

# Teaching

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## REVIEW ESSAY

## REVIEWS



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## Gracious Play: Discipline, Insight, and the Common Good

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**Abstract.** *The article is a theological reflection on the vocation of university teaching that describes the heart of the matter of what faculty do in the classroom. The author draws on personal narrative, social-psychological analyses of how insight occurs and contexts for insights are constructed, and sociological accounts of shifts that have altered significantly the context of university teaching and learning at the cusp of the millennium to make her case. She argues that the vocation of university teaching involves creating spaces of gracious play that are potentially transformative for students and faculty. Creating such spaces, however, draws faculty into an asceticism that can be understood as a spiritual path. The article is a revision of the author's 1999 St. Elizabeth Seton Lecture at the College of Mount St. Joseph, Cincinnati, Ohio.*

### Theological Reflection and the Vocation of Teaching

Theological reflection is the enterprise of providing access to cultural wisdom traditions, especially religious wisdom traditions, in ways that are life-giving. Church historians and theologians attend to this project because history makes clear that in different times and situations, human beings' interest in and access to the transcendent dimensions of existence, however they conceive them, have waxed and waned. What is it about cultures, societies, and situations that makes the transcendent dimensions of life translucent or opaque, that can render human beings, to use Max Weber's phrase, "religiously unmusical"? What are the powers of religious traditions such that they work in human lives for good and for ill, as life-giving and death-dealing forces? These are questions that anyone teaching religious

studies or theology, especially in a church-related institution, might pause to ponder.

What I have come to after twenty-five-plus years of pondering these questions is this: When religious wisdom traditions work in peoples' lives, they ground critique of self and society and fund the imagination for dealing with novel challenges. When they do not work, they are at best irrelevant and at worst are transformed into weapons of destruction. It is impossible to know what, a century from now, the interpretation of my own Catholic Christian heritage, or any version of the Christian heritage at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be. What we do know today is that we enter the twenty-first century in rapidly changing global, national, and church contexts fraught with innumerable tensions, challenges, and conflicts. In such a setting, says the venerable theologian Avery Dulles, Christians do well to go back to their originating stories, to encounter them anew, and to bring individual and corporate experience into fresh dialogue with them. This is the only way to proceed in a situation without broad consensus and shared understanding (Dulles 1983, 218-220). Facilitating the conversation between a heritage's originating stories and people's real experience is what theological reflection is about.

Higher education is no less fraught with tensions, challenges, and conflicts at the cusp of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than are the church and all other social institutions that have been the primary carriers of meaning and identity for cultures that for four hundred years now have been undergoing the radical and accelerating change that marks the process of modernization (Bellah 1970). Acknowledging the situation of higher education and heeding Dulles's advice, this essay reflects theologically on university teaching, especially university teaching in institutions that draw their original inspiration from the Christian heritage. The essay draws into reflective conversation

the resources of: (a) my own and by invitation the reader's experience, (b) the insights of the human sciences, (c) knowledge of our current social and cultural situation, and (d) the wisdom of my own Catholic Christian heritage, in order to articulate the heart of the matter, the meaning of what we are doing when we teach, something I call gracious play – where discipline, insight, and the common good come together. I am convinced that what is at stake in the enterprise of teaching in church-related colleges and universities is nothing less than the shape of human persons and the survivability of civil societies and the planet for the foreseeable future. What may be at stake as well is the preservation and transmission of authentically life-giving elements of the Christian heritage.

### **Remembering the Wholeness of Learning: A Personal Narrative**

In late August of 1970, my cousin dropped me off in front of the administration building of Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. This was a detour at the start of a vacation camping trip for her, and for me the momentous first step in fulfilling a dream. As she drove away I stood there watching, attired in the *de rigueur* bib overalls, t-shirt, and scarf of the day, clutching in one hand the handle of a used, portable manual typewriter with case that had been my high school graduation gift and in the other, the suitcase containing my remaining possessions. My whole being was a battleground between sheer terror and great expectation. At that moment, terror was winning. But before it could transform me into a stone sculpture, a senior resident-assistant approached and helped me find my dorm.

