



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Taking It Personally

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My father, Lloyd R. Westfield, spent the majority of his career as a school psychologist with the Philadelphia public school system. He loved his job, and by many accounts, he was very good at his job. I have vivid memories of him, one summer, as an adjunct professor for Temple University, teaching a course on abnormal psychology. His unanticipated challenge was that with the introduction and exploration of each psychological malady, students “diagnosed” themselves as having each abnormality. Dad said it was like watching children try-on high heeled shoes, sequined church hats, feathery boas, and bright red lipstick in their mother’s closet – except - these garments were distortions, emotional problems and diseases. The stress and duress of teaching students who were primarily doing self-serving analyzes was exhausting for my father. When asked to teach the course the following summer – he declined.

Something similar happens in the adult classroom when teaching about issues of white supremacy, systemic racism, domination, identity, and societal violence. Students try-on the social maladies of injustice as if trying on personal garments. In turn, their classroom engagement is reduced to gazing into the mirror looking for personal fit and failure. If the metaphorical garment somehow fits – they are ashamed. If the metaphorical garment, from

their own imaginary inquiry, is ill-fitting - they absolve themselves from personal responsibility. This venture into taking it personally turns into irresponsible reflection which serves to block critical reflection and hampers a sophisticated consideration for the issues of justice. Teaching in the disciplines of religion, culture studies, race theory, and gender studies means that all my classes are rife for the personal try-ons.

As a womanist, I am deeply committed to the construction of knowledge which comes from personal knowing, experience, and the everydayness of living. For me, this is the source of



Lloyd R. Westfield

wisdom and hope. At the risk of contradicting my previous paragraphs, I am making a distinction between knowledge production and playing at therapy; between reflecting upon personal experience and getting upset about the ideas we are studying because you think the ideas we are studying are directed at you in particular.

The obstacle to teaching, as I see it, is when the classroom is reduced to a place where students haphazardously “play” at their own personal responsibility, and in so doing, refuse to immerse into critically responsible reflection. Students, when taking ideas personally, use the personal as an excuse to be dismissive, judgmental, or just plain rude. Taking issues personally withers the exploration of the personal experience.

It is a challenge to differentiate between white people and the ideology of white supremacy. It is a challenge to differentiate between the ideas of domination (patriarchy, racism, sexism, homophobia, classism) and the lived choices of our brothers and sisters. It is difficult to convey to students that “..... (this) is not about you - personally” when, for so many, this is the first or one of the first conversations which provides information about the workings of systemic oppression.

I am not suggesting an emotional disconnection from study. On the contrary, I have vivid,

visceral memories of moments when theory has liberated me - personally. As well, I can recall moments when theory has eviscerated me - personally. It is nearly impossible to remain objective in deep, meaningful study. What I have learned is not to give over to these super-charged emotional experiences, but instead sit with them and ask "what am I to learn?" The challenge of this kind of pedagogy is to teach students to sit with their own discomfort, and rather than wallow in anger or pity or pain - dare to press through to the new meanings, new learnings - to the change. Inviting students to have new thoughts about old ideas is inherently uncomfortable, likely tremendously emotional, and, if done successfully, will cause transformation of mind, body and spirit. Linger with, being present to, students who are learning to sit with their own discomfort might be the most difficult aspect of teaching. Of course, I am speaking personally.

In what ways and how might we sit with students as they work through their discomfort with certain ideas? What does it mean to linger with students as they struggle?

In what ways/how does a professor signal a student that, while there is no room for "taking it personally" there is ample room to reflect on the personal experience?

Is it possible that we need to routinely refer students for professional therapy as they engage these large ideas of existence?

<https://wabash.center/2016/03/taking-it-personally/>