



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



On Power Posing

Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *College of the Holy Cross*

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If you spend much time in the Northwest of California, especially if you are someone who likes to hike, alongside trail maps at visitor centers you will see posters that instruct you how to handle the unlikely, but entirely possible, event that you might encounter a mountain lion. Unless you are already speeding down the highway toward some venue with more concrete and less cougars, you will learn from the posters that the appropriate thing to do when facing a mountain lion is to *keep on* facing it, and to extend your arms and make yourself as big as possible. Apparently, this communicates to the mountain lion that you are not a deer or goat, or whatever other four-legged creature might normally be considered a potential mountain lion menu option. (It communicated to my family that they were pretty safe as long as they were with me, because there was no way this city boy was not going to run as fast as my feet would carry me if I saw so much as a large raccoon, so I would certainly be the focus of any predator we might encounter.) The anecdotal evidence is that this “make-yourself-as-large-as-possible” tactic is a pretty effective deterrent to getting eaten by a mountain lion. (Of course, there aren’t a lot of anecdotes coming from the cases where that didn’t work, are there?)

I’m pleased to report that after hundreds of hikes during our seven years in northern California, I never had the occasion to put this advice to the test, and now we live in central Massachusetts, the biggest threats have become pot holes and snow plows—and if pending legislation passes, perhaps “pot heads” *in* snow plows. In any case, I was reminded of the

“make-yourself-large” advice at last year’s AAR/SBL meeting, during a conversation with a small group of “new teachers” who gathered around a dinner table organized by the Wabash Center to talk about teaching and learning. It did not take long for our conversation to turn to some familiar topics, especially among those who are just entering the teaching profession fulltime: favorite courses, teaching load, student problems, grading pains, self-confidence, and “the imposter syndrome.” In response to our conversation about self-confidence and the imposter syndrome, someone mentioned something called “power posing.” To my surprise, over half of the “new teachers” at the table immediately and enthusiastically affirmed that they have personally found this practice helpful in their lives as teachers. I made a note to myself to look it up when I got home.

According to a TED Talk by Harvard psychologist Ann Cuddy that has been seen over 33



million times, simply striking a power pose—that is, spreading out your arms and/or legs in an expansive position—in private for two minutes can change your body chemistry (increasing your testosterone and decreasing your cortisol) so you will actually become more assertive and less stress-reactive. Cuddy’s research suggests that these power poses can actually change not only your hormone levels but also your mind; they can improve your self-perception, increase your self-confidence, and enhance your performance in an emotionally challenging or anxiety producing appointment like a public presentation or job interview.

In other words, power posing can serve to help correct a real or perceived power differential. I can imagine how this can be especially helpful to not only “new teachers” but also faculty members who in some ways do not fit the assumed “norms” of our society. Perhaps that is why the colleagues who taught me about power posing months ago are mainly women.

I have several thoughts about teaching and learning because of what I have learned about power posing. First of all, Cuddy’s work on power posing reminds me of the fact that teaching and learning are embodied practices. It is so easy to think that teaching and learning are all about the so-called life of the *mind*, and forget that our bodies—how they look and what we do with them—actually have implications for teaching and learning. This is so because society tells stories about our bodies, but we also need and can use our bodies to teach and to learn in

different ways. As a new teacher and a somewhat slow learner, I had to go through several disappointments before realizing that staying up all night to prepare lesson plans and lectures generally does not lead to effective and productive class sessions. As a more experienced teacher and more experimental learner now, I am trying more to teach and learn experientially or kinesthetically.

Second, Cuddy uses a pithy phrase to summarize her ideas about power posing: “fake it ‘til you *become* it.” Her point here is, of course, that by power posing when you are in fact short on confidence but full of anxiety, you will gradually become the courageous and self-assured person that you want to be. Cuddy’s emphasis on “becoming” actually affirms what we do as teachers and students: namely, we as humans are capable of learning, changing, growing, and developing. At the same time, most of us have learned from Judith Butler by now that something is not “fake” just because it is performative. In terms of teaching and learning, perhaps a better phrase would be: “do it ‘til you become it.” No matter how long “we” have been teaching, we can all become better in our craft as teachers through power posing and/or other kinds of practice and training.

Third, Cuddy urges her audience at the end of her TED Talk to share with others the power of power posing. Earlier, she had related her own struggle as a graduate student at Princeton, where she felt she did not belong, as well as how she used the pithy phrase about “faking it” to help a female student of her own to overcome that same feeling of inadequacy. I wonder how many teachers who power pose to get themselves ready for classes would be willing to tell their students who lack confidence about power posing. More than that, I wonder how many would be able to share their own struggles with self-doubt to help empower their students to face life’s “mountain lions,” whether real or figurative. Being vulnerable is not exactly a pose of power, but it can be a more effective teaching posture at certain times and with particular students.

A few years back, we spent some time in New Zealand, where we learned of the ancient Maori tradition of warriors striking a pose to ready themselves for combat. Sometimes their “power posing” was intimidating enough to forgo the need to actually engage in battle. Here’s a link to New Zealand’s national rugby team performing a rendition of the *Haka*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTwbKryrhks>. These guys aren’t “too tough” to power pose, although I’m not sure I can recommend taking it to this extreme before class (*one must keep in mind the dangers of becoming an overconfident and overpowering teacher*). Perhaps it could help before presenting at the next AAR/SBL? Feel free to substitute the academic colleagues of your choice in your imagination, as long as you are among them. Enjoy the clip.

<https://wabash.center/2016/04/on-power-posing/>