Such was the beginning of my college career, clumsy steps on the unknown path along which my life would unfold. In many ways I remained clumsy during those four years, a rural girl from an ethnic farming community, keenly aware that she lacked the social skills that seemed second nature to her peers from cities and towns, especially the girls from California. At times during the first semester the trauma of transition was so great that having a heated bedroom for the first time in my life was a primary motivation in enduring. Facing my social class and poverty in ways I had not until then was painful. So too was the nagging suspicion in the back of my consciousness that I was betraying my family by being at the university. Still, I found in my courses what had drawn me to college in the first place – books to read, ideas to consider, worlds to imagine, the life of the mind.

Key events in the development of that life remain vivid. One semester I noticed that issues and themes and problems in courses across what seemed to be widely disparate and disjointed disciplines actually are

connected. Insight dawned when I realized just how it was that particular periods in time were given names like Enlightenment or Romantic or Colonial, that in fact there are questions, impulses, issues, that characterize people, cultures, and institutions in an age. Then I encountered the American religious historian and theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr, and passionately engaged a text for the first time, his *The Meaning of Revelation*, because in it I recognized a question that was mine also: how is it that if we are in time, space, bodies, and culture like fish are in water, we might be aware of or know the transcendent at all, and what might that knowing mean? And I remember the final exam during my sophomore year in which, having accepted the challenge to do the single, integrated question, I became aware of myself thinking and thinking well, became aware of the self-transcending delight of that act, and knew exquisite pleasure. I whispered to myself in silence, this is why I came. Gratitude welled up in me.

Looking back at these experiences from the vantage point of thirty years, gratitude still wells up in me. So too, however, does the self-observing, curious university teacher of twenty-plus years who is fascinated by the dynamics of learning in her students and herself ask, what does it take to create a context where learning worth the name happens? And, what is going on when such learning occurs?

My preliminary answer is that significant learning comes as part of insight. Insight arises when one has been grasped by a question or problem, lured into savoring an idea, stunned into stillness by language or art or a scientific problem. Insight, especially powerfully transformative insight, is more than cognitive or intellectual; it involves one's entire being. Transformative insight tends to arise when a human being is in that all-too-rare and yet peculiarly human state of being fascinated by the "other" in and for itself. In that exquisite moment, one knows – not simply facts, theories, or skills, but one's self and one's world. In that moment of self-transcendence in the practice of a discipline, imagination is fed and community becomes possible.

Everyone who teaches a discipline knows the experience of insight, and I would wager, delights in seeing it in students. It is a holy moment. Precisely the potency and power of that moment call teachers to reflect on the complex factors that go into making a space for insight. The resources of the human sciences assist in exploring some of its dimensions.

### **Learning Worth the Name: A Human Drama**

Real learning is a profoundly human drama, a drama of dignity, courage, risk, fear, loss, accomplishment,

and sometimes surprising gift. To forget or to ignore that eviscerates teaching. Such forgetfulness characterizes too many contemporary visions of higher education. When education is conceived in terms of the instrumental reason of a market-driven world, students become consumers, acquiring discrete packets of knowledge or skill that they will drag with them into the world of work. Education is reduced to training. Higher education's costs are conceived in terms of time, inconvenience, and money, but never in terms of what it means to be challenged as a human being. Ironically, the same kind of instrumental reason permeates many defenses of disciplines as communities of practitioners of procedures for producing new knowledge. Such conceptions of higher education are deadly for our students, for faculties, and for our civilization.

In discounting the persons involved in learning, instrumental visions of education ignore the fundamental human drama involved. To ask students to learn anything is to ask them, to use an image from Robert Kegan's *In Over Our Heads*, to "leave home" and to do so not once but repeatedly. Our students come to us with furnished and familiar mental homes. When we ask them to think (which is what the university is about) we are asking them "to go out of their minds" (Kegan 1994, 272). We expect our students not only to learn new information, procedures, and theories, but to develop more complex ways of thinking and knowing. We are asking that they do nothing less than perceive and construct experience and its meanings in more complex ways than they have up to now (Kegan 1994, 273–5).

