



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Kill the Darlings: Teachings of Sondheim

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My dissertation advisor and I were discussing my recently written chapter. She believed the chapter needed more work, needed a rewrite. I was passively resisting her advice believing my words were good. In a stern tone, my advisor said to me, "You must learn to kill your babies." Her tone of voice and message caught me off-guard and shook me. The gruesome phrase threw me into the grasp of "student-fear" - that crushing fear that grips learners when they think their teachers are disapproving and likely to abandon them. Until this moment I had known her to be enthusiastic about my work, supportive of my writing. I knew she believed in me and the book I was composing. In that moment I did not have a response to her command/suggestion/demand. In my silence, my advisor explained that everything that I write cannot be deemed by me as being precious. I listened over the landline phone trying not to disclose my disagreement. She chided me that everything I write need not be prized nor saved. I folded my arms across my chest trying not to drop the phone. I distanced myself from her words as she spoke them. She cautioned me that clinging to every word as I write restricts me, encumbers me, and does not allow me to fully engage that which I am writing. In a muffled voice, I disingenuously thanked her for her feedback.

This advice was given me in 1998. I am still thinking about the meaning and still trying to live into the intent and wisdom. It has taken several years to say I agree with her, and even more years to practice this necessary skill of creativity and homicide. The creative process, whether writing or teaching, is only narrowed by the unwillingness to get it wrong. It has taken time for

me to learn not to archive that which I delete from a manuscript. The best lesson was when I lost many, many pages of copy (irretrievable copy - computer error!) only to realize that the rewrite was stronger, clearer, and more articulate. When I was foisted into this situation, I began to learn the full lesson of “kill your babies.” My advisor was right.

On November 26, 2021, Stephen Sondheim died at the age of 91. Sondheim is rightfully considered one of the titans of Broadway whose music and lyrics elevated the American musical landscape. Sondheim was an artistic genius. He was a prolific observer of people. He used his observations as a pristine storyteller to make the ordinary exciting. His body of work is a creative triumph. I was watching Sunday morning tv when the news of Sondheim’s death was reported. The newscaster, seemingly a genuine admirer of Sondheim’s craft and legacy, recounted a quote. Apparently, Sondheim was famous for telling students and budding musicians, “You must learn to kill your darlings.” Of course, in this moment, my dissertation advisor reappeared to me. Sondheim, like my dissertation advisor, believed that until you doubt yourself and the world, you cannot bring forth real change, genuine artistry, and ingenuity. Until you are able and willing to discard the feeble attempt can the creative process assist you to write, sing, or teach the masterpiece. Too often the first attempts to emerge in the creative moment is the expected, the known, the tried and true. These are the darling babies for which there can be no time or attention. These babies must be killed. Getting rid of the darlings creates space for the un-expected, the new adventure, the genuine self-expression and needed voice. Too often the first attempts are reliant upon the contrived response, the constructed environments, the established rules, and accepted conventions. Creative triumph is not born out of complacency and mediocrity.

As teachers of religion and theology, our imaginations have a responsibility to bring forth new expressions meant to engage the questions of the world with new answers. Let us not stand in our own ways by curtailing, restricting, or confining the creative process. What course(s) in your portfolio needs to be discarded and re-envisioned? What lectures in your introductory course need to be done-away with and reconceived? In what ways will we assist our students in learning the skill of killing their darlings?

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2021/12/kill-the-darlings-teachings-of-sondheim/>