



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Porsche Experience

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Blog Series: Teaching Identity

November 26, 2024

Tags: Plato | beauty | Teaching Identity | Porsche | Curiosity Roundtable

In October 2024, the Wabash Center hosted a “Curiosity Roundtable,” which I was honored to attend. The goal was to offer us experiences to help us; to encourage us to think outside the boxes that trap us as scholars, institutional citizens, and pedagogues. It was an amazing time, with voices that I am still thinking about, but, oddly, the experience that resounds, again and again, in my thoughts is the Porsche Experience.

The group toured the Porsche Experience Center in Atlanta, GA. Those of us who did not get motion sickness—not me, dang it!—experienced driving the Porsche of our choice in the Simulator Lab. It was the tour, however, that had the impact on me. As the informed and enthusiastic guide showed us around, we were able to see, for example, the elements of making a Porsche. We saw a wall with the multiple tones of paint one could use on a Porsche body—some so subtly different that the guide said all buyers were urged to use a specialist in car design. We handled the key fobs and touched leathers used for interiors—just a few items among drawers of exquisite features. Then, we saw beautiful cars, on loan from collectors. What struck me was the flawlessness of these machines, but also, that they had very little mileage. These were cars that barely had been driven, mostly under 200 miles—they were tested, I thought, loaded for delivery, and put in a garage to gaze upon. Beautifully wrought, but, to me, kind of useless, except as possessions—though sort of like the excess of books in my library, I had to admit.

It was the race cars, however, that made me see why the Wabash Center's Executive Director, Dr. Lynne Westfield, brought us there. These cars tied the remarkable beauty of the collectable cars to function. One Porsche slogan is "Passion in Every Detail." The Porsche desire includes "detailed craftsmanship, cutting edge innovation, and sheer passion." That, I think, is what, we as devoted and innovative teacher-scholars practice and is what I saw in in the race cars. Those cars, like the Rothmans Porsche 962 on exhibit, were banged up, used over and over, and were examples of design reworked. These were the workhorses—like us professors—driven in 24 Hours of Le Mans, an endurance sports car race. I learned there why my daddy always bought Goodyear Tires. The Goodyears were so sturdy in the Le Mans that they had to be changed only once. These tires marked an adjustment, and what fascinated me were the adjustments: the redesigns. In the Rothmans we saw, the engine, first, was under the seat—not a great placement.

As the guide talked about that, I said, "Someone died," and he nodded.

So, without losing speed or power, that one had to be adjusted.

Beauty and function brought about through knowledge and innovation and carried out with passion—that is what kept running through my mind as we walked around. Every teacher in that group has been recognized, I know, as passionate about his or her subject matter and skilled: we are beauty in action. Beauty and function, carried out with passion, are the goals of great teaching. As teachers, I think we aim for the good, the true, and the beautiful. The classical Platonic understandings of those may not be same as they were for Plato, perhaps, but we seek to craft the vehicle that is so beautiful that it is utterly compelling—beauty draws and improves us, Plato argues—to our students that they will take the ride with us and risk encountering what we consider to be good and true. As Elaine Scarry reminds us in *On Beauty and Being Just*, a liberal arts education is the perpetuation of beauty. As human beings, we seek to copy the beautiful, and as we do so, we revise our own locations and beings. The beautiful, Scarry argues, helps "incite the will toward continual creation" (8). And, fairness, in terms of beauty, can lead to fairness, equality, in terms of justice: to *being* fair, to seeking "'a symmetry of everyone's relations to one another'" (95).

The design of intellectual experience, as Patricia O'Connell Killen calls it, is the same as the design of those Porsche cars in another space. We go from finding and observing beauty to creating it ourselves in our syllabi and classrooms, to, as we teach, helping our students to see and create beauty themselves. Every piece in the collectable cars was a masterpiece of beauty—from the door handles to the key fobs. As a craftswoman teacher, I want my classes to be that way, beautifully constructed. The beauty embedded in the experience of reading, writing, and, yes, testing, which, as we saw in the Rothmans, is a dangerous but necessary process. Porsche made me see that our work is a wrought beauty: one made from years of doing and redesigning. I really want my teaching to be like those race cars, able to be adapted so that it can hug the ground—as Charles Long used to say, face the nitty gritty of human experience, and round the track.

Those battered race cars stay in my imagination. The other day, I looked at my teaching notes for my Theory and Methods course, which I have taught, now, for over thirty years. The notes carry a lot of my late professors, Charles Long, Ruel Tyson, and Nathan Scott, and of others who taught me, but they show my growth in understanding and my adjustments, as my voice emerged and changed. Marginal notes, updates from my reading, and new thoughts that my students had as we rounded the track add more pages and sticky notes every year. These beautiful pieces gather. My teaching, if it were a Porsche, would look, I hope, like those race cars: a beautiful thing, the pinnacle of human ingenuity and engineering, yet banged up in use and adjustment. What I teach is remade different every time I encounter a new group of students from a new generation or read something that challenges and changes me. I must move the engine or change the shape of the seat or stop and figure out how to find my own, nearly indestructible Goodyear tires.

The guide told us that they do not open the doors on those race cars because we would smell the odor of the drivers, embedded in the cars, even after all these years—drivers who had done twenty-four hours of duty in a car. That fact stuck with me hard. That smell is a mark, a reminder or memory that the beautiful and functional thing needs a driver, and that the driver bears the pain—marks and is marked. I thought of the odor of sanctity that comes, particularly, from the wounds of saints.

We teachers are the like these drivers, these cars, but most of us do not get what we either need or deserve for the work we do. As my Peer Mentoring Cluster and I found during COVID and as one of my dear colleagues, one long out of this business, reminded me recently, institutions spend a lot of time thinking about students and about the institutions themselves. Most are not as committed to beauty as Porsche, and they do not spend much thinking about those driving the car—us teachers. But I think we prevail. Plato argued that the children of dreams outlive the children of the flesh. In the beauty we make, we are and put the first instrument of our dreams in children's hands.

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My drawing teacher said: *Look, think, make a mark.*

Look, I told myself.

And waited to be marked...

She said: Respond to the heaviest part

of the figure first. Density is

form. That I keep hearing *destiny*

is not a mark of character. Like *pilgrimage*
once morphed to *mirage* in a noisy room, someone
so earnest at my ear. Then *marriage* slid.
Mir-aage, Mir-aage, I heard the famous poet let loose
awry into her microphone, triumphant.

The figure to be drawn —
not even half my age. She's completely
emptied her face for this job of standing still an hour.
Look. Okay. But the little

dream in there, inside the *think*
that comes next. A pencil in my hand, its secret life
is charcoal, the wood already burnt,
a sacrifice.[1]

Notes & Bibliography

[1] Marianne Boruch, "Pencil,"

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/55555/pencil>.

<https://wabash.center/2024/11/the-porsche-experience/>