Faculty may not be conscious of making this request or of what it costs, but we make it repeatedly and deal with the costs daily throughout the semester. At the fourth week of my American Church history course the costs of this request confront me when the students, mostly freshmen and sophomores, submit their three-to-four page "critical historical essays" on an early-eighteenth-century, Puritan captivity narrative, John Williams's *Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion*. The assignment: "Write an essay about something in the narrative that will give a reader better understanding of some dimension of Puritan religiousness." Each time I use this assignment, I receive some essays in which the students tell me with what they agree or disagree in Williams's theology, what they liked or didn't like about how he acted when his wife was killed on the forced march to Quebec, that they think he was absolutely correct in seeing the Catholic Church as an "instrument of Satan," or that they are glad that he "stood up for his beliefs," and so forth. I put a "D" on these essays, attach to them another copy of the assignment sheet with criteria fully described, return the essays to the students, and invite them to rewrite

them. Students come into my office and make comments such as: "I am really scared, I've never gotten a D before." "I thought I was doing what you wanted. You said to think and I told you what I thought." "Did you grade me down because what I think about Williams's narrative is different from what you think about it?"

I puzzled over these responses for several semesters thinking that I needed to be clearer in describing the assignment and my criteria for evaluating it. Then, I encountered virtually the same questions in Robert Kegan's discussion of adult learning (1994, 283–7). What became clear was that the situation between my students and me was not a communication problem. My assignment requires students to write an essay in which they take the concepts of this course and bring them to bear on some topic in Williams's narrative. It requires the practice of disciplined subjectivity and critical application of historical reasoning. And it does so precisely in that the assignment requires my students to exercise a qualitatively greater measure of cognitive sophistication than many of them, especially freshmen and sophomores, have. In other words, they can't do what I want them to do without, as Robert Kegan has described so clearly, developing a more complex consciousness.

My freshmen students are, to use Sharon Parks categories from *The Critical Years*, perhaps in reflective consciousness, while my assignment requires critical consciousness. Or to use Mary Belenky and her colleagues' categories from *Women's Ways of Knowing*, my freshmen students are subjective knowers and I want them to move to procedural knowing.

Robert Kegan uses an image from Edwin Abbott's Victorian romance, *Flatland*, to illustrate this situation. "When the two-dimensional figure in *Flatland* meets the three-dimensional sphere, it neither sees a sphere nor has any sense that there is more than what it sees – namely, a two-dimensional circle, that piece of a sphere its plane runs through" (Kegan 1994, 286). My students recognize in the assignment what they already know how to do, articulate values, opinions and hypotheses, and make inferences and generalizations. What they do not see is that engaging a discipline involves more than this. They do not yet grasp "that the discipline is itself a method, procedure, or system of interpretation for reflecting on hypotheses, evaluating values, validating knowledge" (286). The possible dawning of this realization comes when they confront the grade on the assignment. To summarize, my freshmen and sophomore students can reflect on the world, honor their own subjectivity, and engage in inference. They are not yet able, however, to evaluate or relate to their reflection, subjectivity, or inference, what Kegan refers to as a fourth order discipline (Kegan 1994, 284–6).

Make no mistake, if our students do what we ask, they change themselves irrevocably and there are costs in that. To have an idea and to know one has an idea can be a fearsome thing. To think one's own thoughts and be aware that one is thinking can be, at the least, unnerving. To formulate a question and to know that one's question is good is at once exhilarating and terrifying. To be able to articulate why one's question is good is to have passed a point of no return. If students do what we ask, they develop a kind of knowing that cannot be unlearned because it involves nothing more or less than developing a more complex consciousness.

For our students, this is a process of reconstituting themselves as human beings, a process of disintegration and reintegration, for some welcome, for others not. For all, however, it is a process that usually involves their experiencing a sense of tension and even betrayal of family, peer group, social class, ethnic community, religious denomination, or political ideology (Kegan 1994, 274–7). Whether and how students negotiate this process depends on many things: among them students' perceptive acumen, the strength of their bond to their family or another anchoring group, the capacity or willingness of an anchoring group to welcome or tolerate new ways of thinking, and the possibilities for forming an alternative community that supports the life of the mind (Brookfield 1990; Kegan 1994).

