



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



What If That Is Joy?

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Reclined on my large, red, comfy, couch, I was reading, *The Book of Delights* by Ross Gay. I was enjoying the read, and then I got to #14, entitled “Joy Is Such a Human Madness.” In this section, Ross wrote about a student in his class,

Among the most beautiful things I've ever heard anyone say came from my student Bethany, talking about her pedagogical aspirations or ethos, how she wanted to be a teacher, and what she wanted her classroom to be: “What if we joined our wildernesses together?” Sit with that for a minute. That the body, the life, might carry a wilderness, an unexplored territory, and that yours and mine might somewhere, somehow, meet. Might, even, join...

And what if the wilderness – perhaps the densest wild in there – thickets, bogs, swamps, uncrossable ravines and rivers ... is our sorrow?...

What if we joined our sorrows ... What if that is joy?

I was so taken with this idea of teaching, as espoused by Gay’s student, that I sat up, closed the book, tossed it on my coffee table and said out loud, in vernacular speak, “Ross! What you done done?”

His poetic prose crystallized for me the plight of teaching as recently described by distressed colleagues.

In the last several months, colleagues have reported a kind of lingering malaise among students and colleagues. The reports say that teachers and students are making efforts to continue in the routine while at the same time there is a palpable sense of forlornness, sadness, even, dread. Most of this, they say, is unspoken and oftentimes unacknowledged. One colleague said, "Students are just acting weird." Another colleague said, "I feel like no one is able to hear anyone else." Still another said, "I suspect this is a kind of depression, but none like I have seen before."

The conversations also told of an exacerbation. There is, colleagues have said, no singular trouble, no discrete problem, no focused event that can be blamed, fixed, nor done away with, to adjust or that would return us to "normal." We have intuitive knowledge that "things don't feel right," and a confusion, reticence, unclarity about what to do and how to do. The intangible which we cannot identify, and for which our semester is so heavily laden, is - if Ross Gay and his student are accurate - sorrow. We are burdened by collective sorrow, and we possess few institutional coping skills for this corporate onus.

Our classrooms are situated in brittle times. We do not know how to navigate the depth of sorrow which enters our classrooms - either brought by our students or by ourselves.

I suspect we have underestimated the collective consequences of having lived as a society on lockdown for more than a year. Having lived in mandatory isolation, and now emerging from that strange lifestyle, we are coming to know that our collective minds, bodies, and spirits are irrevocably changed - for better or for worse. We enter our classrooms as changed people tasked with discovering those changes by trial and error, by first-hand experience, or by pretending they are not there. We are ill-prepared to navigate these changes.

In addition to the effects of the quarantine, like so many others, I have been staggered by the myriad of events which are contributing to our individual and collective sorrow, our inner terrains of wilderness. We know the list of recent events that have us on edge, that are strangling us: grief for the millions worldwide who have died from Covid, the violent attack on the U.S. Capital to overturn the 2020 presidential election, the ongoing triple-threat health crisis of Covid/RSV/the flu, new outbreaks of polio, the uptick of police violence caught on camera, recent hurricanes, wild fires, war in Europe, the annihilation of Haiti, the British Prime Minister debacle, mass shootings across the country, rises in domestic violence, swells of suicide in all age groups, and on... and on... We wonder if we are living through a foreclosure of democracy, and if we are, upon what can we depend for survival?

Our sorrow is deep.

Our inner bogs, swamps, and uncrossable ravines are expanding.

We bring our expanding wildernesses into our classrooms.

Ross Gay asks, "What if we joined our sorrows... What if that is joy?"

Ross Gay is pointing us toward delight and joy, even amid profound sorrow. The crux is that our sorrow, our wilderness, might be better handled, survived, coped with, if classrooms, rather than ignore or pretend our sorrows away, are joined together - allow us to come together and acknowledge one another's humanity. It is then through community that we will grapple through these new troubles - come what may. I know that for some teachers the call for classrooms to become places of community is as arresting as the current plight of our sorrow.

We must redesign, rethink, recommit or continue to falter and come up short.

Classrooms that allow our wilderness to meet and join might be thought to be invitations to a shared onslaught of tears, gnashing of teeth, ringing of hands, heightening distress for already anxious people; a kind of therapeutic approach to teaching for which few of us are prepared, and even fewer are interested. That is not how I hear this profound vision of teaching toward communities of care.

Joy is not the antidote for sorrow. Joy emerges when a community of persons are present one to another in times of distress, grief, uncertainty, and doubt. Classroom spaces which encourage that our wildernesses meet, and possibly join are spaces for which the communal values of listening, compassion, tenderness, and accountability are a shared priority. Ross Gay is suggesting that our classrooms, if they are going to be balm for this strange moment, are best when they are spaces of caring community.

In this peculiar moment, when we do not recognize ourselves, our teaching task is to pivot away from climates of isolation, individualism, and those assignments that insist upon gratuitous stress or hollow competitions. This is a moment to call one another together in care and compassion. The joy will be in the discovery that none of us are alone as we navigate these unfamiliar, uncertain, and death dealing times.

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