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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



1,600 Files and 5 Plastic Bags

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Blog Series: Re/Kindling Creativity and Imagination

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At the end of November I experienced a disastrous event: I lost about 1,600 files from my computer. For reasons I'd rather not discuss, all I know is that years of heavily curated material and so much hard work are gone. All of the books I've written are gone. All my syllabi, my class preparation, my texts—everything is gone. Some things from many years ago remain, but I don't even have the courage to go look. It will only show what I don't have anymore.

Four years ago, I made a huge turn in my scholarship and am now trying to learn from the earth and working from a perspective that could be called the law (and lore) of the land. This deep change has shifted me and all my ways of knowing: classes, readings, pedagogies, resources, and relations. Entire worldviews! During these four years I took classes online and placed huge amounts of resources and readings in files, some of them with thirty, fifty, even a hundred pages, with journals, articles, websites, magazines, newspapers, list of books, and lots of references. Gone.

I have written so much and given talks, some more academic and some less; all sorts of format and content of texts. All gone. I was working on a book that was missing just the introduction. Gone. My sabbatical proposal with the full first draft of an extensive play I was working on. Gone. A book I was writing about my experience of becoming a father to my three adopted kids; five years of texts and notes. Gone. As the days went by, I realized I had to teach a workshop without any materials at hand. I was reminded that I had to teach an intensive online

seminar to graduate students in Brazil and again, I had nothing to rely on. I will stop here.

I was so desolated I didn't know what to do. I went to see Wonder, the tree I always visit to talk and listen to. While I was there, I realized that crusts were growing on her which belong to a family of fungi that live on "dead wood." Wonder—my companion, the one who had been teaching me about my relation to the earth—was dying, or had died, I don't know. My heart fell to the ground. If I had had a map under my feet, now this map had disappeared. There was nothing to guide me, or to turn back to, in terms of "where" my thinking, my writing, and my teaching were. Those who write, teach, speak, work, and play with words know that to lose what you write is to lose yourself. For writing becomes our body and soul; it is all biographical, even if not necessarily about ourselves. A very specific way of knowing shapes us into who we are and how we make everything meaningful and life possible.

In fact, the where of knowledge has pursued me for a while. As a liberation theologian, the where has always been fundamental to how and with whom I think. Ecological thinking helped me realize that I need to think beyond the humans around me. It is interesting how we have replaced knowledge and memory from local, oral history to paper, books, cabinets, and libraries, and then to online files and the cloud— But when we lost our oral history, our bodies were detached from the land and it was as if our memory and knowing was placed elsewhere. Not fully within us anymore and "us" here means the whole landscape we live in. Thus, to know is to go somewhere else to reach a certain knowledge: a school, a class, a book, a library. The knowledge that we carry within us has been replaced by the knowledge we gain elsewhere, and it is only formally channeled by proper forms of scholarship. Surely, knowledge is always relational and we learn from one another. Surely Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual as the movement between formal and popular knowledge is fundamental. But what I am thinking here is more about how plantation and modernity have shifted knowledge from the land, and our relation to each other and to other species, to an outside *abroad* place. Colonialism and capitalism have turned us into renters of spaces and knowledges. We buy to know. This outside place is embodied by slave owners and the specialist, both of whom *master the field*. I cannot be a fully respected scholar if I don't master my field. This process has also replaced our forms of memory. Uprooted from the land, we don't carry the memories of the land anymore. We carry the memory of books or a file that holds the place of a certain knowledge. We have forgotten bodily (land/human/more than human) forms of knowing, practices where our knowledges lean on bodily knowing in relation to plants, animals, cells and are intrinsically implicated.

This dis-location of knowledge creates various forms of anxiety. Entangled in a catch-22, this way of knowing comes with years of placing my knowledge elsewhere, in a place that is neither fully me nor fully outside of me. It hangs somewhere and I access it through my ability to buy a book, enter a school, or remember where it is in my computer. But now, without that imaginary/physical/online location where everything I have was placed and was lost, I do not know what to know anymore. One thousand six hundred files gone. Professor Marc Ellis said this to me: "It might be a prompt to move to another level of consolidating and deepening your thought." I didn't want to hear that, but something in me knew he was right. I am still battling

this loss, but I think that what happened to me was not only about the evil online machinery spirits. It was actually me saying: I can't take this weight of academic control, this burden of mastery, this desperation to know the field(s), this much running after knowledges, this much anxiety of knowing. For knowing in this modern process, is not about being, but being included.

So, this can actually be a chance for me to change, even though I don't know how exactly. But I know I have to pay attention to the where I live and that will suffice: it has to be in my body in relation to what is around me. I now want my body to know in relation with non-human species, perhaps I need to do far closer readings, pause, and go slower than I have ever gone. While one's knowledge(s) are always in relation, it is only a perspective from a point and from that point we understand everybody else's worlds. Each world in relation to many other worlds do not compose a totality under which a seamless background unites all the worlds. Rather, my point of perceiving is oriented and transformed by thousands of other worlds of other species also in flux and relating with thousands of other worlds composing different perspectives. None of these with any center to hold.

I need a view of the world that is not only human. Another grammar of perception, a bodily one. I need to learn to see but also learn to be seen by the animals, for example. What do their eyes do to me? As I learn the names we give to plants, I need to learn the names those plants give to me. What do their bodies/feeling/being do to me? We breath because they created the oxygen! How do I learn the laws of the trees more than the laws of my religion?

I want to be able to listen to the birds whom I feed in my backyard, to try to get to know them better. I am trying to get the food they like best, trying to understand their own perspective in relation to me and other worlds with which they relate. I want to live with them and with other species: plants, animals, beings. Entire worlds of knowledges! Stories of many worlds together! Yesterday I went to the store to buy seeds and the guy said: Use this so the squirrels will not come. And I said: But I want them to come! I want as many worlds together as possible. What about that possum? Oh, can we all live together? I don't know what to do with mice—I have this utter fear of them, and I have kids at home. I put some poison out for them. Tragic! I want to know why so many worms are now out of the grass and frozen on the cement. I am struggling with the very few birds we have since it is winter. It's brutal not to hear them loud every day. Rachel Carson always rings a cold sound in my heart when I can't hear the birds. The bees are more often absent. The Codonoquinet river near my house; I need to know about this ancient presence and what makes a river possible. I am grateful for the many scholars in other fields and community leaders who are helping me known better now.

I recently went to visit my mother in Brazil and I walked around my neighborhood paying attention to the trees I grew up with. In fifty-two years, it was the first time I paid attention to those who saw me growing and gave me a world to live in: the trees around my house! There were about thirty different trees in four streets! Ten of them had fruits! The memory of my father being a clown also visited me again. I realized I need to let my clown come out more fully and bring joy to myself and my kids. That makes me pause. To pay attention to my

students differently. Do they carry any form of happiness that will help them brave through this difficult world we are living in now? A clown teacher? Other forms of imagination and creativity. No more demanding readings or results. Rather, unfolding worlds together... Learning to remember like the seeds do and to walk in the pace of the cows.

Coming back from the data recovery store in downtown New York, I hopped onto the subway and there was a homeless man in front of me. He was eating. Not a single grain was left behind. He was so well organized, keeping his five small plastic bags near him. Perhaps that was all he had. I kept looking at him. I tried to make conversation with him, but he didn't want to talk. He finished eating and put his head down. The train arrived at my station and I left. Coming out into the cold I was searching for some bird singing, but I couldn't hear any. Only one thing captivated my mind: I lost one thousand six hundred files, but this man only has five small plastic bags.

<https://wabash.center/2022/01/1600-files-and-5-plastic-bags/>