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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Making Personal Trauma a Cultural Issue

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When I was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer, everything seemed to cave in on my body as questions narrowed: first, what to take out via surgery, then what to put in via chemotherapy and food, and eventually, to possible internal causes due to genetic flaws. Although everything and everyone seemed to be focused on my body, my thoughts were occupied with things outside of my body--from environmental carcinogens, to students, to writing deadlines. While much of the focus on trauma in the classroom has been on how to deal with traumatized students (links below), there has been less discussion of traumatized faculty, as if professors are somehow immune to the trauma students bring into the classroom.

Yet, professors, like students, are embedded in environments that often cause trauma. How do we teach not only in the wake of the trauma of students, but also in the wake of our own traumas? Moreover, how can we shift individualistic narratives about trauma toward a cultural narrative, particularly in the context of the classroom? While we might idealistically like to keep personal trauma separate from the classroom, the realities of trauma tend to be messy. Trauma exceeds the boundaries we have worked so hard to establish. This is as true for professors as it is for students.

To tell or not to tell

When I was diagnosed, I was teaching two courses: one entirely online as part of the Council for Independent Colleges's Consortium for Online Humanities Instruction and one at a correctional institution using the inside-out model. I knew that I would not be able to continue shuttling students back and forth to a correctional institution following my surgery and that it was going to be difficult as I started chemo. My online students had grown accustomed to near-daily interactions in the spaces we had created for dialogue. My options, as I saw them, were to tell the students about the diagnosis, tell the students that I was sick, or not to tell the students anything. Regardless of the choice I made, my diagnosis would affect students and classroom dynamics.

Do we invite students into our personal traumas or keep them out? What do we risk by putting students in proximity to personal trauma? What do we risk by trying to keep them out? What might students learn from watching their professors deal with illness or other personal traumas?

Both classes had fewer than 20 students enrolled and I had formed connections with many of the students, so I weighed the options in this context and decided not to shield students from the details. I would be as honest as I could.

Shifting the narrative

One of the things that students might learn if we invite them into our personal traumas is how to shift the narrative of trauma from a narrative about individuals to a cultural one. In the case of my cancer, this means considering the "how did this happen question" without resorting to blaming my genetic line, the decisions of my parents, or my decisions about food and exercise. It is easy to like individualistic reasons for trauma. If you can figure out why I got colon cancer, you feel like you can protect yourself from this particular trauma by making better decisions. This is not unlike feeling that you can avoid rape by dressing modestly and not walking alone at night. While many have recognized the problem with responding to rape by calling on potential rape victims to change their habits, people with cancer continue to be advised to change their personal habits. Such advice shields the broader collective from having to make difficult decisions about the way we have organized our lives together, how that organization might be contributing to the rise in cancer, and the effects of a politics that marginalizes people with pre-existing conditions. Because my diagnosis coincided with the first-full scale attempt to dismantle the ACA, bringing my personal trauma into the classroom created space for students to see how collective decisions shape what might appear to be individual trauma.

By naming trauma in the classroom, we invite students into the kinds of questions that can shift the narrative of blame from individuals who experience trauma toward systemic problems that reveal an economy willing to sacrifice some for the benefit of others. In shifting this narrative, students learn how to think about trauma as something that affects individuals, but often does not have individual causes. Trauma is often rooted in social decisions.

Links:

The Ethics of Trigger Warnings in the Classroom

No Trigger Warnings in my class
You Are Triggering Me!

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2018/02/making-personal-trauma-cultural-issue/>