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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



A Muted Professor for a Change

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In Luke 1:20, an angel named Gabriel informs the priest Zechariah that he will remain mute during his wife Elizabeth's pregnancy. Zechariah's mistake was to doubt Gabriel's announcement that they would have a child despite decades of infertility. Perhaps Gabriel made a mistake by reacting harshly to a question any reasonable human would have asked, but I have come to understand the priest's silence as a prescription more than a punishment. I imagine a muted Zechariah growing spiritually and relationally as he listened more to Elizabeth, to their relative Mary, and to the Spirit who would guide and empower their son.

I found myself identifying with Zechariah while participating as a learner in Dr. Mitzi J. Smith's excellent course on African American Interpretation and the Gospel of Luke.[i] When we discussed my role prior to the course, Mitzi made it clear that I must not speak or write in ways that undermined her authority as the instructor. At her request I did not post any messages in the preliminary discussion forums in Moodle. One exception that Mitzi approved was a message explaining my relative silence and encouraging openness to womanist hermeneutics.[ii] When we transitioned to intensive sessions in Zoom, Mitzi sometimes asked my opinion, and she included me in breakout discussion groups. Even so, I remained one of the quietest learners in the class.

Although I identified with Zechariah's temporary silence, his privilege offers a more enduring

analogy. My privilege has included a history of talking in class. My parents valued education highly and had resources to help me succeed, including my mother's training and experience in early childhood education. With their encouragement, I became a precocious talker, quick to get teachers' attention and give answers they wanted. Not all of my classmates were so advantaged. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi describes the anger he felt at biased teaching in third grade. A white teacher regularly ignored raised non-white hands while engaging with favored white children.[iii] The flip side of similar biases enhanced my education in many respects, but there were drawbacks. I missed out on what others would have said if I had not taken so much "air time," and my relationships were often better with adults than with peers. I was oblivious to the injustice.

The skills and habits I learned as a child helped me compete for attention, grades, honors, and scholarships all the way through a PhD program. An MDiv program that emphasized collaboration taught me to dial back competition and seek the good of a whole class, but I still talked a lot. I continue to do so as a seminary professor.

Extensive research has documented the impact of implicit bias on students' achievement at all levels of education.[iv] There seem to be fewer studies focused on the impact of implicit bias on students' perceptions of minoritized and women professors,[v] but I am learning from Mitzi and other colleagues that it is a serious problem. For many (but not all) students, my race and gender lend me added authority, whereas the same students may discount the authority of professors who are not white or male. For Mitzi these biases are headwinds that impede her teaching.

Patriarchal biblical texts and interpretations have long supported to the silencing of women, and Luke-Acts has contributed to that injustice because most female characters model traditional silent roles. Mary's prophetic hymn in Luke 1:67-79 is an important exception, but the overall impression remains. In relation to that tradition, Mitzi's strong leadership and my relative silence constituted a small dose of justice.

Most prescriptions come with warning labels, and so should silence. When privileged people remain comfortably silent in the face of oppression, we perpetuate injustice by refusing to add our voices and energies to movements for change. Silence can also be a symptom of passive-aggressive relationships, where resentments fester without being addressed in a timely way. Like fasting, silence is only healthy when it is temporary. It is best when chosen, not imposed, and when rooted in trust, not fear. In academic settings, silent students might be hiding a failure to prepare, or they might be afraid that voicing their thoughts will lead to negative judgments.

My own motives for silence were mixed. I was willing to comply with Mitzi's wishes and eager to hear what others had to say during each of the challenging and engaging sessions. I was also anxious not to fit the stereotype of a well-intentioned but clueless white guy. I abhor racism and sexism, but I also recognize that I am not entirely free from them. I did not want to say "the wrong thing."

Dr. Marcia Riggs has wisely suggested that intentional, interpersonal work on race and gender would have been valuable earlier in our collaboration.[vi] The course was not an appropriate space in which to do that work, but I hope to do more in the future. I also hope that my experience of “stereotype threat” will deepen my empathy and strengthen my planning for students who may be silent due to fear.[vii]

Discernment of when to speak and when to remain silent is an essential skill for theological educators and for everyone who seeks justice. Zechariah’s silence prepares him to prophesy like Mary, and I hope to benefit from the same prescription.

Notes

[i] For more information about the course and the related Wabash Center grant project, search for previous posts by Drs. Mitzi J. Smith and Daniel W. Ulrich, beginning with “Learning Womanist Hermeneutics during Covid-19” at <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/07/learning-womanist-hermeneutics-during-covid-19/>.

[ii] Thanks to Mary Hess for suggesting this step.

[iii] Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 44-55.

[iv] See, for example, the studies summarized in Rachel E. Godsil et al., *The Science of Equality, Volume 1: Addressing Implicit Bias, Racial Anxiety, and Stereotype Threat in Education and Health Care* (Perception Institute, 2014), accessed August 28, 2020, <http://perception.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Science-of-Equality.pdf>.

[v] On the impact of race, see Bettye P. Smith, “Student Ratings of Teaching Effectiveness: An Analysis of End-of-Course Faculty Evaluations,” *College Student Journal* 41, no. 4 (December 1, 2007): 788-800. On age and gender see Alison F. Doubleday and Lisa M. J. Lee, “Dissecting the Voice: Health Professions Students’ Perceptions of Instructor Age and Gender in an Online Environment and the Impact on Evaluations for Faculty,” *Anatomical Sciences Education* 9 (2016): 537-44.

[vi] Marcia Y. Riggs, “To Teach Collaboratively or Not?”

[vii] “Stereotype threat” is fear of acting in ways that confirm a stereotype of a group to which one belongs. For research demonstrating its negative impact on learning, including in discussions of race, see Godsil, *The Science of Equality*, 31-33.

<https://wabash.center/2020/09/a-muted-professor-for-a-change/>