like Malott's *Lord's Prayer*." This piece of music is considered one of the music standards of African American church musicians; every church musician worth his/her salt knows this piece. The organist paused, called over to Stevie Wonder and asked, "Do you have the sheet music?"

A nervous *hush-your-mouth* fell over the enormous room. It was one of those rare moments when the shock was so great things seemed to go into slow motion. Some of the shock came from the fact that a professional musician asked a blind man for sheet music. The rest of the guffaw came from the pronouncement that a professional church musician could not play this standard without reading it from sheet music.

As providence would have it, the director of the Harlem Boys Choir had heard Stevie Wonder's request and the organist's embarrassing response. The Director pointed to one of the boys who was standing on the chancel steps. The boy, dutifully and without hesitation, ran to the piano and began playing Malott's *Lord's Prayer*. As soon as Stevie Wonder heard the piano sound, he joined in on keyboard. That afternoon, I sang Malott's *Lord's Prayer* with Venessa Williams, Stevie Wonder, and the Harlem Boys Choir. A few camera people and producers sang too. It was a triumphant moment of Christmas in March!

Gardner Taylor, considered an extraordinary preacher, would leave his sermon manuscript, which he had spent the entire week poring over, in the middle of his desk, then go into the pulpit and preach. He would preach his sermon relying upon his preparation and the movement of the Holy Spirit. The reason we know this to be the case is that he never entered the pulpit with anything but a Bible in his hand and there are reams of Dr. Taylor's sermon manuscripts.

My former colleague, Otto Maduro, would lecture from post-it notes-only 3 or 4 for an hour lecture. Never did I see him stand and read aloud from a manuscript and always did he give an impassioned and informed lecture.

About ten years ago I decided I knew the materials in my introductory course well enough that I would no longer use a manuscript for lectures. The first couple sessions, I was afraid I would forget something or leave out some vital aspect of theory. What I discovered was that rather than reading to my students, I began to talk with my students as I lectured. Without a manuscript, I was able to be present with them in a significantly different way. Being untethered from a manuscript allowed me to come from behind the podium; allowed me to watch their expressions and pay closer attention to their breathing; allowed me to think fresh thoughts as I talked. My glitch then and now is when a student wants me to repeat something verbatim. I say, "HmMMM . . . I was not listening to myself." Then a student (there is always one) who takes copious notes repeats what I said and we move on. Teaching without a manuscript allows me to gather-in previous conversations, items in the news, and the temperament in the room. I can have moments of scripted thoughts and I can have moments of improvisational musings which ground the discussion in the here-and-now. When I am free from a manuscript I can help students in meaning-making with the inflections of my voice, the gestures of my body, based upon what I know of their own life experience. It makes me more agile, more dexterous, more in-tuned with a conversation between us rather than information from me to them. Lecturing without a manuscript has changed the tempo and rhythms of my teaching. I linger over notions when students signal they need more time and move quickly through items for which students signal they understand. I feel I have a better rapport with

them because I am not focused on the page in-hand. I feel more free to teach.

After doing this for ten-plus years, I am convinced that by the end of the semester I have covered as much or more intellectual terrain as I did when I had a manuscript.

Like the piano-playing boy in the Harlem Boys Choir—there are some intellectual standards that I know, and letting go of the manuscript makes me better able to perform what I know with conviction and percussion. I can play it on cue, not in a mechanical or rote fashion, but in the moment and for the people who are also there to play. We learn, in these moments, to listen for each other.

Highly respected musicians make it their craft to read the notes as printed, as intended by the composer, as expected by the listening audience when they are knowledgeable and ridged. The great work of composing music or writing a manuscript is not to be overlooked or belittled. Playing the music without interpretation, without deviating – trying to get it perfect—is a respected form, discipline, practice. Even so, there are genres of music and kinds of musicians who lift their heads from the sheet music and dare to interpret, dare to make the music their own in every moment. I want to teach, not toward the illusion of perfection, but toward authentic expression of my own voice, my own “take,” – exposing my students to my own spiritual authenticity.

I suspect the boy who played for and with Stevie Wonder that day is now a man who still remembers that remarkable moment. I hope he is a man who still knows how to say “yes” to improvisation and the grace which comes with letting go.

<https://wabash.center/2019/02/know-the-rules-then-let-them-go/>