### **The Worlds We Inhabit: Larger Social Contexts and Learning**

The list of factors that influence students' development of more complex consciousness is decidedly social. Faculty must take cognizance of the larger social, cultural context from which our students come when exploring the meaning of our teaching.

Developing a more complex consciousness is difficult in any social context. My hunch, however, is that the context within which those of us over forty-five negotiated the transitions to more complex consciousness offered more resources to support that change than does the context out of which students come today.

For a whole set of complex reasons the United States has undergone massive transitions and disruptions since the 1950s. Access to education, affluence, geographic mobility, social mobility, and media and communications technology all increased after World War II. Simultaneously, ascriptive loyalties began to weaken. The influence of family, ethnic group, denominational affiliation, and region on individuals declined. Those who grew up in the optimistic social context of the 1950s encountered Vietnam, racism, and awareness of the oppression of

women, ethnic groups, and sexual minorities. The result was disenchantment on a broad scale. With that disenchantment came a lessening of respect for traditional channels of authority and an expanded individualism that were expressed in a quest for self-fulfillment marked primarily by a recovery of the primacy of the experiential and the emancipation of the self over against all institutions and roles (Roof and McKinney 1988). Lest you question the significance of these changes, consider this: in a recent survey the number of "Americans who reply that they trust the government in Washington only some of the time or almost never rose from 30% in 1966 to 75% in 1992" (Bellah n.d., 16). Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney describe this situation as a "new voluntarism" in which the individual is freed for autonomous decision making, religion becomes individual and not social, and construction of meaning becomes a personal responsibility in a market of wide ranging options.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow captures the inner consequences of all that happened when he says that since the 1950s, the United States has shifted from a nation of dwellers to a nation of seekers. We used to reside in communities, now we commute. We used to produce durable goods, now we produce services and information. We used to be producers and contributors, now we are consumers. Before 1960 most people in the U.S. occupied a tightly bounded, hierarchical world in which individuals followed prescribed behaviors through formalized roles. Now we occupy a world of looser connections, negotiations, networks, and temporary associations. Individuals before 1960 defined their identities primarily by social roles. Today people talk not of status and role but of making decisions, searching among options, and presenting themselves in the best light. Until 1960, institutions constituted the building blocks of society within which people worked in order to accomplish their purposes. Now practical activity takes precedence over organizational positions and symbolic messages prevail over rules and action (Wuthnow 1998a, 2–10).

Those over forty-five, then, were shaped in a world of dwelling, a habitation that provided an orderly, systematic understanding of life. The age cohort of the 1950s and 1960s was shaped profoundly by the Vietnam War, Civil Rights, and Women's Liberation. These and other movements sought to close the gap between what the cultural narratives of the U.S. promised – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – and the actual realities of power and genuine opportunity in the U.S. The social critique and liberation movements of the 1960s all were rooted in the optimism that the gap between national reality and aspiration could be closed (Roof and McKinney 1988).

People exuded a sense of agency and possibility constitutive of the *Zeitgeist* or spirit of the 1960s. In such a context, as difficult as it might have been, learning how to analyze and criticize, essential parts of developing more complex consciousness, was for most students largely a liberating experience, an activity that supported constructive visions of a better society.

Those formed in a world of seekers, however, have spent their lives negotiating and constructing temporary and often fleeting and multiple families, friendship networks, institutional connections, and versions of transcendence and the relationship of the human to it. Theirs is a world of loose connections and porous institutions (Wuthnow 1998b). For them meaning is an accomplishment, precious, rare, and to be protected. Consequently, few students come to the university eager to deconstruct any parts of their worlds. Many come with fear, a deep sense of the fragility of all social relationships, and even of their own identity, though they seldom put it into words. The defining events for this age cohort are not those of power and agency, but largely of failure and danger. Recently in a course on the future of religions in the U.S., my returning adult students waxed eloquently about Civil Rights, Vietnam, and the sense of possibility that they loved about the 1960s. My eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old students could agree on only one common event that marked them as an age cohort – the explosion of the space shuttle, Challenger. Following that on their list, most votes went to crime, drugs, and environmental degradation. (My students' list paralleled that of students in a national study [Levine and Cureton 1998, 20–24].)

