



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



What Do You Need?

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

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

August 24, 2020

Tags: teaching | resources | agency

In the early sixties, our three-generational family lived in a tight-knit African American community in north Philly. Van Pelt Street, just off of Diamond Street, was a long city block of home owners who knew each other, looked out for each other, and cared for all the families on the block. Both sides of the street consisted of row houses - meaning all the houses connected together. This version of architecture in NYC is called brownstone, but since Philadelphia houses were made of brick, they were called rowhomes. The entrance to the homes were marble stairs with stoops just outside of each door. Neighbors would sit on their stoops like country folk sit on their front porches. Sitting on the stoop was a daily activity for almost every household. As children, my brother and I, once we knew not to run into the street, were free to wonder up and down the street playing and visiting neighbors on their stoops. Visiting neighbors, while never being out of my parents' or grandparents' watchful eye, gave us a sense of interdependence and community. My parents knew that the farther from home we wondered, the more loving eyes watched us, watched over us and kept us safe. One of our favorite neighbors was Mr. Joe. Mr. Joe had salt and pepper, closely cut hair and smelled of motor oil. His hands were large and rough and his voice was warm and round. I can't remember a time Mr. Joe did not smile when he saw me. Mr. Joe wore blue coveralls, and in the pocket of his coveralls, we soon learned, was candy. Mr. Joe would come home from work,

go inside, then in short order, return to sit on his stoop. When my brother and I saw Mr. Joe on his stoop, we would go for a visit. Mr. Joe never disappointed – he was always glad for our visits and always offered us candy. If my brother was offered a piece of candy while I was not with him, he would say to Mr. Joe, “Can I have one for my sister?” And, Mr. Joe would say of course, reach back into his pocket and give my brother a second piece of candy. Brent would run home and give me my piece candy. If I was visiting Mr. Joe without Brent, and Mr. Joe gave me a piece of candy, I would simply say, “Thank you” to Mr. Joe, then run home and give my brother my piece of candy. Brent, seeing I only had one piece, would ask, “Why didn’t you ask for one for me?” My brother and I soon learned I was too shy to ask, too shy to say anything other than “thank you” even to beloved neighbor Mr. Joe. As a child, I was unable to voice what I needed. Sometimes saying what you need seems intimidating and scary. By the way, Brent never took my one piece of candy for himself.

Years later, I was in a conversation with my Dean. The Dean had just taken the administrative post a few months before, and had scheduled conversations with each faculty person. The conversations were to get acquainted and to talk about curriculum participation. At my appointment, the Dean and I were having a congenial conversation. Then, his last question stumped me. The Dean asked me, “What do you need?” The question halted me. My hesitation was as much due to the way he asked the question, as the question itself. The Dean asked the question as if he intended to act upon my answer. Feeling the sincerity of the question gave it more gravity. In the moment, I felt disappointed that I had no real answer.

This was not like the moment with Mr. Joe when I was too shy to say what I needed. By the time I sat with the dean, I was a well-voiced scholar. The question posed by the dean revealed that I had not done sufficient reflection or imagination work to rise to the level of his inquiry. Indeed, what do I need to teach well, better, or differently?

The question was not a question of supplies. The Dean was not asking if I needed ink pens or a new desk chair. And, he was not asking about such things as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, nor was he making an inquiry about the existential nature of my being. The Dean was asking me – what do you need in order to improve your teaching? What do you need to further immerse yourself in your own pedagogical project? What support do you need to engage the issues of your work? What can our intellectual community do to support your teaching agendas, practices, habits, or experiments? In this moment, I realized I had been so busy doing my project, I had taken little time to imaginatively reflect upon the doing of my project. I did not know what I needed and, in that moment, I could not say what I needed. Knowing what you need takes meditation, contemplation, inquiry, investigation, consideration, creativity and maybe -- conversations with friends that may involve drinking brown liquor, eating fatty foods and dancing.

At the risk of stating the obvious, change is here to stay. In this moment, to engage the question “what do you need?” requires a more than cursory understanding of the context our work inhabits. The changes wrought in higher education, in general, and in our classrooms, specifically, are many and large. This season of COVID 19 quarantine, the Black Lives Matter

movement, the extraordinary dilemma of government leadership, the shifting weather patterns, the US and global economic volatility, and global transformations are here to stay and have critical bearing upon our teaching lives. Even the notion of change being here to stay does not mean we are now static – in any way. The changes themselves are still changing. This dynamism, shifting, twisting and uncertainty is the new normal. We are surrounded personally, corporately, and nationally by grief, loss, and uncertainty. Our classrooms, our students, our selves have changed and will continue to change. We cannot be too shy or voiceless in engaging the question of need, and we cannot be unprepared or lacking critical reflection and imagination to answer this question with depth, guts and heart. Brothers and sisters, what do you need in order to teach - right now?

In the midst of this ever-deepening flux, what would it mean to create space for conversation which can hold liminality and certainty as creative tension so that the emerging educational paradigms our society spawns now, and into the future, is nurtured?

The Wabash Center has been working toward creating space so that colleagues can reflect and plan for what is needed in the right-now and the soon-to-be. Here is some of our work product:

1. Launch of the Digital Salons in September. The six Digital Salons, bringing 95 colleagues into conversation to talk about what is needed.
2. Improving *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching*
3. Creating online symposiums to be in conversation with major artists
4. Webinars dedicated to antiracist practices
5. Podcasts with more than 5,000 downloads
6. Partnership with the Collegeville Institute about creative writing for scholars who want to speak into the public square
7. Our staff is doing our own training in cultural competency
8. Searching for new associate director
9. Expanded online resource pages and materials created
10. Three new blog series were created: Teaching for Social Justice and Civic Engagement; Teaching and Learning During Crisis; Director's blog series "Teaching on the Pulse."
11. and more to be announced soon...

It took me a couple months, but I did answer my Dean's inquiry about my needs. The answer I gave him was thoughtful, generative, and, suggested my need for a new trajectory in my teaching project. Strengthening the ecology of our schools likely means providing one another with what is needed.

<https://wabash.center/2020/08/what-do-you-need/>