



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Keep Looking!

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The narration below is my recollection of a typical interchange between my mother and my father when I was a child. Be mindful that we lived in a large home and invariably during these conversations my father would be on the first floor and my mother would be on the second floor. So, as you read their exchange imagine loud voices between two people who cannot see one another.

“Nancy, where is the wah-wah-wah!” said my father standing at the bottom of the staircase.

My mother, likely sewing, or making beds, or doing some household work on the second floor, answered, “Look in the kitchen; in the drawer under the cabinet with the water glasses; it’s on the left-hand side.”

Dad goes to the kitchen, opens a drawer, and rummages around the drawer, but cannot locate the wah-wah-wah. Dad returns to the bottom of the stairs to ask to my mother again.

“Nancy, I don’t see it. It is not there.”

“Yes, it is! Look in the drawer – the one with the red handle; the wah-wah-wah is on the left-

hand side.” said my mother.

Dad returns to the kitchen. He checks to see if he had previously opened the correct drawer. He had not. This time he locates the drawer with the red handle, opens it and rummages around in the drawer, but does not see the wah-wah-wah. A third time, he returns to the bottom of the stairs and in a louder, frustrated voice says,

‘Nancy! It’s not there. I can’t find the wah-wah-wah!!!’

My mother, in a calm, and loud voice replies, “Keep looking!”

My father, convinced my mother is mistaken about the location of the wah-wah-wah, gives up. Acquainted with my father’s sensibilities, my mother stops the work she is doing, and goes downstairs to the kitchen. Hearing my mother’s movements on the stairs (and our dog running ahead of her as she walks), my father waits in the kitchen for my mother – glad she has come to find the wah-wah-wah for him. My mother walks past my father, pulls open the drawer under the cabinet with the water glasses, the drawer with the red handle. Seeing the jumbled contents of the drawer she makes a mental note to reorganize the drawer at dinner time. She reaches into the drawer, near the left-hand side, and pulls out the wah-wah-wah. Shocked, my father takes the wah-wah-wah and contritely kisses my mother on the cheek as a thanks for finding it for him.

My question for reflection is not so much about my mother’s skills of household item curation, but about my father’s inability to see. Why could my father, even with the most specific directions, not see that for which he was searching? Or, why cannot our students, even with detailed syllabi, thick instructions for assignments, accomplish assignments? In other words, what does it take to see when searching?

One answer is perseverance. Keep looking!

My experience is that adult students want to Google once and call it research. Or they want to read once and expect to understand dense materials. When my mother instructed my father to *keep looking!* she was calling for skills of perseverance. “Keep looking!” means that even if it is not in your experience or imagination, (or the drawer you are rummaging through) it is in the imagination and knowledge of your teachers, so endure until you get to the end. As teachers, providing opportunities for our students to develop perseverance – the ability to keep looking until you can see it, find it, know it, understand it, get insight from it - is invaluable.

The inability for students to see is often vividly expressed in introductory classes. Teaching introductory courses often means that newly matriculated students’ conveyance of what they know and the ways they approach the course is primarily through life experience or learnings from other degrees in other schools. New students grappling with new materials, new approaches, new vocabulary, and new praxes often make for frustrated learners and fearful adults. Adult learners, for the most part, do not like attempting the new. They prefer being affirmed for what they already know. For some, learning anew feels insulting, uncomfortable –

as if it is personal judgment for not knowing what they should know. Studying religion and theology exacerbate these feelings of judgement - woulda' known, shoulda' known', and coulda' known - are haunting experiences which free float in classrooms. For students who come from traditions steeped in particularly exacting ways of knowing sacred texts and sacred ways, the experience of not knowing can be devastating.

There were semesters I would assign one critical essay to be written over the duration of the entire semester. Incrementally, students would need to turn-in drafts of the essay. Without assigning a grade, I would edit the draft then return for further research, thinking and rewriting. At the end of the semester, the essay, now polished by the drafting process, would be submitted for grading. Many students let me know that this iterative process was emotionally very difficult. They did not want to keep "re-doing" the essay. They saw little value in moving from a weak version to a stronger version, especially if each version did not receive a grade. They found it challenging to keep looking for the same thing until it was found, created, written - well. This assignment exposed the narrow edges of their skills of perseverance.

At the risk of overworking an illustration, the previous scene of my parent's typical conversation has its limits concerning teaching and learning. Consider that my parents, as spouse of one another, did not have the contract of teacher and learner. A contract between student and teacher is a different contract than between husband and wife, parent and child, employer and employee. The contract between teacher and learner has its own distinctiveness. The contract between teacher and learner is meant to create space so the learner can disclose, be vulnerable, expose their curiosity, and their want to expand and find insight. In return, the teacher provides opportunities for new knowledges, and maturity. So, here is the judgement call unique to the teacher/learner contract and the notion of perseverance.

In the moments before sight (understanding) by a learner, in the moments of frustration when what is searched for cannot be located or seen, the teacher has got to allow the learner the honor of the moment of not-knowing - the moment of struggle. For the teacher to rush in with the answer (rush in to rescue) is to deny the learner the moment of ah-hah! The ah-hah! moment of magic, achievement, and growth when what was searched for is found is why, in part, students want to learn. Teachers must be willing and able to stand in the moment when the student is frustrated and not act. In this moment it is easier to simply rescue them from the pain of learning, but resist. This is a truly difficult moment for teachers to hold. In these moments, we must learn to persevere.

<https://wabash.center/2021/04/keep-looking/>