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Fostering Resistance to Cultured Despair

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“Resisting cultured despair” is a phrase from feminist ethicist Sharon Welch that captured my imagination in graduate school. It is a phrase, or rather a disposition, that named for me my experience with the paralysis (and the privilege) that often prevent us from moving beyond critical description (what is going on) to responsive and responsible action in an unjust and messy world.

For the past decade, resisting cultured despair has been an explicit feature of my teaching philosophy. It takes form in undergraduate, values-integrated seminars as well as in graduate servant leadership classes—courses designed to counter what religious education scholar Mary Elizabeth Moore decries as the “bifurcation of information and formation” in our pedagogies. In the end, I want the knowledge we generate together in the classroom to be catalytic rather than paralytic. I want my students to join the resistance, to become arc-benders in the moral universe.

In its more common form, the initial despair sets in as the students grow in their awareness of the complex, long-standing, and interlocking nature of contemporary social ills—that is, as the students become “cultured.” So, conventional wisdom suggests we read together from the traditional canon of arc-benders. Yes, the challenges are daunting, the systems entrenched, but

look at MLK! Ella Baker! Nelson Mandela! Dorothy Day! Cesar Chavez! to name just a few of the social change “saints” often invited into the curriculum.

But herein lies the rub, and the less talked about but no less paralyzing dimension of cultured despair: the more we read of the moral virtuosos whose lives we count on to inspire our students (and, let’s be honest, ourselves), the easier it becomes to outsource our responsibility for changing the world to the luminaries, the set apart among us, the ones—certainly not me!—who by virtue of their extraordinary gifts and sacrifice can actually make a difference.

As I continue to wrestle with transposing resistance to cultured despair from the soaring heights of a teaching philosophy to the grounded pedagogy of everyday teaching, I have found it helpful to adapt a strategy that has been effective in designing student writing assignments. One challenge familiar, I suspect, to most teachers is the student paper that tries, unsuccessfully, to emulate the style of and employ with earnest abandon the new vocabulary in the assigned course readings—the “try hards,” as my teenage daughter might say. My kneejerk response reflects this appellation: you are trying too hard, which, of course, is not helpful feedback. Whether crestfallen, contemptuous, or simply confused, student reactions to critiques of their writing include an implicit demand: ok, then show me what good writing *that I am capable of* looks like. So, we read the eloquent and professionally edited essays, speeches, and letters of the virtuosos for inspiration, and less for imitation. We pair these readings with review and discussion of a good (and sometimes a great) student paper from a past class.

For me, forming students to resist cultured despair requires a similar approach. What this looks like in practice may vary, but for the past several semesters I have made an intentional effort to invite into the classroom recent alumni who are working in organizations that attend daily to the intersection of justice and care—organizations that amplify the leading causes of life in word and deed. The first-person stories of peers, like the reading of student writing, is a witness to a way of life as *towards* social justice, towards a life of “faithful service and ethical leadership,” as our university mission intimates. Their stories serve as tangible reference points throughout the semester, grounding our critical and conceptual analysis of issues threatening human flourishing.

Three practical points to note: these conversations are shared, memorable, and easily adapted to flexible learning environments. These conversations with alumni ensure that we have a “shared text”—something that a required reading aspires to but often falls short of in practice. The shared, living texts prove easier to recall and work with in subsequent class sessions. And, as I discovered this year, the conversations can be hosted virtually in a way that, ironically, may enhance the “reality” of their stories. For example, alumni can give virtual tours of organizations we would never be able to visit in person during a class.

There is, of course, nothing radical or new about bringing back alumni to tell their story—your alumni office will be thrilled to assist (and publicize). And as with any alumni “career talks,” the impact can be direct: the current student compelled to apply for a year of service with the organizations for whom the alumni work. But the pedagogical move, like so many, is not

contingent on generating immediate, observable causal relationships. Rather, it is a recognition that in our classrooms, the invitation to *change the world* –as the most recent iteration of our (your?) university branding exhorts–cannot be delivered solely by those whose stories have been mythologized and anthologized. This has become increasingly clear in the current moment when the moral authority of past saints is simultaneously invoked and revoked by new voices demanding to be heard.

Teaching resistance to cultured despair requires additional signposts and, likely, the identification of new paths. Partnering with recent alumni is a source of hope and accountability for me as I prepare to teach this fall, conscious of both the temptation to cultured despair and the rising culture of despair.

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