Teaching Online is Teaching as Escape

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Quarantine strips life down to the bare essentials. My work gets me out of bed each morning and through each day. Admittedly, before quarantine, the demands of work structured most of my days and a significant portion of my life. The difference is that during quarantine I am more willing to admit that I have been reduced to my work with little else left that is life-giving.

Facing this reality allows me to face the truth that I have been living through a series of stressors. My life over the past five years has been marked by transitions: relocation to a new city, a new administrative role, a divorce, co-parenting arrangements for pre-teen, now teen boys, purchase of a new home and the attendant address changes, packing and unpacking. These were papered over by a full professional life packed with teaching, academic writing, professional conferencing, mentoring, administration, leadership in my various academic groups. These stressors built to a full boil with the death of my brother in mid-March and the experience of having to view his burial via YouTube.

Quarantine has brought escape routes and pathways for deep connections that the hectic pace

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of academic life under "normal" circumstances would have eliminated with the constant demands for productivity and keeping on top of schedules. Quarantine has reduced my work from its tangible realities to greater screen time that facilitate the escape habits I have honed over the course of my career.

Teaching online is not entirely new to me; what is new to me is teaching from the space where the majority of my life and critical life moments are lived out in front of screens and through pixilated images. As waves of grief have come over me in the past weeks, I recognize how work forces me to acknowledge and name my teaching as a coping strategy. The routines of the week require me to perform and to show up for class times, respond to discussion posts, read and grade student writing, attend meetings. I pushed myself through with sufficient practice of showing up and pretending competence. I now see that teaching during these times sits within a simulated world. Simulation has always fed my need to escape, as it has for many other persons. Simulating grief, pain, loss, and stress can only go so far, for as Bessel van der Kolk reminds us, "the body keeps the score."

Teaching can be a means of pretending things are ordinary. Making minimal changes to the syllabus, expanding topics to take account of the current context, or adjusting grade expectations. All these adaptations are coping mechanisms for me to tell myself, and my students, that we were carrying on with the ordinary events of academic life. In these online spaces, we facilitate a grand simulacra and escape to familiar worlds of knowledge and competence. I am fine with the escape only because it is a means of survival at this time. I recognize all too well that the theories of online education presume that the digital world serves as the adjunct to the flesh and blood realities of teachers and learners. Now we are truly in flipped classrooms where flesh and blood encounters form less and less of our daily realities and the digital becomes the default reality.

In these days of disconnection, I am finding that other forms of social gatherings in online settings need to be named as pale reflections of the real thing. Part of my grief is wishing I had been next to my parents and siblings as we said goodbye to our older brother. I long for real connections, preferring the comfort of a friend's voice over an email expressing condolences. I long to be in real conversations with a worshipping community, and not listening to someone talk at me through a screen. These real connections that formed the parts of our real-world communities are a long way off. Until then, I face the reality that I am my best human connection.

In normal times I might find this thought too self-absorbed. If disconnection gets me to fall in love with me again, to love the parts of me that are energized by teaching, to love fiercely the liberative work of my academic research, then I am achieving what Derek Walcott refers to as loving "again the stranger who was your self." Now I am thinking of ways to teach through my body and my responsiveness to my body's pain, my vulnerability, and longings. This means inhabiting biblical characters with greater empathy and asking students to stretch their imaginations away from orthodox inspired interpretations of biblical texts to find real connections with the feelings, fears, and experiences of biblical texts that in many ways have

been formed in the midst of trauma. I'm developing exercises that ask students to read texts as they look through their windows at the world they mostly experience through imagined senses and translate those experiences into looking at the ancient world in the Bible as if peering at them standing at the window of their homes. I am learning how to harness the genius of D-Nice's Club Quarantine parties that call people together around a screen event lived out in bodily movements in individual homes. To teach online now not only means attending to the onscreen activities, the strategies of well-crafted pixilated pedagogy, but also doing the hard work to pay attention to what happens offline with us as teachers and with our students.

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