



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Learning on the Fly: 2nd Tact

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

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

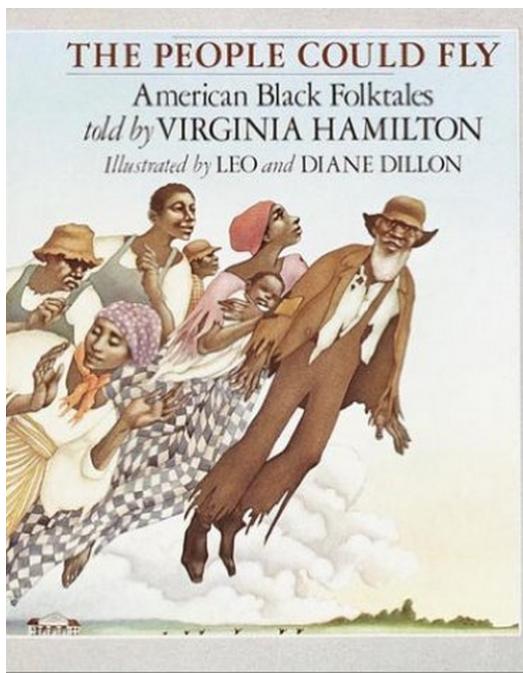
November 10, 2015

Tags: teaching with the arts | student learning goals | teaching with stories

“Learning on the fly,” a phrase used by seminarian Phil Salter, is still on my mind. I am taking a different tact from my previous ponderings

The inclinations, proclivities and aspirations to fly are abundantly evident in literature - folk, pop, euro-classical, and American Black. Several generations have marveled at the stories of Superman, Peter Pan, and Astro Boy - all who could fly. We are equally awed by, indebted to, the Wright brothers for achieving the, then, impossible - now, commonplace. Wingsuiting is the latest extreme sport, and Icarus still captures our sympathetic imaginations. We want to fly - we want to remember how to fly.

As a child, the TV shows, comic books and history lessons which told stories of flying people caught my curiosity, kept me entertained, all-the-while subtly suggesting that flying was fantasy or just not a desire suited for me/mine. Thankfully, my family also told stories of people who could fly, but our stories were about wisdom keeping, truth telling, and liberation. The family stories instilled in me an unabashed understanding that certain Africans, then and now - could fly.



While there are many iterations of the extraordinary story of the African people who could fly, blog space does not allow for a proper retelling. I will tell generally about the stories, and refer you to [The People Could Fly](#) by Virginia Hamilton, if you wish to read a full version.

In a nutshell, the story of the people who could fly always begins by describing the unjust and brutal suffering of the dehumanized African people at the hands of the godless, inhumane oppressor during chattel slavery. The story always ends with a captive(s) taking flight and making the successful journey to freedom. The main idea of the story is that escape to freedom can happen through innate ability to fly when the Seer, the wisdom figure of the story, speaks magical words, causing the capability of flight to be activated in a person.

My fascination is with the Seer. The Seer knows the person who has the ability to fly. At an appointed time, the Seer pronounces the moment as ready, says to the person, "Fly, as you know how to fly!" Then the Seer speaks more magical words, conjuring the strength of the flight, decreeing the person into freedom. Suppose as teachers, we are meant to play the role of the Seer for our students? Oh, this raises dire questions which are at the heart of our vocation

What if we, as scholars and professors, acknowledge that the yearning for the sacred mystery is why we entered religious and theological teaching, yet the inattention and disregard by the academy for our pursuit of the sacred has rendered many of us un-able to be Seers, or worse still, unwilling to fly. What if that which flows directly from ancient, communal experiences of the Divine, and is meant for us to pour into our students, has instead been traded for loveless, meaningless, mundane jobs?

To be a teacher who is a Seer means to open my spiritual abilities before my students. It means setting the expectation for Divine, liberative encounter in the agenda of the classroom,

not as a classroom that becomes a worship service, but as a classroom where the awareness of the activity of God is an integral and synergistic part of teaching and learning. As a Seer, I am obligated to know the ways of God not only in my personal prayer closet, but also in the midst of the turmoil of the world. My bit of the world is in the classroom.

Transformative teaching, the work of a Seer, rejects the disregard and callousness of the academy and finds ways, bold or subversive or inconspicuous, for spiritual knowing and healing to be part of the learning experience. Simply put, the experience of the Divine is to be beckoned in classrooms. In the folktale, the Seer's power is that he knew. He knew: who possessed the innate capacity; the time for action; the words which were keys to open spiritual doors. I want to push past knowledge of the disciplinary canons and the survival politics of higher education in order to delve into the knowing that is life-giving and life-affirming for teacher and learner, alike. I want to linger over and immerse myself in the spiritual practices of the Seer who, in the midst of misery and bondage, enabled passage to freedom. I want the kind of knowing that is so powerful my students take flight.

This is the 7th post in this series by Nancy Lynne Westfield this semester (Fall 2015).

<https://wabash.center/2015/11/learning-on-the-fly-2nd-tact/>