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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Self-Care and Professional Location

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Self-care has become a familiar concept and an area of interest in faculty development and in student life. For many, self-care has become the substance of our reflections about personality traits that stem from our family of origin to concerns about longevity in our professional and vocational lives. The call to care for self does not go unheard, and for many there's puzzling about hobbies, a reluctance to make the necessary changes to squeeze self-care into our already overloaded schedules, and perhaps even an eschewing of the import of self-care. A lot of people attempt to find an activity to take up for a couple of weeks (think New Year's resolutions) that will quell the inner voice reminding us to check yet another box on the to-do list because of an intuitive sense that self-care is indeed a healthy practice. Why write a blog about something that doesn't seem to require much deliberation? After all, isn't a response to the invitation to care for self a simple yes or no?

I have spent the past eight years piecing together a professional response to vocation. While I pursued a terminal degree envisioning a full-time faculty position somewhere, this picture of my ideal professional life has taken a much different turn. For a few years and holding on to my dream, with each cycle of yet another academic year and another application submitted, there was hope that a full-time faculty position, or any full-time job in a seminary, would eventually materialize. In the meantime, I was a busy adjunct instructor and pastoral minister, all the while juggling the demands of family life. With each year and with each declined application, I found myself in a cyclical pattern of saying yes to adjunct work for the following

academic year because I was uncertain that I would have other opportunities. Clearly, this was not what I had expected after many years of hard work, nor did I think this was a way to honor the village that showed up so that I could complete the degree and graduate. Don't get me wrong, there IS immense gratitude for the enriching opportunities to work and I continue to learn best teaching practices, even in areas that aren't explicitly in my wheelhouse. With little to no job security, teaching and prepping for each new work opportunity is demanding because an invitation to teach again the following year is dependent on performance and whether there is a need.

Increasingly and with significant changes in the terrain of theological higher education, graduates with doctoral degrees are required to reexamine their professional aspirations and shift their expectations according to the reality that there may never be a full-time teaching opportunity. From navigating different institutions as an outsider to developing and teaching new courses, individuals in part-time, contractual, and non-tenure track positions amass a full-time workload with hours accrued from various employers. And so, a resolute and affirmative response to the invitation to care for self in this professional adjunct reality is tempered by the constraints that come with financial strain, the emotional toll of job insecurity, the psychological weight of challenges to self-esteem, and the body's physiological responses to stress, to name a few.

None of these adjunct realities negates the import of self-care, and contractual, "part-time" adjuncts are in no way exempt from the need to care for body, mind, and spirit. Burnout is real and an accompanying and worrisome symptom of burnout is apathy. If an outcome of burnout is that instructors no longer have the capacity to care about students and all the good that happens in physical and virtual teaching spaces, then it's imperative that teachers and institutions alike look closely at institutional culture and professional location to examine the particularities behind resistance to and an inability to say yes to self-care. Whatever the season and context of teaching, administration, church ministry, or any of the myriad ways people are employed, rather than judgement and shaming for the decision to forego self-care because of sheer exhaustion, lack of resources, and the unrelenting pressure to produce in order to matter, the invitation of this blog is to examine professional location and how this supports or obstructs your ability to practice self-care. And if the good work of theological education is meaningful, life-giving, and worth the marathon, perhaps it's time to dig deep, to unplug, and to access all our grounding sources for a spaciousness that reminds us that we're more than what we produce and that we're worthy of care.

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