



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Red Balloon Inspiration

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Inspiration is a red balloon. My clear recollection of a film transporting me to another space and time occurred in the 2nd grade. I was a student at the George Washington Carver Elementary School in North Philadelphia. Our class, taught by Mrs. Cain, watched the short film *The Red Balloon*.

Sitting at my desk, my 2nd grade-self was given over to the story, swept-up to another time and space, transported from Philadelphia to a life in Paris. While watching the film, I felt all the emotions, heard all the sounds, saw all the sights, and tasted all the smells. It was as if I was inside the story. Or it was as if the story was inside of me.

In the 34-minutes, my life expanded. A red balloon in-spirit-ed me.

During the film, I became the helium filled red balloon - beautiful and vibrant. I, while in the story as the balloon, possessed feelings, agency, will and awareness. The boy - kind, gentle and caring - was able to play and communicate with me. Together, we forged a deep friendship.

Here is the plot of the film as my 2nd grade-self experienced it and as I still vividly remember it

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The boy and I wandered about the streets of Paris enjoying one another's company. As we played, we drew attention from people - young and old. Adults were delighted at the sight of a red balloon following closely behind a boy. Other children were envious of our blitheful love. I was welcomed into the boy's family. One Sunday, the boy's mother asked me to remain at home while the family went to church. In their absence, I was very lonely. I found my way out of the apartment window, down the street and to the church. I entered through the opened front door and sat with my family. In glaring meanness, a church usher nabbed me and threw me out of the sanctuary and onto the curb. My boy, in defense of me, left the church to comfort me. Then together we wandered around the neighborhood. My boy decided to purchase a treat from the neighborhood bakery. I willingly waited just outside the shop. A gang of older boys who were envious snatched me and ran with me - pulling violently hard on my string. With great effort, the boy got me back from the older boys but then the gang chased us through the allies. They were angry. We were terrified. The mob finally caught up to us. The gang pinned the boy on the ground as they shot me down with sling shots and sharp rocks. Then one of the brutes stomped me with the heel of his boot. I was destroyed. Just as it seemed as if my life was over, and all hope and love was lost - the boy looked up from his tears and devastation. All the other balloons in Paris had come to him. In celebration, the community of balloons formed a bunch and took my beloved boy on a joyful ride over the city.

Teaching to inspire students can seem too lofty a goal until we remember the stories, people, and events who inspire(d) us.

Our classrooms do not have to be boring with stale, flat moments where we tell students about life as if life happens away from learning. Engage students - mind, body, and spirit. Our challenge is to create learning experiences which immerse students into the lessons of life and of curriculum. Our task is to help students make meaning with the tools of imagination, inspiration, and encounter.

We know from our own lives that encounters with the arts, in many mediums, can be transporting and transformative. Recall a time when a story (through film, theatre, dance, poetry, painting, etc.) profoundly shifted your understanding of the world or of your place in the world. Recall a time when an offering of creativity (photography, sculpture, TV comedy, garden design, architecture, etc.) took you out of yourself or took your breath away or deeply moved you. What was the last beautiful thing that moved you to tears, that inspired you to wonder, awe, or love? What has made you laugh to tears? What would it take to design courses which invoke and evoke these kinds of experiences for students? How might your introductory course be redesigned so your students experience being on the inside of the story?

Invite students into new stories - they will be inspired. Take them on new adventures - they will be motivated to learn. Send them to foreign lands - they will rise to the challenge of exploration and discovery. Let the possibility of their learning be your inspiration for more imaginative teaching.

Thank you, Mrs. Cain.

<https://wabash.center/2023/08/red-balloon-inspiration/>