



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Insecurities of a Teacher

Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Union Theological Seminary, NY*

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

April 12, 2016

Tags: critically reflective teaching | vocation of teaching | assessing teaching

It was my first semester teaching. I was anxious and fearful. I was trying to know what to do, while pretending I knew everything. In my second or third class, as I was saying something critical of the US in relationship to 9/11, one student raised his hand and said: “What you are saying is not right! I don’t even know how they let you teach here. You should not even be in this country much less be allowed to teach Americans.” He went on venting his anger. At that time I was shocked and scared and didn’t know what to do. One thing saved me though. I had a student in that class that had hearing problems and I had to wear a microphone around my neck so she could hear me. Also, every time somebody spoke I had to get very close to that person so she could hear them as well. I walked to the back of the class, leaned towards him and said: “Can you please say it again so Mary can hear it?” At that time, he changed half of what he had said before and I had time to process it and reply to him more properly. That class made a mark on my soul and from then on I was always scared that the same thing would happen at anytime. Being an immigrant, I was often afraid of attacks like that.

After 8 years of teaching and many years in therapy I hope I have learned to look at myself and understand myself better. One of the things that I had to learn was to be aware of my own fears. The whole process of earning a PhD, applying for jobs, and finally teaching is a heightened place for fears to appear. To expose ourselves in front of others and know that we will be judged is not easy. Failures of papers, of lectures, of grants, of jobs, of teaching a good class, of not responding in a certain way, of students’ negative evaluations always create and resurrect many fears. If we are not aware of them, they can damage us. Teachers need

friends to help unpack and understand situations, when we feel caught in a web of frustrations and fears. Teachers will tell you how damaging it is for them when they read 2 negative student evaluations out of 20 positive ones. These 2 evaluations will haunt them day and night putting them on the edge of not considering themselves apt to teach. Some teachers will even admit that they just dump the evaluations in the garbage can and don't even look at them.

If John Calvin is right when he says at the beginning of *The Institutes* that to know God is to know oneself, then to teach theology or perhaps even religion, one has to know oneself in order to speak. Paulo Freire says that to teach is to find freedom in one's self and help others to be free as well, a journey into the discovery and autonomy of one's life. In order to do that he says, we need to keep going back and reflect on our own practices time and again. Because we always need to learn and to relearn our craft. It is this freedom, associated with this joy of teaching, that we need to learn every day in our teaching craft.



But it is hard work. Our fears will always find a way back to us. Sometimes our fears will make us not change something in our syllabus or our pedagogies or even the classes we teach. Sometimes we will resent that we don't get a grant or are not accepted at a conference, or are not invited to something, or a student accuses us of something. These are the things that we need to deal with often so we can come as fresh as possible to the classroom!

Fear can get us stuck! Sometimes it is the very inability of teachers to move and change that precludes the transformation of higher education. We teach what we learned. And then the success of our teaching education seems to be the repetition of a pattern that as long as it is there, it will support the certainty of our teaching skills. Like rituals, once they are repeated they will confirm certain beliefs that are already there. The formation of teachers are always an ongoing case of dealing with fears, being constantly reshaped from pedagogies of stiffness and fears into pedagogies of freedom and courage, against the tentacles of a neoliberal education that likes only training not formation, repetition over imagination, one form of knowledge over a variety of knowledges, and the trust on a kind of technocracy that will avoid dreams and utopia.

Thus, the teacher's ongoing formation is a process of gaining trust, both trusting ourselves and trusting our students. I remember going to class afraid of the students and what they were going to say and do. Some days, I still have that fear. Now I am very aware that some students can easily get on our "bad side" and figure out our fears. When that happens we feel we have to be prepared for a war, sometimes hidden, sometimes explicit. It is our task as educators to

understand, as much as possible, the places, internal and external, where the students are inhabiting during class.

I remember a class I was teaching and there was this student who would annoy me immensely, making vicious comments on the things I said and the pedagogies I used. And I always replied back with the same anger. Our adversarial relation was clear and I realized I needed to talk about this. A good friend, a psychoanalyst, told me this: "In the classroom you have this father/mother figure before your students. You are not their father/mother but you are to receive their anger, process it inside of you and return in a way that it won't mirror what they are throwing at you. Transform what you receive and return in ways that can break this cycle and help your student to find a better place. Try it." That word changed me! It didn't change the student but it did change me. It is not always that I can take the time to rethink and process what I received and return it "properly." It is always a challenge. I recently saw Dr. James Cone give a lecture at Union. At the end, somebody was very inappropriate in his comments, even racist and very disrespectful. Knowing him from classroom I told myself: "Oh wait just a little my friend, you will regret you have said that." To my surprise Dr. Cone thought for a moment and said: "I don't know how to help you, I really don't. Perhaps we live in different worlds." And that was it. I want that wisdom to become my own!

One of the main issues in our formation is to discern what to do when we don't know what to do. I have seen my own teachers failing in various ways in their immediate decision making! But I learned with them and those moments helped me organize better and gave me perspective. It also showed me how fragile we are and how inadequate we can often be. It is always so difficult. Being a professor of ritual and worship, I am always being publicly evaluated. And I tell you it is not easy. I still carry many fears inside of me.

Every time I teach a new class or lead worship I am afraid I won't succeed, that I miscalculated it, that I chose wrong readings or practices, that students and other teachers will finally realize I am not really a good teacher, that I am an impostor (my major fear). So I try to be the best I can be to myself and to my students. I do research. I read more about my field and other fields. I try to be as rigorous as I can. I learn about theories. I try to master my own craft. I keep a critical eye to my practice and my thinking. I always harbor a certain naiveté that makes me open for the basics and for what I do not know, and I know I am far from what I need to know.

But I continue to go back to my practices time and again. I read about other teachers' practices. I see other people's practices and I search for counsel from seasoned teachers. I try to change and I do change in the midst of the class/semester. I ask students how we are doing throughout the class. I assume my vulnerability and I invite students to come along with me as partners in this time of mutual teaching-learning.

To conclude, I met the student who cursed me 5 years later in an ice cream truck line in Philadelphia. As we saw each other, we greeted each other and the first thing he said to me was: "I am sorry for that day, I think I was too anxious and fearful." We ate our ice cream together and went on with our lives. This joy doesn't happen always, but at least it shows that

we can change and we can figure out some of our fears, both students and teachers.

<https://wabash.center/2016/04/the-insecurities-of-a-teacher/>