



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Look to the Stars

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Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

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My friend Kenneth Ngwa and I have ongoing conversations about impossible questions concerning the current malaise of education. How do you make your way and guide others when there is no clear direction, when what is next is unclear? How do you do what is needed when you do not know the sure pathway or route? In a world where change is constant and the future feels unrecognizable—what does it take to find/make your way through the shadows, past scary monsters in spaces without light? When traditions are no longer relevant, when established paradigms are no longer dependable, when infrastructures are shifting and crumbling, causing more uncertainty—which way should we go? In our attempt to answer these kinds of questions, my discussions with Kenneth are often saturated with stories meant to illuminate possibility and point toward our building a new future.

In a recent exchange between me and Kenneth, I told him this story...

When my brother Brent was in the 5th grade (I was a 4th grader), he announced at our family dinner that his homework assignment was to look at the stars. My father was intrigued. Dad asked Brent what he was supposed to look for. Dad was asking which constellation or planet, or star pattern was being studied and observed. My brother reported that he was just assigned to “look at the stars.” Dad looked suspicious. Brent said that after dinner he was going outside to look up. My father, in an impatient tone, said, “You won’t be able to see the stars.”

“What do you mean? I’m going outside to see the stars!” my brother insisted.

My father said, “There is too much light in the city to see the stars at night. You can only see the stars when there is enough darkness.”

My brother looked quizzical. So did I. We did not understand what my father knew.

After dinner, with Dad, we put on hats and coats, took flashlights, and headed to our front stoop. Standing on the stoop of our rowhouse in North Philadelphia, we looked up. All there was to see was dark sky. No stars. Or so we thought.

Dad drove us to Fairmont Park—about 3 miles from our house. We drove past the reservoir, past the playground, past the baseball field—all familiar places. We drove another mile then Dad pulled over on the lawn and turned off the engine. We were in a remote part of the park that I had only seen from the comfort of the car window. It was not a location where we played. Dad got out of the car. He said, “Come on.” My brother and I were hesitant. We had been taught that isolated spaces in the city were unsafe. We had been taught not to venture too deep into the woods or away from the known spaces. Brent and I were fearful. With hands tucked into our pockets and our breath freezing in the cold air, we had less excitement about this adventure. Dad told us to look up.

Shocked! We could see stars! It was amazing. There was a sprinkling of stars in the sky that were not evident at our house. Then Dad said, “Follow me.” With our flashlights turned on, we followed. We walked across a meadow, ducked under the low hanging branches of Weeping Willow trees then down a short, rocky path. As we walked, without talking, the chilly air stilled and the noise of the city quieted. We were still only three miles from our house, but it felt like a different world.

Dad walked over to a downed tree, sat down and turned off his flashlight. So did we. Dad looked at us then without saying a word pointed to the sky. To our astonishment the night sky was dazzling with stars!

Dad pointed out the north star, the big dipper and the little dipper. We learned about Earth’s place in the solar system and that the moon is as critical to our life as the sun. He told us about constellations, comets, planets and meteors. This was the first time the story of Harriet Tubman making use of the north star to guide herself and others to freedom made sense.

On the way home we stopped for a half gallon butter pecan ice cream. When we got home, mom dished up the ice cream. Brent and I recounted to her all that we had been shown. Dad was pleased.

Kenneth’s pristine insight of my story:

Connecting the search for the stars with the wisdom of the trusted savant who is not reduced to a "tour guide" (which I often felt my colonial-type education was at its best) but rather is

respected as a companion for whom the stakes for the journey are as high as the sight to be seen—the stars and constellations might be a way to rethink our educational system.

The question that bedevils the teacher in the classroom is whether the current stakes and questions of the learner are compelling enough to get the instructors out of their comfort zones and on the road to see/show the stars. Can we teach beyond our current constellations? Can we let the questions (and even the desires) of the student guide our journey? Are the stakes high enough that even when the students ignorantly (in a neutral sense) assume they can see the stars in a highly lit space, they won't be dismissed and instead be taken on the winding journey to the place where they can see the stars?

To teach effectively, we must move to the courageous position where the hermeneutic of distrust (well earned) is turned around by a hermeneutic of trust. When dad turned out the lights, you and your brother did not panic. What is more, you also turned out yours. Why? Because of the trust that held the journey together. There is something more powerful and lasting than the lights that brighten our pathways, and that is the lights that brighten our imaginations - the lights that connect us to constellations. Some lights must be turned off to see other lights. But and I think this is the critical epistemological and pedagogical line, we must be the ones who decide it is time to turn off the flashlights.

Our liberation and educational freedom are found not just by overcoming the darkness of isms that limit our minds but also in recognizing that sometimes the hindrance to our thriving is our focus on the smaller lights. To see the bigger lights, we must not be distracted, not even by the smaller lights. We need to learn how, when, and where to turn off the smaller lights. And that is something only the ancestors can teach us. That is how education connects story to imagination. Why? Because the best kinds of education bring us to encounter the big lights where we see constellations but do not feel lost.

Who among us knows that just three miles from home lay a different world of stars, right past the playgrounds and familiar spaces? Whoever has this kind of knowledge, let them be our teachers. Henceforth, let those with this knowledge teach so that we come to know how to see the galaxies and the biggest lights necessary to uplift a community that has been trying to see the stars with the flashlights turned on. Let us trust the teachings of those who are trustworthy. Indigenous epistemology may yet save us.

Impossible questions feel less daunting when friends, ancestors, stories and stars guide the way. Our responsibility as committed teachers is to meet the challenge of becoming better teachers by learning how “to go and see” while at the same time learning to turn off the light. Onward through the fog!

<https://wabash.center/2025/03/look-to-the-stars/>