



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Resourcing the In-Between: Teaching and Learning Pastoral Care During Pandemic

Mindy McGarrah Sharp, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

Blog Series: Praxis: The Responsive & Expanding Classroom

April 14, 2020

Tags: student learning | teaching during crisis | teaching pastoral care

Caught In-Between Questions

“I always figured my music came from somewhere between,” said singer-songwriter John Prine in an old interview.[1] I’ve been listening to his music as part of praying for health, and now mourning his death to this pandemic. We are in an in-between time, caught in-between mourning and making music, moving through the day and being stopped in our tracks at the sheer weight of the pandemic.

Some things are falling apart. Some things are holding steady. Where does the seminary curriculum fall in this spectrum and why does it matter?

Discussing teaching and learning pastoral care amid pandemic, one student asked about the purpose of specialized training in theological education. In this moment of human solidarity does professional training serve to unite and/or separate?

Another student revealed a nagging feeling that seminary wasn’t built for them and that the curriculum isn’t as inclusive as it professes. Now that finishing a semester of disruption is taking so much energy, the student wonders if it’s worth it. Is it?

I share such vocational questions: what is the purpose of professional training? To what extent are our institutions exclusive or inaccessible and can this disruption lead to expansive and

deep change? What is crumbling? What is holding firm? What does all of this mean for my vocation? To what extent do I believe my courses and teaching and learning practices could resource this moment?

Attending Seminary in Pandemic

Crisis is an unbidden test. The COVID-19 pandemic tasks the curriculum-assessing all we have learned and taught, drawing sustenance from deep wells of knowledge and wisdom, exposing as shallow what we may have thought was deep.

How could theological education resource this crisis moment? Sacred texts and philosophies speak to people across times and spaces, in good times and hard times, and mostly in-between. Text and tradition can both expose and salve wounds, make and undo worlds for whole peoples.

Academic practices of digging, studying, connecting, unmasking, lingering with words are staples of theological education across the curriculum that could help give energy and direction on as we move through pandemic. How does my discipline of pastoral care resource this moment?

Moving In-Between

We are in-between what was and what will be. Human interaction with the novel coronavirus has begun, but not yet ended. More pointedly than most days, in pandemic we linger between life and death, searching for what will give and sustain life while minimizing and transforming, vaccinating against what kills. This is a time of in-betweens. We abide in the middle.

School is not what it was and is not yet what it will be next year or in five years. We move through the in-between. Medical care, economies, policies, birthday parties, clothing ourselves for the day, visiting the sick and imprisoned while advocating for health and release, embracing at weddings, births, deaths, and other momentous life occasions—our institutions, civic practices, and religious practices and so much more are not what they were just weeks ago and are not yet where they will be. We abide in the middle.

Pastoral care is a discipline that pays careful attention to the in-between that could resource the in-between-nesses of our lives in this moment of crisis and disruption.

Pastoral Care Can Resource the In-Between

1. **pastoral care in-between selves and communities.** It is important to honor the dignity and uniqueness of each human person while also studying the places, spaces, and communities in which individuals live. Pastoral care recognizes individual vulnerabilities and limits. Pastoral care also affirms compassionate connection. Practices of faith and religious experiences abide in-between personal piety and social justice. Practices of self-reflection, communal reflection, and conversation between selves and communities can

resource lingering in this in-between. In crisis, we link “how you are, really?” to “what in the world is happening?”

2. **pastoral care in-between identity and interculturality.** Not only are selves and communities constantly interacting, but identities and cultures constantly interact and affect each other. An intercultural posture recognizes that there is no such thing as an identity or a culture that is exactly one unchanging thing for all times. Practices of bordering and border crossing affect belonging. Much pastoral attention is focused on the borders of identities and the deep interactions of living cultures. Practices of storytelling, translating, learning and listening across cultures, and paying attention to borders and border crossing can resource this in-between. In crisis we link “who am I?” with “how does my story reflect and contribute to a world of difference?”
3. **pastoral care in-between roles of different levels of training, authority, and power.** Pastoral care practices pay close attention to the character of relationships between parents and children, between teachers and students, between faith leaders and faith community members, between therapists and clients. People with more role-based authority have more responsibility for creating and maintaining good boundaries. We also know that role-reversals can happen where the student becomes the teacher (momentarily or in more sustained way). In many families, children become care takers of aging parents. Practices of collaborating across roles with good boundaries help attend well to in-between that characterizes much of our relational lives. In crisis that crosses borders, we ask what wisdom children bring while carefully reexamining and recommitting to boundaries that guard against abuse of power.
4. **pastoral care in-between theories and practices, in-between actions and reflections.** Knowing and doing, learning and acting are deeply interconnected. Inseparable. The way we know and what counts as a source of knowledge (epistemology) is affected by and affects who we are and how we engage life practices. Likewise, practices of moving through the world help us understand and evaluate theories, often interpreting or creating new ways of thinking about what it is we do and why. Practices of integrating what we do and what we think about what we do can help to resource the in-between. In this crisis, we link questions about how to lead and teach while staying home with questions about why it matters, and in what ways it is challenging.
5. **pastoral care in-between what is and what ought to be.** Practices of pastoral care are transformational, not transactional. Chaplains and other faith leaders participate in pastoral care because we believe it does something in the world, something like healing, something like liberating, something like instilling courage into the heart of fear. Crisis times can bring up all the old patterns, coping mechanisms that got us through hard times before, but may not help us be well. Systems thinking helps us recognize both life-giving and stubborn harmful patterns. Crisis times can also make new collaborations possible, help structures of injustice fall away, and fuel energies for deeper transformations. Practicing noticing patterns, remaining non-anxious, and dreaming dreams of possible futures can resource this in-between.

This is a time of in-between and it makes sense to be asking questions about what matters, what is worth giving up, what must be grieved, what endures. Is theological education

important in-between? To me, it's not a question of whether, but how theological education can help resource this moment of crisis—not solve it, but help move through it. I am thankful for the ways pastoral care locates study and practices in the in-between. We're going to need all the resources each other brings as we navigate this in-between.

How is your discipline resourcing the moment?

[1] <https://youtu.be/x-SKCWXoryU>

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/04/resourcing-the-in-between-teaching-and-learning-pastoral-care-during-pandemic/>