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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Field Trip

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Blog Series: Embodied Teaching
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It was a spectacular morning on Emory's verdant quad. The early October air was just offering the hint of crispness that announced the imminent arrival of fall. The grass, roped off for re-seeding (a detail some students thought revealed loving care for the soil and others thought revealed a desire to control a manicured landscape), shimmered a dewy electric green. The oak trees' leaves were beginning to flaunt their autumn gold, offset by an expanse of sky the color of a robin's egg.

But then, I noticed two students were standing off to the side of the rest of the class, whispering to each other, smiling, and almost giggling. All my self-preservation alarm bells hard-earned in junior high started going off. What are they laughing at? Is it me? Am I doing or saying something stupid?

It was the "Religious Education and Our Ecological Context" class, and we'd come out to the quad on an October morning to discuss and try to practice Sallie McFague's use (which she borrows from Marilyn Frye) of the concepts of the "loving eye" and the "arrogant eye" when encountering nature.[1] When beholding nature with an arrogant eye, we look upon it as an object, something separate from ourselves for our use and convenience. When beholding nature with a loving eye, we acknowledge its mystery and relationship to us, appreciating it on its own terms. The students were divided into two groups, each of which assumed the point of view of the arrogant eye or the loving eye and asked to make notes of what they saw or

encountered in the quad from that point of view. Some students bounded off in pairs or trios, chatting and pointing out what they saw to their classmates, while others slowly wandered off quietly by themselves, pens and notebooks in hand. A couple of students lingered near me, asking a question about an upcoming assignment, perhaps not entirely comfortable with this task of just being in their bodies outdoors.

I often incorporate such embodied and contemplative learning experiences, particularly in this class. In fact, the students also were asked to choose a location, near where they live, to observe for five minutes daily. They were invited to marshal all their senses to make note of all the changes in that place as the semester slid from late summer into fall, and then winter. A few weeks earlier, we visited an art installation by Charmaine Minniefield at Emory's Carlos Museum, *Indigo Prayers: A Creation Story.* In that work, Minniefield powerfully uses pigments indigenous to Gambia, where her ancestral roots are found, to visually represent the "ring shout," a dance of prayer and resistance. In these seven very large paintings, installed in such a way that they move slightly as one walks past, the artist's own body is represented. The paintings tell an embodied story of the relationship between the self and place (and displacement), mirroring a theme for our class.

All of this is to say that in this class, which considers the spiritual and moral relationship of the self (and the community) to particular places and to the "more-than-human world,"[2] I have intentionally built in embodied pedagogies to open up paths of knowing perhaps not available in more didactic or even discursive classroom activities. I made this decision on sure theoretical and pedagogical footing: Donna Haraway and Lorraine Code both argue for a more expanded epistemological framework, appreciating the role that embodied and emotional experience play in the production of knowledge.[3]

And yet, as we were gathering back to talk about the experience, I was distracted by the two students standing very near me who seemed to be having a laugh at my expense. I immediately began to second guess my choice to bring the class outdoors. My inner voice began shouting at me: "This is graduate school for God's sake! Get serious!" (I suspect that my inner voice comes from the same place as Stephanie Crumpton's, also featured in this blog series: "Even worse, I hear my own voice telling me, 'You're dumbing it and yourself down. Folks [including yourself] need to step it up.'")

I didn't want to put the students on the spot, but they made eye contact with me as I opened up the discussion. I paused, and one of them said, "We were just saying how much we like it that you take us on 'field trips.'"

They were happy.

Now, I can't say that knowing this fact erased my self-doubt. Indeed, there's some small part of me that still believes seriousness and joy are somehow in tension with each other, and learning should be serious. As the conversation unfolded, however, a tapestry was woven that incorporated all the students had beheld on the quad, and the ways in which McFague's categories accounted for (or didn't) the ways in which we were relating to the more-than-

human world in this moment. I revealed more of my pedagogical rationale for being out there, the principle of embodied learning as a pathway to ecological knowing, though we'd discussed that principle before in the ordinary classroom. As we walked back to the building, the students were animated, talking about the ways in which they might incorporate similar practices in their field sites or other settings.

And we were happy.

[1] Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

[2] Abram uses this phrase to appreciate the animacy of the natural world, and to avoid objectifying dualism. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human-World* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1996).

[3] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–599; Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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