



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



A Key Ritual: Summoning Student Agency

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

April 01, 2025

Tags: Classroom | Ritual | teaching on the pulse | retreat | empowerment | ownership

Our attempts to teach towards openness, towards possibility, towards new glimpses of an uncharted future mean that teaching can be demanding, even confounding. One way I learned to embrace this approach was by incorporating rituals in my course designs.

The use of rituals in classrooms allows students an experience that moves them into realms where meaning-making requires imagination and vision. Rituals can provide provocative and creative ways for students to enter and inhabit course content that otherwise would go overlooked, under-investigated, or ignored. Rituals create space for learning through intrigue, encounter, and invocation.

Below, I recount a class ritual I designed to coax students into claiming more power, agency, and voice in their own learning. Here is my key ritual.

Ten graduate students and I went to a retreat center by the sea for an intensive 4-day course focused on the notions of mystery and imagination. At our first session, we gathered in a large room and sat on folding chairs arranged in a circle. The all-purpose room had a wall of glass windows with views east toward the Atlantic Ocean. From the circle, we could not hear the waves, but we could see the sea stretching out. The afternoon sun gently setting into the horizon was lovely and the perfect backdrop for our key ritual. It was a beautiful place to learn

together.

I sat in the circle holding a black, beaded purse.

In preparation for the first session, I had collected an assortment of keys. My collection included skeleton keys, hotel room digital keys, metal house keys, roller skate keys, safety deposit box keys, padlock keys, piano keys, house radiator keys, clock keys, keys for maps, a thumb drive with Stevie Wonder's "Songs in the Key of Life"— as many kinds of keys as I could find. The black, beaded, drawstring bag with long strands of fringe on the bottom was a treasure I had since my junior high school days of boho fashion. I was delighted when I found it in my closet. It was the perfect vessel for the ritual.

Holding up the bag in front of the class, I jingled the contents so the learners would hear noise. Over the sound of clinking and tinkling, while using a suspenseful and serious tone of voice, "I am going to bring the purse to each of you. When I come to you, reach in and select one object. Just one—you cannot handle two!" I chided. "When you pull the object out, this object becomes yours. Its power will become your power. Do not let anyone else view your object. Keep it concealed in your hands. Hold it to your bosom. If you want, glimpse at it through your interlaced fingers or turn your back for a peek. Do not let anyone see your object."

Some students became reticent. Some looked a little hesitant. I was having fun.

I passed around the circle taking the open purse in turn to each student. I held the purse high so the contents could not be viewed. Each student, following directions, reached in, retrieved an object that was some kind of key. As instructed, students took care not to show their key. Some students used both hands to keep the key from view.

Once everyone had a key - I asked, "Before we show what we have chosen, or more to the point, what has chosen us, does anyone want to give back what you took from my bag? Does anyone want to return their choice? Or does anyone want something different?"

These questions brought a thick, full silence into the circle. I waited for their decisions. Everyone signaled that they wanted to keep what they had chosen.

"Very good, then. You can reveal what is in your hand. You can reveal what has chosen you," I said.

Students unfurled their fingers revealing their gift, revealing their key.

Some looked happy - had smiles on their faces.

Some looked quizzical - had arched eyebrows and squinting eyes.

Others looked confused - they looked at their key then around at the keys of the other students as if they had received something strange.

I continued, "For the duration of our course you will carry your key with you. You will get acquainted with the power of your key. Remember—keys open doors, providing access. Keys also lock doors, providing safety and protection. This key will give you power that you already possess but have not accessed or for which you have not been disciplined. Your key will help you become more of who you already are. With your key you have the power to open and close at your behest. During this class get acquainted with your power and use it wisely."

I instructed that the next step was that each student would take their keys and a notebook to a quiet spot inside or outside of the retreat center. Each person was to find a comfortable and private spot to converse with their key. For an hour, each student will interview their key; contemplate their key; draw their key; write a story, song, or poem with their key in the starring role. Get to know your key and record what your key tells you about its purpose, power, history, and value.

To my surprise, these instructions were met with eagerness.

An hour later the group returned to the circle. Each student told a fascinating narrative about what they had learned from and about their keys. The reports were in the forms of drawings, lyrics, journal prose and poetry. Each was beautiful in its own way. For the rest of the course students explored the power of their own agency and imagination and how those attributes were symbolized and animated by their key. At the last session of the course, I brought the drawstring beaded purse back to the circle. I asked if anyone wanted to return their key to the bag. Everyone kept their power.

This is what I learned. When courses are more than spaces where information is memorized then regurgitated, students who are unacquainted with self-reflection and possess little self-knowledge feel lost or are easily overwhelmed. When classes are spaces of wonder, curiosity, and deep deliberation students must be acquainted with their own power to question. They must be willing to bring their own agendas and to consider a wider way of being. Too many students are unaware of their capabilities and capacities as learners. They are unacquainted with their own genuine. Adult learners who enter classrooms with little self-knowledge are often skittish, suspicious, and ill-prepared for the challenges of classroom endeavors. This lack of knowledge makes it difficult to teach. It takes some modicum of self-awareness and clarity of purpose for learners to take hold of courses at a level of depth worth pursuing. Learning requires students to have agency - to have keys to their own power.

Our job as teachers, in part, is to assist students with un-learning the ways which dampen their voices, and which keep them afraid of new learning. We must assist them with cultivating agency so they are less encumbered during their pursuits. Rituals in teaching can move students past their fears and into their power, courage, and commitments. Giving students keys was my way of ritualizing my expectations that they would use their power to learn, to come to voice, to tap into their own desires and yearnings.

Reflection questions:

What rituals can we lead so that students feel more themselves in our classrooms - i.e. empowered, voiced, and capable?

What does it mean to teach toward possibility and how do rituals make the impossible possible?

What rituals assist in creating a learning environment where students learn their own value and worth and dignity?

<https://wabash.center/2025/04/a-key-ritual-summoning-student-agency/>