The radically changed social and cultural context in which today's students have been formed, and in which they have, with courage and dignity, hammered out worlds of meaning for themselves, raises many issues for university teachers. A substantial one is how the way those formed in a seeker context construct meaning, identity, and affiliation colors their hearing and receiving of cultural wisdom traditions, especially religious and theological traditions. A second significant issue is that for large numbers of students the disciplines of the university are more profoundly alien and threatening now than thirty years ago. The rigor of methodology, the awareness of a disciplined subjectivity, and the development of a critical consciousness, regardless of discipline, ask students to encounter and engage knowledge, skills, and procedures, and to do so in ways that assault their hard won mental homes. University professors ask nothing less of our students than that they develop a complexity of consciousness that will compel them to acknowledge and analyze the fragility of individuals, institutions, cultures, society, and the planet. We ask them to do this in a social context that is more fearful

than hopeful, a social context in which the traditional institutional carriers of meaning in cultures – religions – have grown increasingly defensive. And we tell them that what we are asking them to do is a good. It may well be that the only reason any human beings in their right minds respond affirmatively to this request is because they encounter in the classroom that combination of challenge and support that allows the deep desire in them for rich existence to resonate with the possibilities for life and community that faculty present as we invite them into gracious play.

### **Gracious Play: Discipline, Insight, and the Common Good**

Gracious play, a metaphor, expresses the moment when teaching and learning worth the name occurs. Gracious play, a context that nurtures insight. The word "gracious" carries with it multiple connotations. We speak of a gracious hostess or host, of a gracious home, of a gracious gathering. The word carries a sense of aesthetic fittingness, of space, of abundance, of room to breathe, of hospitality. In a gracious setting we know ourselves welcomed as we are. In a gracious setting we let down our guard, loosen our defenses, and become present to ourselves and to the other. In a gracious place we are more than we were.

Real play, even vigorous play, has a quality of graciousness. Play involves companions, actual, imagined, or reflexively, oneself. Play involves rules, but cannot be reduced to the mere application of instrumental reason. Play involves innovation, even improvisation, an acting in relation to and with multiple, often shifting factors and other participants. When caught up in play we experience self-transcendence, we delight in being. Play is like a good parable; before we know it we are drawn into a different standpoint, try on life from inside another skin. Even if we know ourselves in this other standpoint for only a few seconds, we have known ourselves differently, perhaps truer, more whole, than we are now. As well, we have known our world in a different way.

As the twenty-first century dawns, those of us whose vocation is university teaching are called to nothing short of creating a space of gracious play that our students might enter. No small calling given the intricate human dynamics of developing more complex consciousness and the character of the social contexts that have formed our students.

A space for gracious play is created in that artful or ingenious combination of support and challenge that helps our students grow. Challenge without support is "toxic and promotes defensiveness and constriction." Support without adequate challenge is "boring and promotes devitalization." "Both imbalances lead to

withdrawal or dissociation from the context." The artful combination leads to "vital engagement" (Kegan 1994, 42; see also Brookfield 1990). Excellent teachers are those who, regardless of pedagogical style, find the artful combination.

In the university classroom, students are, in fact, challenged by many things: facts, theories and concepts in disciplines, encountering alternative perspectives, engaging in new activities, and critical reflection. Ethnographic research on student learning repeatedly has concluded that faculty underestimate the extent to which seemingly routine small facts and simple tasks challenge students (Brookfield 1990). This came home to me when an undergraduate student showed up at my office to announce that my American Church History course had destroyed her faith. As the student spoke it became clear that the breaking point of what had been her religious world came when she confronted the range and number of religious options that have existed in the U.S. since the colonial period – a simple fact. Even though students are challenged by things faculty often deem insignificant, however, the ethnographic research on student learning also shows that when students meet the challenges courses present, they generalize that experience of power and agency to other spheres of their lives (Brookfield 1990).

Support has to do with providing resources that assist students to meet the challenges with which we confront them. This begins with the inner disposition of faculty, specifically in recognizing and taking account of the human dynamics of the learning process and letting students know that we are aware of their struggles, even as we hold them to standards of excellence. To put it another way, if we want to support our students, we must be willing to go through the mental and emotional gymnastics of remembering what it was like before we knew X or could do Y, not because our students are replicas of us, but because this exercise can focus and extend our awareness of the drama of courage, struggle, and even delight that we are privileged to encounter (dare I say midwife?) each time we walk into a teaching situation.

