



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Learning to Wait for the Wind

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

Blog Series: Notes From The Field

May 17, 2018

Tags: teaching contemplation | teaching patience | pedagogical strategies | wisdom

In a society wrought with busyness, contemplation is often deemed a foolish waste of time. Yet, for those of us who want to be reflective practitioners of teaching, contemplation is essential. In considering the needs of students who are navigating our frenetic society, perhaps they, too, need to learn to be more contemplative. Suppose the lessons we teach about social change, eradication of patriarchy and white supremacy, and the need to support the poor into economic stability, cannot be grasped or attained without contemplation?

Teaching against the societal values of individualism, violence, greed, and competition needs deep reflection. Raising awareness of the oppressive economic systems, unnecessary suffering, and environmental devastation might mean learning the practices of contemplation if we are to survive. Recognizing the inhumanity of oppressive structures, and summoning the creativity to reimagine a society that is more communal, more humane, more equitable, takes long periods of thoughtful concentration. Clarity and wisdom can be beckoned through the work of contemplation.

In considering the role of contemplation in teaching and learning, I asked myself if there have been moments in my life where I have had the experience of contemplation from which I might draw to better teach my students. If I am to incorporate contemplation for my own learning, what do I know about contemplation and how have I come to know it? When have I

experienced contemplation that was useful? This was the helpful recollection:

My dad had a certain kind of know-how. Among other things, Dad knew the right days to fly kites. This, I have come to understand, is a kind of wisdom. Kite day was not a set date on the calendar. Kite day was the day that Dad knew the wind was just right. How he knew - I still do not know. On the appointed day, usually a spring Saturday, Dad would announce to me and my brother Brent that it was Kite Day. The announcement meant we, in great excitement, would gather the needed elements to build kites. Brent and I would grab previously read newspapers, the stakes used for tomato plants, assorted kinds of string and old undershirts. We spread the supplies out on the dining room table and my father went to work. With the precision of an origami artist, Dad carefully folded the newspaper, attached the stakes into the folds, then, using ripped up tee-shirts, fashioned and knotted a tail for each kite. The last step was to apply the string and check the makeshift reeling. Once the kites were assembled, we processed, kites in-hand, careful not to drag the tails, to the baseball field across the street from our row house in North Philly. Dad would choose the spot for the kite flying by pausing to feel for the wind. Then, I thought he was just being dramatic. Now, I know feeling for the wind is a necessary aspect of successful kite flying. After quiet moments of wind-testing, we were ready. With great care each kite was placed on the grass and its tail was carefully laid out. My brother and I wanted to run with our kites - demanding them into the sky, but no kite ever obeyed. My father said, "No kite flies from running it into the sky - you must wait for the wind."

Waiting for the wind was not easy because it meant just that - waiting.

What I learned is that once the flurry of assembling the kite is over - kite flying becomes a contemplative sport. Waiting for the wind required patience, stillness, and focus. These moments of waiting were full moments of silence, light conversation, or just observing the surroundings.

With no notice, sometimes gusts would come and abruptly snatch the kite up into the air then just as abruptly slam it down to the ground. If kites became bruised or even destroyed, Dad would fix it or fashion a new one on site. Sometimes, if my brother or I had been lulled into inattention, a gust would take our kite up and the fast-moving string would burn our tender hands. We learned about friction and how to put Band-Aids on fingers. As we became more attuned, Brent and I learned to hold the kite back from flight when the wind was too strong. We learned to judge the right wind and see our kites into lift-off. The moments of lift-off were exciting. Feeling the wind take hold of the kite in a gentle way was the anticipated moment realized. Once lift-off was achieved, the job was, as Dad instructed, to "Keep the nose up!" so the kite would gain altitude and so the line could be let out gradually and evenly. When the kite was 10 or 20 feet in the air, the goal was to get the kite to 40 or 50 feet. The best flying was when the line was completely let out, and we had time to quietly sit and gaze while it danced, soared, and pranced across the sky. The sky above our field in North Philly was quite a lovely site on kite flying days.

Friends, am I suggesting we all learn to fly kites? Yes! Sometimes the literal is the best.

Beyond the literal, I am considering ways of designing learning activities for students, as well as developing practices for teachers, which require time to tarry, linger, be still and quiet. This elegant practice might spawn our best teaching, ever. It might be as simple as breathing and pausing before answering questions in classroom discussion or instructing students to think silently for a few extended moments before asking questions. Slowing the tempo of Q&A might led to deeper, more insightful inquiry.

Beyond that, crafting exercises which make use of meditation, silence, and stillness to consider complex or emotionally charged concepts could be a refreshing change to the typical patterns of classroom interaction. And of course, for teacher preparation, time spent in silence, in mindfulness practice, and in stillness for re-centering and preparation will likely make us calmer, more present as we teach. The greater change in our classrooms might be developing the sensitivity and patience to wait on the winds of our students, i.e. their curiosity, their questions, and concerns, to shape the course and discussions. A contemplative classroom could be a more attuned, a more relevant learning experience.

Let us all find beneficial ways to wait for the wind.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2018/05/learning-to-wait-for-the-wind/>