



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Teaching While Grieving

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

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

January 30, 2021

Tags: teaching | self care | learning | grief

Listen to Dr. Westfield read this blog in an audio format.

My mother was deeply loved. She and my father came to live with me in 2008. Mom and Dad became known in the school community as they regularly attended chapel services, lectures and community dinners. Students who were my research assistants and teaching assistants were invited to dinner by my mom who still cooked dinner for our family. When invited by the Dean, Mom and Dad attended one faculty meeting (!!! Sweet Jesus!!! – a story for another time!).

My mother, Nancy Bullock Westfield died on December 7, 2010. We funeralized her in the chapel of Seminary Hall. Many students and colleagues attended the service. I felt an outpouring of love for my family. Mom's homegoing service was a celebration of her life well lived. The celebration highlighted mom's 81 years of service, artistry, nurture and audacious acts of justice on behalf of poor children and Black children in Philadelphia. And, the homegoing, like so many funerals, was the beginning of my family's long-walk-through grieving our beloved.

In the spring semester of 2011, I was teaching my introductory course. Amy, a brilliant

doctoral student, was my teaching assistant. One day while class was convened, Amy, with reticence, asked if she could talk with me in the hallway. I had divided the students into small groups with reflection questions, so the class was, in this moment, on task. I said yes, let's talk now. Amy looked untypically pensive as we walked into the hallway and away from the possibility of our conversation being overheard by our students.

Amy said, "Dr. Westfield..." (full pause; and holding her breath). "Umm..." (empty pause; and still holding her breath)

Concerned, I asked, "Amy, what is it?"

Amy said, "Dr. Westfield..." (taking a breath to gain courage) "Dr. Westfield, you've given that assignment before." (looking me in the eye for the first time)

I did not understand what Amy meant; I frowned to express my puzzlement. My thoughts raced in preparation to disagree. In nano-seconds, I recalled the week before, but I could not recall the learning activities. I turned a half-pivot from her and looked away as I tried to remember, tried to think. Amy, in a gentle, low tone, said, "Last week you divided the students into conversation groups and gave the same reflection questions."

My immediate reaction was to be defensive and tell her that she was mistaken, but before speaking I looked at her eyes filled with such empathy that I knew she was trying to be helpful. My pause created space for her to speak again, "Remember. last week you gave the same assignment ... and then the students reported in."

"Actually...." Amy went on, ".... this is the third time you have asked them to reflect upon these questions." As she said these words, I began to remember. I began to orient myself. I began to realize that, indeed, this was the third time I had given the same assignment for class discussion. Without allowing my body to flinch, I jolted from the realization.

In exasperation and embarrassment, I whispered in a quiet and defeated tone, "Amy."

With a warm smile, Amy said, "It's ok - the class understands you're grieving."

Amy and I returned to the classroom and I called the class out of their small groups. When we gathered, I apologized without giving a reason for the thrice redundant learning activity. I quickly reminded them of the assignment that was due the next week, asked for any questions, then dismissed the class about thirty minutes earlier than our scheduled dismissal.

Walking with my mother through her illness and then to her death had been one of the most difficult journeys I have ever taken. Even so, I underestimated the power of sorrow and the ways it can (and does) effect all aspects of life - even the teaching life. My mother's death had taken a toll on me. Thankfully, Amy had my back.

The vaccine for the COVID 19 virus promises an ease to the suffering in our country and

around the world. Many of us, faculty, administrators, and students, have personally lost loved ones during this scourge. We grieve. Others will not have had family and friends who died, but will be part of the overall experience of malaise, communal loss, and shock that continues to grip the nation. We grieve. The Black Lives Matter movement's demands go unanswered. We ring our hands, pray and grieve. The insurrection at the Capital Building on January 6 sent a renewed wave of fear, frustration, and the anxiety yet ripples through our nation. The feelings of loss, terror, and anxiety continue to pierce our awake and our dreams. In our uncertainty, we grieve. We have to acknowledge that we are, all, teaching while grieving.

Who is the self who teaches? In this moment of loss, our corporate answer is that we are the people who are seized by sorrow, hurt, and anguish. We are people who are grieving. Teaching as usual is not possible!

In recollecting this classroom experience I am not trying to be confessional - as if I had done something wrong. Rather, I tell the story to convey that grieving necessitates additional support and care. Even the most seasoned and conscientious teacher, while grieving, needs help. I am appreciative to Amy for pointing out that I was stuck. Had she not told me, my realization would have been much more painful and embarrassing. Or worse yet, I would not have ever realized. In teaching while grieving, who has your back? Who is your brave Amy?

For individuals who are in touch with their grief, what grief counselor, spiritual director or therapist will you meet with regularly as you process the effects of 2020-21 upon your teaching? For learning communities who possess a depth of communal awareness and a sense of togetherness, what rituals, rites, and conversations will you design for this sad moment? What blues songs will you compose? What lamentation will you paint, sculpt, write, create? What new habits will you acquire to honor the dead and the dieing? In what ways will you take your grieving and be inspired, be made brave, be summoned to a deeper, more meaningful call of teaching? What new insights on teaching will you incorporate?

Perhaps there will be new ceremonies for graduations, commencements and baccalaureates? Maybe new liturgies or rites of passage will be included in the senior send-offs, the spring dances, and the year books? Perhaps you will begin or end each class with a moment of silence, or of music, or ask students to plan a community-wide protest as a course assignment?

Sometimes grief prevents reflection, prevents action - only affords paralysis. Sometimes while we are grieving all we can do is the little bit we can do; one day at a time. Perhaps, simply keep a journal on your teaching until the grief subsides enough to reflect and plan for change.

The courses I taught in the Spring of 2011 were not my best, but they were the best I had to offer at the time. I hope that the little bits I had to offer my students were enough.

Thank you, Amy, for your care and support.

<https://wabash.center/2021/01/teaching-while-grieving/>