Creating a space of gracious play for our students involves constructing a bridge, a context for crossing over from who they are to who they may become. We cannot build the bridge unless we communicate both a genuinely welcoming acknowledgment to who they are right now as persons and provide challenges that foster their developing a more complex consciousness (Kegan 1994, 43). Kierkegaard wrote about this in his journal: "If real success is to attend the effort to bring [persons] to a definite position, one must first of all take pains to find where [they are] and begin there. This is the secret of helping others . . . . In order to help another effectively I must understand what [that person]

understands. If I do not know that, my greater understanding will be of no help to [them] . . . . *Instruction begins when you put yourself in [another's] place so that you may understand what [they] understand and in the way [they] understand it*" (*The Journals of Kierkegaard*, quoted in Kegan 1994, 278; emphasis mine).

Creating spaces of gracious play and inviting students into these constitutes, in our day, a profoundly counter-cultural act. It is also a profoundly spiritual act. Returning to the metaphor, notice that the very qualities of gracious play – self-transcendence, engagement with the other, creativity, innovation, delight, deepened awareness of the self and the other – are those which the classic spiritual writers address as elements in the soul's growth toward and encounter with the transcendent or God. A choice contemporary statement of this is that of Henri Nouwen in *Reaching Out* (1975), where he writes that the spiritual life involves three movements: (1) from loneliness to solitude, by which one shifts from isolation and egocentrism to a deepened awareness of the self and the world; (2) from hostility to hospitality, where one moves from anger and fear and an impulse to destroy what threatens one's self to an experience of graciousness, at-homeness in life, and a capacity to extend hospitality to the stranger; and, (3) from illusion to prayer, which involves the growing ability to know one's self instead of one's self-deceptions and to know all that exists on its own terms, not one's own preferred terms.

As faculty, we beckon students to cross the bridge from who they are to who they might become, to develop more complex consciousness through their encounter with academic disciplines. In doing so we invite students into a spiritual journey; as with all spiritual journeys, it offers both promise and peril. The promise of developing a more complex consciousness includes richer, more nuanced relationships to whomever and whatever is, including oneself; the freedom to choose commitments out of inner integrity instead of imposed obligation; the experience of one's existence as gift; and the capacity for self-transcending delight in the other that makes genuine creativity and community possible. The peril includes loss of the comfort of a host of absolute certitudes; the burden of self-responsibility; the knowledge that one's knowing can be skewed and distorted; and the realization that one's actions, motivated by the best of intentions, cause harm.

As the twenty-first century begins, our world and our Christian communities desperately need human beings who know both the promise and the peril of more complex consciousness and do not flee, but come to know both as gift and grace. In a society in which spirituality has been cut loose from institutional

religion, the classrooms of church-related universities may be one of the few remaining settings in which such consciousness and its concomitant sensibilities and spirituality can be nurtured.

When our classrooms become spaces of gracious play, students are supported to walk into the gap between what they know and what they might discover. In such a space, in the midst of the learning and loss common to all disciplines, for some of our students fascination overcomes fear, insight arises, sensibilities are altered, capacities for discrimination develop. What becomes possible, to put it in theological language, is nothing more or less than solidarity in sin and grace, a commitment to the common good, a capacity for compassion, the ability, as sociologist Robert Bellah put it in a recent address at Regis College in Denver, to become Eucharist, "ourselves completing 'what is lacking in Christ's afflictions,' as Paul says in Colossians, by self-giving love for the whole world" (Bellah n.d., 24).

This is the impulse that drives teaching worth the name, that pushes faculty to ask just what might happen to ourselves and our disciplines and our curricula if we claimed development of student consciousness as our primary mission. When we genuinely engage that question, we walk into a gap between what we know and what we might know, who we are now and who we might become – full of every bit as much promise and peril as the gaps we work to turn into spaces of gracious play for our students. As faculty, our call at the dawn of the twenty-first century is to walk into that gap, to stand there until fascination overcomes fear and we encounter our grace.

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