



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Tears about Mis-Education

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

January 05, 2016

Tags: philosophy of teaching | teaching and emotions | difficult conversations

Sometimes learning is accompanied by tears, theirs and mine.

The concept of mis-education is so disquieting to some students that tears are shed in the classroom. Never has there been bold sobs or muffled cries of languished sorrow - nothing quite so dramatic. Rather, the tears have been quiet moments of upset-ness which makes the nose run, the hands tremble. For a few students, tears well up, then the body tenses and clinches so as to control the tears from spilling over onto their cheeks. On two or three occasions, when the tears have overflowed their banks, she quietly left the room (usually she is a Black woman) to return after splashing cold water on her face and taking deep breaths while alone in the neutral space of the restroom. When she comes back to class, I smile at her - nod my head to affirm her strength.

When the tears come, I bear witness to the insight, revelation, grace, and pain.

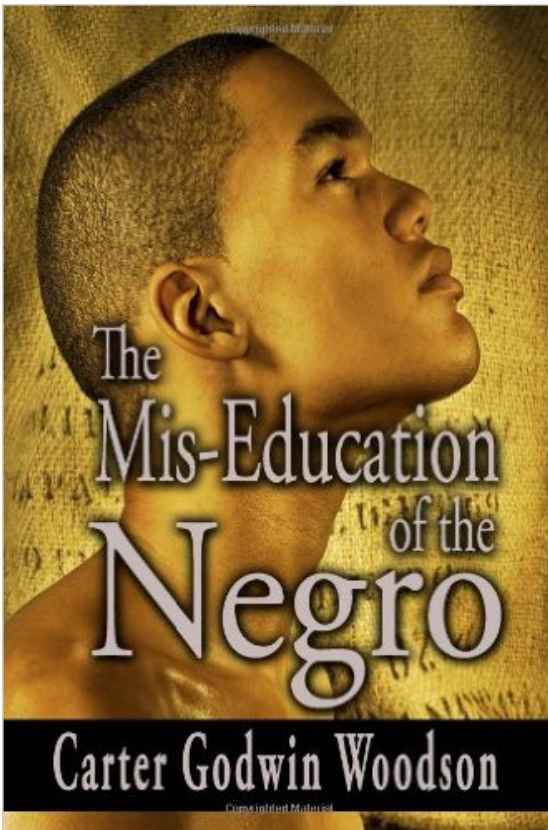
I used to wait and IF it happened, IF tears came, I would then pray. Now - now I know to pray before I introduce the concept of mis-education so WHEN the tears bubble up my prayers have

summoned salve for the re-opened wounds which hopefully will heal (some wounds never heal). Sometimes teaching is the re-opening of wounds.

The tears are not easy to see; they must be felt. People try to hide them. Students are caught off-guard when an idea has the audacity to move them to tears. I first noticed because I felt the energy in the room quickly shift. Students become uncharacteristically fidgety. Hands reach into purses for tissues, faint sounds of sniffing dapple the airwaves and eyes which usual meet mine look away; feet turn sideways signaling loss of grounded-ness and disorientation. A shrilled quietness creeps in, their breath shallows and they close their eyes gently gasping for ease. Oh, mis-education can be onerous to sit with.

Other students notice the shift in energy too, notice the tears - seen and unseen; flowing and damned up. Some students, in response to the tears of others, disconnect from the moment wishing to flee the intensity, the reality which pushes-in like a home invasion in the suburbs when people, lying into TV news cameras say, "Nothing like that ever happens around here." Others sympathetically move closer to their friend - consoling with proximity of care. Still others genuinely do not notice - so unplugged from the learning experience that nothing penetrates and nothing excretes - distracted; they just dangle through the semester.

It is difficult to teach concepts of oppression and dehumanization when those who have borne the brunt of the lash are in the room. Paradoxically, it is my joy to teach concepts of oppression and dehumanization when those who have borne the brunt of the lash are in the room. And of course, ironically, those who wielded the bullwhip, nightstick, and hanging rope are also present. This is why the old people sang, "nobody knows de trouble I see - GLORY HALLELUJAH!"



The disturbing and healing quote which is the catalyst for the tears is this. Carter G. Woodson, author of *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933) wrote:

“If you control a (person’s) thinking, you do not have to worry about (her) action. When you determine what a (person) shall think, you do not have to concern yourself about what (she) will do. If you make a (person) feel that (she) is inferior, you do not have to compel (her) to accept inferior status, for (she) will seek it for himself (herself). If you make a (person) think that (she) is justly an outcast, you do not have to order (her) to the back door. (She) will go without being told; and if there is no back door, (her) very nature will demand one.” (84-85)

Sometimes, if I am not mindful, their tears will swiftly turn to anger, fury, closed-fisted guile .... Since I-myself am just a hair-trigger away from rage, I empathize, I ache, I struggle to push past my own madness to maintain our collective agenda of peace, liberty and repair of the soul.

More than anything, I respect their tears. To be moved, in a classroom, giving over to vulnerability is the heart that is still alive, still yearning, still desiring freedom. I respect anyone who traverses the death-dealing path of U.S. education and can still cry about injustice.

Their tears rekindle my hope - their tears are indicators of their courage to reach out into the unknown and discover those ancestors who are reaching to them - able to comfort, console and heal.

This is the 11th post in this series by Nancy Lynne Westfield this semester (Fall 2015).

<https://wabash.center/2016/01/tears-about-mis-education/>