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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Magic of Having Teachers

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My last first day of class – *as a student* – was fifteen years ago. But here I am again, somehow back for more.

I could make this into one of those “how did I get here?” blogs, and that might be interesting. (The short version is that *you should sign up for Wabash’s Breaking the Academic Mold writing workshop* if you get the chance). But the *how* of it all is less interesting than the *why*. The *why* of this new first day of class, fifteen years after I thought I was finished, is that I discovered something I really wanted to learn, and I knew I couldn’t teach myself.

Since you’ve found your way to a Wabash Center blog post, there’s a good chance you’re pretty great at teaching new things to yourself and to others, and there’s a good chance you’re a really accomplished learner, too. We probably have that in common. I’ve taught myself lots of things over the years, from Italian to citation formats to how to caption videos on the LMS to how to write a tenure dossier. We’ve all learned things without a teacher. But after spending a week in the Minnesota woods with the fantastic teachers Wabash brought to that writing workshop, I knew I needed to learn more, and I knew I couldn’t do it alone.

That’s how I ended up here, on my first day of class in an MFA program in nonfiction. It’s my sabbatical year – a precious and rarifying privilege, to be sure—and I’m spending it trying to

learn how to be a writer. I've written lots of stuff, of course, just like you have, but I want to learn the craft of *writing*. And for that I need teachers.

It's a wild and unexpected thing, if I'm being honest – the experience of having a teacher. I had forgotten, after a decade with my name on the syllabus, what it's like to be a student. All the old anxieties showed up like the faces you'd hoped to avoid at your high school reunion. Will I be smart enough? Will I come across as too eager, or too entitled, or too much of something else, or—worst of all—will I come across as not enough? Does she really mean double-spaced with 12-point font? Do I really have to print a copy? *What should I wear?*

But I don't want to write about the anxieties; I don't want to give those old faces the satisfaction. I want to write about the way euphoria took me by surprise.

After all these years, I had forgotten what it means to show up to learn a thing and be greeted by someone ready to teach you. I had not remembered what it's like to encounter an expert in a classroom, someone hand-picked and specially trained to help you learn. Even as someone in the education business, I had somehow lost track of the feeling of wanting to learn something and having someone appear, ready to teach it to me.

I'm remembering now that having teachers is *magical*. It's magical to learn from someone who has spent a lifetime preparing to teach you. It's magical to place yourself in the care of someone who's ready to help. It's magical to have a guide, to meet a mentor, to learn in community.

The experience of having a teacher again, after all these years, is reminding me that that's who I am to my students. I suppose that after so many intro classes and so many seminars, I had slipped into thinking about my role in many other ways than *magical*. I've thought of myself as an institutional intermediary, as an enforcer of policies and offerer of services, as a facilitator or orchestra conductor, and even sometimes as a "sage on stage," dispensing arcana on demand. But now, back on the other side of things and remembering what it's like to trust someone with my own formation again, I'm noticing the ways my students have told me what I've meant to them. I'm noticing how they describe me—and my colleagues—as transformative and foundational figures in their lives. I have tended to *aw-shucks* these comments away, reminding students of their roles in their own formation. But now, having teachers again, I think I understand better what my students mean.

It's still just the first day of class. All the frustrating parts of having a teacher are still ahead, and I'm sure there will be plenty of opportunities for realizing and remembering the ways in which I can be a frustrating teacher, too. There will be time for all of that, and more that I can't anticipate. But for now, I'm reveling—I'm exulting and I'm nearly vibrating with excitement—at the *magic* of having teachers.

<https://wabash.center/2025/09/the-magic-of-having-teachers/>

