



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



To Bless the Space Between Us

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One exercise that has sustained me throughout these last three years of a global pandemic has been writing letters to my Beloveds. As a child who was always on the move, inhabiting *la frontera*, physically and intellectually, writing to friends in my home country was a way to remain grounded while sharing glimpses and shifts in my inner landscapes in embodied ways.

Epistolary practices have connected peoples across space, time, and geographic divides for millennia. So ancient and so distant, this tradition remains so close, so potent, and so alive. Several religious traditions are quite familiar with this form of expression. Think of the Apostle Paul, who wrote to many communities in response to specific urgencies. I believe such a poetic-prophetic exercise has helped generations of our kin to be reassured, connect to their roots, and move through many dangerous crossroads. As I write these words, I am reminded that it is election day in my home country of Brazil. I don't take the right to vote for granted as

it was an impossibility some six decades ago. Paulo Freire, from whom we have all learned a lot about education, shared reflections in his *A Pedagogy of Hope* (1992) on what it was like to be forced into sixteen years of painful exile following the 1964 coup d'état. Letter writing was essential to him during those treacherous years. A lot of what later became known as the core of his teaching philosophy and praxis was developed in dialogue with distant friends, communities, and home country, many of whom he communicated with via letters. In his *Profesora Sim, Tia Nao: Cartas a Quem Ousa Ensinar* (1993), Freire indicates in the very title of the book that he would be communicating with his audience through letters to those who dare to teach. I suspect that Freire chose such a mode of communication precisely because of the impact phrases such as "Dear Comrades, Dear Co-conspirators" may have on readers. These words have the power of disarming us, conjuring a type of openness to our sensorial and embodied experiences. More than academic, abstract, and conceptual knowledge, those who dare to teach know that accessible, clear, and heartfelt content is not necessarily simplistic or superficial. On the contrary, it is drenched with histories, as Freire put it. He often wrote about how one never arrives alone in any context, whether to exile, a classroom, or the reading of a letter. Our bodies are, indeed, drenched in history, carrying an overlay of feelings, desires, memories, cumulative knowings, worldviews, longings, *saudades*, frustrations, trauma, and tensions that live at the threshold of our texts and contexts. For Freire, writing letters while in exile was a way to preserve his identity while inventing new ways of living and being and loving in unknown, and often strange, countries. Letter writing became a way to educate his affections, as he put it, and of coping with the insurmountable challenges of his geopolitical condition while resisting the urge to succumb to naive optimism.

This fall semester, I have the immense pleasure of co-teaching an online class on spiritual formation with Dr. Aizaiah Yong at the Claremont School of Theology. As we began thinking of how to "Bless the Space Between Us," between the weekly assignments, among the diverse time zones and geographic locations, an idea emerged of incorporating epistolary practices in what we named SpiritLetters. At the end of each week, we take turns writing a reflection on how our weeks have been, what kinds of spiritual practices have sustained us, and what types of literature, art forms, prayers, and blessings have given us nourishment as our lives unfold. These experiments with letter writing in the context of our teaching-learning community are intended to share a kind of presence that enacts, embodies, and evokes a sense of deep regard and warmth that only this medium can radiate. The Irish teacher and poet John O'Donohue is responsible for *inspiring* and *inspiring* both our SpiritLetters and this blog post's title. His book *To Bless the Space Between Us* (2008) offers readers insights, comfort, and company in our spiritual journeys. He reflects:

- The commercial edge of so-called "progress" has cut away a large region of human tissue and webbing that held us in communion with one another. We have fallen out of belonging. Consequently, when we stand before crucial thresholds in our lives, we have no rituals to protect, encourage, and guide us as we cross over into the unknown. For such crossings, we need to find new words.

And these new words that slide from our minds to our hearts, spilling into the pages as

SpiritLetters, are offered as blessings and invocations that hopefully can accompany teacher-learners in their academic journeys.

In what follows, Aizaiah Yong shares a bit of the impact SpiritLetters have had on him.

As a teacher and scholar who is deeply influenced by the Christian contemplative tradition as understood by Raimon Panikkar and Julian of Norwich, it is important for me that the practice of intellectual learning be deeply tethered to the practice of embodied living. The practice of writing a weekly SpiritLetter to our learning community has supported the intention of harmonizing intellectual learning with embodied living in two important ways: (1) providing an opportunity to slow down and be more fully present to the insights and ruminations offered from within the class and (2) inviting a deeper and more profound integration of them in our global social witnessing, which is an important element necessary when tending to collective trauma. Through the practice of SpiritLetters, I have found that slowing down is less about the speed by which I perform a task, but rather the level of intensity in which I engage. In this sense, to slow down allows one (for me as the teacher-learner and co-facilitator) to be more fully aware of the precious and invaluable insights offered by each person in the class through a stance of curiosity and compassion. Here, I am disciplining myself to avoid prematurely entering into critical analysis but instead choosing to contemplate first, allowing for their words, assignments, and questions to unfold within me. A process of slowing down invites a more embodied awareness of how the class is flowing and also informs a more holistic response, which in turn becomes the words written through the SpiritLetter. SpiritLetters ultimately then become a moment of mirroring back to the whole learning community what I am hearing and then asks those wisdoms to be more deeply integrated in the class journey's forward. SpiritLetters offer a space to reflect back what is arising and to allow for a finer-tuned calibration that guides our collective responses as persons and communities. I consider this a contemplative and trauma-informed approach to teaching which Thomas Huebl describes as "resilience building as collective coherence." Huebl writes, "Resilience building means that I am not just a cognitive participant of the communities I am part of, it is that I feel it. When we are aware of each other we create collective coherence. That is especially important when we go through disturbing times."[] As we continue to invite more diverse and geographically-distributed learning communities into our classrooms of higher education, I hope that we continue to practice emergent pedagogical approaches that allow us to slow down, be more fully aware of the relations that support us, and invite a deeper collective integration of the wisdom revealed.*

It is our hope that these reflections will invite you to inhabit these spaces of co-learning and co-teaching with an invitation to cultivate your own pedagogical practices of being and

becoming, even in the face of multiple crises and impossibilities. May we remember to laugh, rest, regenerate, and seek tenderness so that we can continue to bless the spaces between us.

In togetherness,

Aizaiah and Yohana

[*] <https://thomashuebl.com/what-is-global-social-witnessing/>

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/11/to-bless-the-space-between-us/>