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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



What Ritual Does...

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Part One: Ritual Is Communal Learning.

We might agree that “community” is a dynamic, divine dance among individuals who, at any given moment, can structure and normalize what might have begun as a spontaneous, enlivening interaction. Community, in the context of our classrooms, can either be a routinized structure of interactions, focused on a set of pragmatics (time allotted, prescribed lessons/topics, inherited answers to repeated questions), or a generative experience, full of imagery and ideas that are liberative to the spirit. In other words, we can create community to fulfill a set of accepted structures about learning, or we can create a space that courageously “touches the spirit.”

This is the point of ritual, to touch the spirit, and it involves everyone in the space together experiencing the divine dance. Rituals, when seeking to connect meaningfully to the essence of our being, becomes a point of teaching and learning within the moment. I believe that there are such experiences of ritual in every culture because even as we are human, we are divine. Both aspects of our being desire existence. For those of us in theological education, we have the privilege to focus on both the human and the divine as a responsibility of teaching those called to do spirit work. Ritual invites the community of bearers and seekers to experience this transcendent work together and receive the benefits of communal learning to touch the divine within us together. Part of our challenge is operating in an ecosystem that pays more attention

to rules and structures than the divine dance, trusting in our own aptitude and the genius of the spirit to decentralize oppressive rules and structures.

My communities called me forth to be a keeper of the ritual. It was not until they gave voice to my “medicine” that I accepted it and began to develop it. Rituals became the first task when I settled myself into class preparation. I would find spaces to just listen. The listening would take even longer when I saw names of learners that I had in a previous class. It was much later that I realized that this listening was paying attention to ancestral voices whose “sight became my vanguard voice.” Ritual not only enlivened the purpose of the course beyond the accumulation of information, but it also afforded each one of us to sit with our individual social location in ritual as an opportunity for personal value in the communal space. With the ritual, we were measuring our worth based upon course content in relation to our lived experiences. We were adding value to the community by our existence and the value of being connected to one another. As I think about the adults who entered those classroom spaces and the complexity of their lives, the ritual space also became a moment of releasing and accepting without having to speak to the specifics of what was/would be going on. This is the healing aspect of ritual. Rituals create space for communal recovery and discovery. Rituals create space for rest.

Do I require everyone in attendance to engage the ritual? I do not. Even for those who, in their own way, do not participate in the class rituals, they bear witness to it. And what we do know, is that you cannot unsee what you see, and you cannot unhear what you have heard. This is also the reason why ritual work is a deeply intentional and serious work. It is not an icebreaker or a gesture of novelty. This is an assurance: the presence of a person at the ritual affords them a chance to speak to the spirit.

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