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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



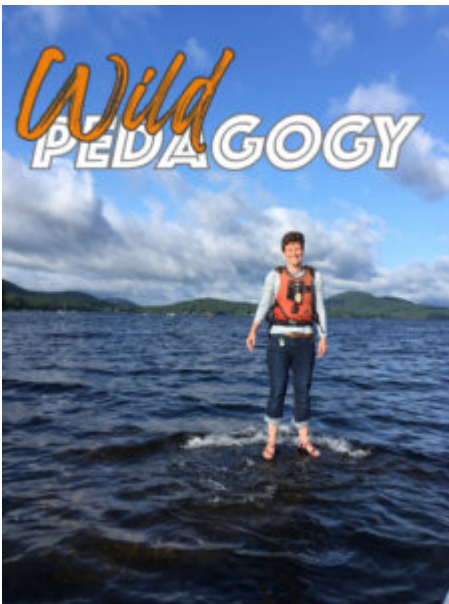
Being Human in an AI World

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Blog Series: Changing Scholarship | Wild Pedagogy

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Recently I attended the Wabash Center's Curiosity Roundtable, where we heard from Dr. Iva Carruthers in one session. Her presentation was titled "AI and Ubuntu in the Age of Metanomics." She had us thinking about what it means to be human and how we talk about humanity in this new age of AI—in all its forms—and what theology has to offer and how different sources of knowledge, different intelligences, all

contribute to our being. Is being human about knowledge or about wisdom? About thinking or about relationship? It was a rich conversation that didn't once bring up how we deal with issues of students using ChatGPT in class.

As I thought about our prompt—what do I do with this conversation when I return to my institution?—my initial response was: resist the AI! And then I thought more deeply. The question is really how to ground ourselves more deeply in what it means to be human. The short answer is that we engage more in the world and with each other, but how do I do that? How do I help my students to do that?

Unsurprisingly, my answer is to spend more time outdoors together. So now I have another reason in my backpack to use evangelizing for outdoor teaching. Hear me out.

The best teaching happens outdoors because it's a broader sense of teaching than mere lecture content. It's the things I've been talking about in this blog. Students are more likely to play outdoors because they feel a freedom in the wind and the sun and "getting away with" not being "in class" as they've always understood classrooms. Play is a deeply important part of learning to be human. Children play at being adults long before they are adults, and the play, which is about imitation and experimentation in spaces of controlled risk, develops the skills of adulthood in the child. It's similar for students. They play with ideas—imitate and experiment in a low-risk space—and so, grow into their understandings.

In addition to content, they play with, students play with each other more readily outdoors. The freedom of movement makes getting into groups easier as well as interaction with group members. They sit closer together and find themselves more present to one another when they only have to focus on each other and the space—with its greens and blues, its warmth and wind—is calmer and less distracting than any video screen. Longer immersive classes do this even more (see my previous posts on the way immersive classes facilitate presence and community), but even shorter classes outside the normal environment will help students see one another as humans and create bonds.

Play is also, as I understand it, an important part of learning to be an animal (see this chapter by Kay Redfield Jamison: "Playing Fields of the Mind" in her *Exuberance: The Passion for Life* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004]). So, we learn to be more human and at the same time become more connected to other animals who also play, being reminded that we are part of creation. Along with this, when they are outside students are more immersed in the material world, and their phones are less attached to them. They are distracted by more interesting and more real things than whatever is on their screens. When people have a greater immersion in the real world, they gain more ability to discern the fake aspects of AI because they know the real thing.

When students have to work together, especially in an immersive trip where they depend on each other physically (like on a wilderness trip), they learn what real friendship and connectedness look like and perhaps can distinguish the real from the fake in virtual worlds. In a good outdoor class—or a good indoor class that requires students to work together to create

something—they learn what humanity looks like in all kinds of forms beyond what AI with its implicit biases is telling them. They learn empathy and compassion and relationship, the stuff that makes human beings human and which AI can only “know” about, or at best imitate.

These are the things teaching outdoors and prioritizing interactions with the material world and with real people unmediated by screens does. My version is outdoor teaching, and I won't stop evangelizing for it, but we can just as easily think of this as out-of-the-classroom teaching. Any place where we can encourage (or require) students to engage their worlds and the people in them is a place we are saying that our AI world is not the final word. Requiring some community engagement as part of the class or a museum visit or a technology fast or a group project that must be done only in person—all of these encourage play and presence and learning to distinguish reality from virtual reality. And if our clergy and theologians were trained this way, what a real world we might have. May it be so.

<https://wabash.center/2025/01/being-human-in-an-ai-world/>