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What Does Writing About Teaching Mean to You? Courage

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Teaching. Is there a greater thing to fear? For those of us in religious education, the "straw epistle" tells us that the teacher will be judged more strictly (James 3:1). These words on strict judgment are a source of meta praxis reflection for me. Irene Orr defines meta praxis as: "the potential for human flourishing through an awareness of practice and the value of making craft as an explicit knowledge pathway. Within and beyond the practice, this pathway has the potential to put us in touch with the essential vitality of life and its human value."[i]

Below, I focus on my meta praxis with the idea that the craft of teaching requires courage. This courage reflects on the essential vitality of life and its human value. Furthermore, it requires us to make a serious connection between what we study and how we live it out. In Spanish we say, "*Del dicho al hecho hay mucho trecho*" which means something like "From saying it to doing it there's a big stretch." It is similar to saying, "It is easier said than done."

Teaching is a task that is undervalued in our cultural milieu – and especially in fundamentalist circles it is seen with suspicion. I live and work in fundamentalist circles in the Southeastern US. Fundamentalism loves the end-time prophets, the soothsayers, and the showmen. In the classroom, it prefers indoctrination and rote recall. For example, it took a solar eclipse in 2024 to generate speculation about eschatological events and a lot of misinformation pouring into the livelihoods of people of faith. True education involves so much more than fear mongering. It engages people where they live. Otherwise, there can be no authentic reflection or

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flourishing.

In my experience, writing about teaching requires us to have the courage to be human. For example, in my classes I have experienced that it is important to build and establish a rapport with students. In building a rapport, the teacher must engage the students right where they are at, wherever they come from, and with the baggage (for better or for worse) of their religious background. It is here that being human involves a level of relatability. Griffiths states that being relatable can help to create an appetite for learning.[ii] As a person with a PhD, I am an expert on the content. I have studied it and know that the material I teach is *potentially* life-changing. The difficulty arises because as a teacher I engage the learner at the mundane level of everyday reality. The journey towards the deeper layers of cognition and the underlying base epistemology is quite daunting, particularly when my students are not asking the questions I want to answer. Furthermore, the age of disinformation complicates my work.[iii] I have had several students who have no formal theological training in my classroom. They are usually content to compartmentalize the grammars of theology from their lived reality. Quite simply, some students just want to know how to make their church grow numerically, how to increase donations, and about the latest eschatological theological fads. It is taxing to engage them in the everyday visceral reality with the deeper theological grammars that powerfully shape and mold human beings.

I have found that an effective way of demonstrating humanity is by incarnating my deepest values in the classroom. Much of what I teach about is modeled in the classroom. The values that I hold dear are more often "caught" than they are taught.[iv] For me, it has become imperative to establish some sort of relational connection with my students. As a teacher, I find myself carefully observing the world around my students. I become a student of my students. It is similar work to that of ethnographers when they enter a group and establish a rapport for their task of observation. I have heard many of my peers criticize this by saying that our students don't need their hands held, but when looking at different academic studies about the classroom, the most common denominator in retention success is a human connection.[v]And when one considers that the number of students specializing in religion is actually decreasing, this becomes even more important. Ultimately, it is a battle for the affections of our students, whether they are undergraduate or graduate students. I recognize that this affective work cannot be readily quantified as the affections are an elusive but very real element of our humanity.

Having courage means that I must create a hospitable environment – even with the fundamentalists. I have found that teaching works best when I create a hospitable environment, even when we vehemently disagree. However, students desire a "relationship-rich" experience in their journey through higher education.[vi] It requires courage because quite honestly, my time is filled with faculty meetings, committee meetings, personal research, writing, and the search for creativity – the temptation is to let contact with my students slide and limit my communication with them to terse sentences via email (if I respond at all). This press for time means that my contact with students must be intentional and meaningful. The teacher must have the courage, even in asynchronous online interactions, to establish quality

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contact with students.

I am convinced that being courageous yields positive results. It ultimately means that my voice, a Honduran-American *mestizo* voice, is at the very least respected because I have shown hospitality when many students merely think of me as just "the Hispanic professor." This hospitality transforms me from a stranger (read: a "*Bad Hombre*") into being able to engage my students, even with the insertion of a dissonance of perspective. It is this relationship with them that allows me to introduce them to a new thought or a different pattern of living (meta praxis) that can alter someone's life journey. My mere presence has a new sense of authority that can possibly create enough ripples at the edges of life experiences so that I might alter the web or system of beliefs.[vii] I engage the teaching discipline to discover ways to alter webs and engage my students as I further embody concepts and the dense stuff in the clouds and give it traction in their daily lived experiences. We agree, disagree, and yet ultimately strive for synthesized solutions on our journey together.

Notes & Bibliography

[i] Irene Orr, "Meta Praxis: Craft Praxis: A Way of Being," (Doctoral Thesis, University of Dundee, 2020).

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[iv] For an example see Ronald Allen, "Is Preaching Taught or Caught: How Practitioners Learn," *Theological Education* 41, no. 1 (2005): 137-152, https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5e35cd3a-845e-389c-bddd-d72efdd95eb0.

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