



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Passion for the Long Haul

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

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

September 01, 2015

Tags: philosophy of teaching | embodied teaching | vocation of teaching | faculty well-being

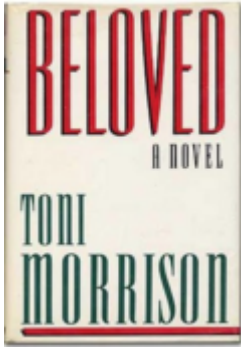
Baby Suggs, holy, is an enslaved, woman in the novel Beloved, by Toni Morrison. In the passage cited below, Baby Suggs, holy is preaching in the woods on a Saturday afternoon.

Baby Suggs, holy stands on a huge flat-sided rock, prays, and then begins to preach proclaiming the essential message of incarnation and liberation. In her preaching, she portrays and invokes a power I want to wield in my classrooms. It is the power of passion – the ability to love hard. Baby Suggs, holy, says,

" ... in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh..... You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you.....hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize." (Beloved, page 88)."

This is a clarion call to love those who are enfleshed in my classroom. Specifically, it is a wisdom message to learn to love myself, especially since I teach over “yonder.”

Passion helps me teach better – teach for the long haul. When I want to quit, when I get tired,



impatient, or discouraged – my passion allows me to stick it out. Like many people, I began teaching because I was passionate about learning. I love ideas – new and old. I love solving problems and being creative. I want, in the classroom, to right wrongs, to better appreciate beauty, to challenge the status quo and disdain mediocrity. Passion, having not waned, has helped me to move toward these lofty visions.

After years in the field of teaching, it is Baby Suggs, holy and those women like her, who keep my fires kindled. I have only to remember the dreadful experiences of brutality she and the other women endured who lived in a world where flesh was owned by another human being. In the reality of chattel slavery, she dared loving herself. Baby Suggs, holy had the audacity to preach about love in a world where her love was met with children, men-folk and friends routinely sold away. She preaches to love oneself because otherwise there is no one to love you, and you need love.

Loving my flesh, hard in my classrooms gives me leave to openly discuss issues of racism and oppression because flesh is the purveyor of all isms, i.e. racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, etc. I recognize that my body is not neutral in the classroom. My body, like all bodies, is an indicator of power, authority, and status. It is by viewing my body that students determine (accurately or inaccurately) my race, my class, my gender, my sexual orientation, and, in too many cases, my very worth.

My love of my flesh in my classroom means helping my white students to re-decode/re-interpret the societal messages about the body and the politics of the body which exist within and beyond the classroom. Racist, sexist society has taught them that my African American, female body is a display of such stereotypes as jezebel, superwoman, ghetto fabulous or mammie. Unchecked, their imaginations would work to re-inscribe the presumed status of inferiority upon me. I love my flesh hard when I wade into deep conversations about justice knowing I am educating the oppressor in my own classroom.

Occasionally, my students will be bowled over by my intensity. Some few will complain that my curricular itinerary is “too much” or they will voice their preference for moderation. When the students balk, I recollect the transformative passions of my people. I remember the taking down of the confederate flag this summer from the grounds of the South Carolina state capital. It took years to convince folks that this flag was a diabolical symbol of hatred unsuitable to be flown in places which housed the workings of democracy. The long, tedious

negotiations prevailed because of the unwavering conviction held by those who believe in equality - those who love their flesh, hard. Passion over the long-haul is what made this flag furl.

So I ask: How does one measure the personal risk of passionate teaching? What would it take to create a more enfleshed experience in the adult classroom - classrooms which allow learners and teachers to weep, laugh and dance on bare feet in grass?

This is the 2nd post in this series by Nancy Lynne Westfield this semester (Fall 2015).

<https://wabash.center/2015/09/passion-for-the-long-haul/>