



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## **“Teacher, Do You Believe in White Supremacy?”**

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

Blog Series: Teaching, Religion, Politics

August 31, 2017

Tags: teaching for transformation | social justice | white supremacy

Years ago, preparation for the beginning of school was a family affair. The cigar box for storage of pencils, pens, glue, and scissors was gotten by my father from the Pennsylvania State Store. Notebooks, book bags, and new sneakers were on my mother’s to do list. New clothes were my favorite preparation. A plaid skirt and dresses for me. My brother got pants and shirts, enough for the week. For our family, fulfilling this routine meant “we were ready!” for school to start.

Now, years later, I am on the other side of the classroom podium. Yes, new shoes have been purchased, but my attention is on a different kind of preparation. I am uneasy and apprehensive. The hatred and moral outrage in the nation is weighing heavily upon my preparation. While racism is woven into the tapestry of USA democracy, we find ourselves in an unrehearsed moment.

We are in an era where facts have empirical alternatives, immigrants are disinvited with police action, patriotism is routinely questioned, time-honored value systems are publicly maligned, and core social institutions such as family, religion, parenthood, marriage, and racial identity

are under siege. When the classroom doors are flung open the students will likely be thinking about, and undoubtedly affected by, our moral crisis spurred on by recent domestic terrorism and the uninhibited displays of white supremacy. The national conversation about our morally bankrupt and inarticulate president will be on their minds. Or worse yet, if learners have ignored or closed themselves off from the surge of the Klu Klux Klan, the protests in all the major cities, and the many looming international disasters, then when they enter the classroom they will be hoping to continue the delusion of safety and security.

Whether immersed in the national conversation or oblivious to it there is a new kind of vulnerability, uncertainty, mistrust and strain in our everydayness - I am unsettled and do not know how to prepare. What does it mean to "get ready" to teach when the national leadership is equivocating and mealy-mouthed about the inferiority and disposability of Blacks, Jews, Latino/s, recent immigrants, Muslims, LGBTQ, and the poor? When students cross the thresholds of our classrooms, their questions, concerns, beliefs, fears, confusions, fatigues, and misgivings will also flood through the door. It would be foolish to hide behind our own scripted syllabi, and then feign surprise when these issues bubble-up. Even if these volatile topics are not discussed forthrightly in our curriculum, students and colleagues alike are likely to act-out their fears and emotional distress. Our classrooms will be altered by the national conversation on hate in America - and rightfully so.

My hunch is that the seminal inquiries will come when students (and colleagues) ask about our personal beliefs and values. The instances with the most magnitude are not likely to happen in the drama of a lecture or during a spirited debate in the classroom. I suspect the inquiry will come in subdued moments at the coffee urn or while riding together in an elevator. Students will ask, overtly or in a roundabout fashion, what you personally believe concerning patriotism, moral courage, and race. If you are a teacher with any standing in the faculty, or with any regard in the life of your students, you will be asked about your personal stance on white nationalism and white America. To be asked by your students to guide them with your own moral compass is a powerful request. It is a request that, for some teachers, is beyond our comfort zones and perceived professional boundaries. Tough luck!

Students will be listening for the integrity of your conviction, your ability to be genuine about current injustices and the location of your moral passion. Be honest and believable. If we are to seize the power of our authority and step into our responsibility as moral agents who set examples of moral clarity, then we must know what we think before we are asked what we think. The moral volatility of this moment behooves all of us to know what we believe before we are asked - because we will be asked.

During your preparation, reflection, and soul searching consider the risk and the cost of your values and weigh them carefully. Meeting the obligation of speaking for justice and against hatred has a price - sometimes a terribly high price. Silence also has its premium.

The pundits and politicians cannot be our exemplars. Their disingenuous speak makes their ignorance vivid during the 24/7 news cycle. Most have done little personal or critical reflection

- and it shows. When they incorrectly use vocabulary from the politics-of-racism lexicon, speak a-historically as if race politics is new, or reply in shallow, hackneyed clichés we know we are being led by persons who are ill-prepared and outmoded. The failure of moral leadership is, in part, the unwillingness to prepare before speaking. Soundbites cannot rule the day.

The wild ride that is Trump's presidency is only going to become more frenetic and incoherent. The collective experience of dangerous uncertainty and looming demise will not wane but continue to wax into the foreseeable future. The psychological torque produced by this fatigue will weigh heavily upon the stability of our classrooms and upon the teaching know-how we have come to rely upon. Our students, more than ever, will need us to create spaces that help them to make sense of all that is shifting, eroding, and slipping away.

As teachers who accept the prophetic nature of our role and responsibility, we must tend to our own body health and keep consistent with our spiritual practices. If you must despair, do it in the privacy of your prayer closet. Allow your students to hear what you believe as a way of integrity and meaning-making. Show them how to create the voice of justice by being a voice for justice. Assure them that democracy can withstand this attack.

Then hope like hell that it can.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/08/teacher-believe-white-supremacy/>