



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Enchanted Classrooms

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Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

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In my family's tradition, dreams, visions, symbols, and signs are part of our knowing, understanding, and meaning making apparatus. I grew up with nightly dinner table conversation which effortlessly included sharing dreams, seeking out interpretations, then the habit of reordering a decision based upon spiritual in-sight. Our "cloud of witnesses" is a vivid and active part of our spiritual practice. We depend upon prayer, ancestral visitations, angels' interventions, the protection of guides, and warnings by ancestors.

My family's religious and cultural tradition teaches that the world is more enchanted, magical, whimsical, unusual and unpredictable than typically is made room for by the wider culture's narrow understanding. And since our classrooms are not siloed away from the world—I think that our classrooms, if we would learn to pay attention, are enchanted spaces. Along with this provocative assertion, I want to also say that I do not know, absolutely, what coaxes adult students into learning. I suspect learning, especially for adults, might be dependent upon enchanted happenings in our classrooms.

My grandmother, Vyola White Bullock, was an elementary school teacher in the early 1900s. My grandmother use-to say, "All that is is not visible." She would say this adage is particularly important in understanding our classrooms and in seeking more effective methods of teaching.

If we are to consider the dynamism of the intangible (i.e. enchantment) in our classrooms -

what do we pay attention to, respect, and do? In other words, what if more is happening in our classrooms than meets the eye? What if those happenings are more responsible for student learning than we know? What if that which we ignore, or that which we have no knowledge of, **is** the catalyst for student learning and our successful teaching?

Some teaching is known to open doors, create bridges, inspire students to realize and participate in enchanted endeavors of learning. Equipping students with new ways of meaning making, allowing students to access ideas of freedom, connecting students' dreaming to actuality and healing, can create sparks of intrigue, can create the fire of imagination and wonder that immerse students in new realities. Sometimes, encounters with new knowledges are so palatable that students are moved, literally, into other spaces and other times. My experience as a student, and more recently, my experience as a teacher, has shown me that from time-to-time, portals open. Some learning causes portals to open allowing brave enough students to step through. I have seen portals open in classrooms.

As a student, I have, many times, stepped through portals which opened during my study. I was introduced to the work of bell hooks in graduate school. Studying hooks' work was like time travel. I had experiences of remembering what I had not previously known. Learning from hooks' work was a dialogue across the years, across the geographic divide. The first time I read *Sisters of Yam* I felt as if my bone marrow recognized an ancient truth. I was transported into her world which quickly became our world. I knew what I knew, even more.

As a teacher, I have learned that portals do not always invite us into elegant spaces. Some portals offer struggle, fight, confrontation. A vivid encounter happened while teaching my Introduction to Educational Ministry course some years ago. At the beginning of a lecture in the second session, a student raised her hand—interrupting my lecture. She had a scowl on her face, her lips pursed, shoulders tense with anxiety. Seeing her raised hand, I stopped my lecturing, met her glare with a faint smile and invited her to speak. She said that she had read the assigned reading by bell hooks from *Teaching to Transgress*. As she spoke, her voice was shrill and loud. She said the reading infuriated her. She said the reading was so maddening that she hurled the book against the wall. Her declaration of angst and anger instantly shifted the mood of the other students in the room to one of caution and concern. I heard one student sigh in impatience not wanting to give time for this woman to speak her experience of disorientation and pain.

I paused before I answered her. I asked the woman what she had done after throwing the book against the wall.

The student said, "I walked over, picked it up, and kept reading until the end."

I shouted, "YES!"

My shout startled the class. The student's sour expression turned to wide-eyed confusion.

I said, "We must, even if it breaks a hip, wrestle with these ideas until daybreak in hopes of

receiving the blessing. And you did that! You wrestled! You went through the portal and wrestled for your blessing!” (This, for Bible reading students, was a recognition that the woman had had the experience like that of Jacob in Genesis 32:22-32.) I recognized this student’s report as an experience that had taken her into a portal.

From the tradition of my family, this student had been transported and blessed and was telling the story of learning through consternation and dismay. Some portals teach through skirmishes and brawls for understanding and growth.

Portals operate through words and beyond words, with explanations and beyond explanation, with knowledge of the possibilities and beyond our imaginations. Students yearn for vivid experiences that connect them, make them more voiced and more visible. Stepping through the portals provides an immersive experience where the intangible becomes tangible with clarity and needed purpose.

Reflection questions for communal dialogue:

- How do teachers recognize when a portal opens for learning?
- What would it take to plan or choreograph a portal to open for learning?
- If portals cannot be choreographed, what does it take to coax or summon open the doors of the portal?
- What kind of teaching stops portals, that would open, from opening?
- What do we do that closes the portals prematurely?

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