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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Lessons From the Pandemic: How Do We Recognize and Honor Our Limits?

Anna Lännström, *Stonehill College*

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Teaching through pandemic brought home two basic lessons to me:

1. What happens in our students' lives affects their performance in the classroom.
2. Professors are mere human beings who can only do so much before our health suffers.

Both seem obvious. Surely, I knew all that even before the pandemic? Perhaps. But I hadn't internalized it, and I certainly hadn't acted as though it was true. I see many of my colleagues do the same.

The pandemic was the first time I taught in a situation where my students and I were all doing poorly at the same time. We were jittery and frightened. We were trying to carry on as usual, but nothing was normal.

It quickly became obvious that the pandemic would affect our students' ability to work. In March 2020, kids in my class who had been great students the previous week suddenly become incapable of following basic instructions. They kept emailing me with oddly clueless questions.

Expectations had to change, and I began settling for my students at least learning *something*. I assigned easier and shorter readings, more videos, and shorter papers. I gave more extensions,

excused more absences, and talked to many more students about their mental health struggles.

But my own workload didn't lighten. I worked much harder than normal. And my life was in upheaval too (along with everybody else's!). I would have benefited from the same sort of break and support that I was giving the students.

My doctor considers me high risk for pandemic-related burnout because I'm a female professor at a small college. She sees me as a member of the helping professions. I initially downplayed her concerns, pointing out that healthcare workers have it much worse. They do of course. But she is right. I see signs of impending burnout in myself and in many of my colleagues—especially younger women and especially those with children.

This isn't sustainable. We're just like our students. We can only do so much before our performance and our health suffers. Our limitations need more attention and more action than we have been giving them so far.

We are, I hope, coming out of the pandemic, but in higher education we're emerging into an uncertain future. Many of our institutions are deep into discussions of budget cuts; the crisis of the humanities continues, and programs are being eliminated. And mental health issues among our students are at an all-time high. It won't stop being hard.

Going forward, how can we respect our own limitations and set clearer boundaries with our institutions, our students, and our colleagues? How can those of us who are tenured and more experienced help our junior colleagues do this more effectively? And how do we do all this while continuing to be there for our students?

Those are big questions, and figuring out how to go forward will take collective action. Institutions need to change, junior faculty need to be protected, and we need to get better at allowing people real time off. I have no idea how to make all that happen. So, I start small.

My individual actions, for now: I will do for myself what I did for my students—I will recognize that my expectations of myself have to change. I can't continue to work at my regular pace. I'm too tired. I and the people around me will have to settle for me doing less. And I will tell them that.

Over the summer, I'm going to rest.

- I won't try to catch up on my research (neglected for the past two years).
- I won't revise my fall courses. They are good enough.
- I'll read, following my curiosity and meandering from book to book. And I'll write if I have something to say.
- I'll take a few weeks off, and I'll stay off email when I do, away message in place.
- I'll rest.

In the fall, I'll work with an eye to my limits.

- If I'm still drained, I'll accept that and I'll say "no." A lot.
- I'll think about how to shift the cultures around me in a more sustainable direction so that rest isn't just a privilege for faculty with tenure.
- I'll think about how to help junior colleagues and students to set and maintain boundaries.

I'll remember that my students won't be back to normal in the fall either and I'll continue to treat them with compassion and understanding. It's been a long two years—for all of us.

References and resources:

- "Burnout and How to Avoid It" from one of my favorite authorities on happiness, Dr. Laurie Santos at Yale. It's part of her podcast *The Happiness Lab*.
- Santos is going on a leave of absence. She's noticing that she is heading for burnout and thus wisely changing course. Newspaper article about that here.
- For more on showing compassion to ourselves as well as to our students, see Kristin Neff and Dr. Chris Germer's work on self-compassion.
- A massive number of articles in the *Chronicle*, including the report *Burned Out and Overburdened* (which I haven't read it yet).

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