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Embracing the Imposter Within

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Blog Series: Embodied Teaching

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“What are you working on these days?” the President asked. The setting was a professional meeting. I was on the Board of Directors of my professional society, and I was at my first meeting. I discovered that we begin each meeting with this same question. Everyone went around the room to talk about the book, the essay, the project they were working on. Then, it was my turn. I changed the focus away from my own work to the work I did for our professional society. I was brief, and then the person next to me picked up the question.

The others at the table didn’t know me; didn’t know the anxiety I was feeling. Given all the work that these professors had published, many I had read, a few I regarded as superstars, I wondered what I was doing in this room. How did I get on this board in the first place? I had no brilliant book that is a must-read for anyone in the field. I had not garnered a prestigious NEH grant worth thousands to my institution. I was just one of the worker bees – chairing a committee where people often ask, “What is it your committee does?”

I am a poor kid from the projects who went to a small, little-known church-related college with an open admissions process, not Harvard (although I did live just up the street – a “townie” I am told, often with an air of condescension). My neighborhood was where the Harvard students would come when they wanted to “give back” to feel good about themselves; noblesse oblige I later learned. I was a charity case; I needed their help to succeed – at least that’s what I was told.

Yet there I was, sitting with them steering the future of the academy, or at least our part in it. Who was I to be giving suggestions? What the hell did I know? So, at first, I didn't say much for fear that I would be found out for the imposter I was.

I remember completing coursework in grad school and having an obligatory meeting with my advisor. Apparently, the department had conversations about me and my performance to date. My Ivy-League-bred advisor began the conversation, "In truth, we were not too sure what we would be getting with you given your background. We decided to take a chance, and we have been pleased with your performance." Did they really think that the preparation I received in my previous schools was that poor? I wondered if he had the same conversation with my peers, all of whom had graduated from prestigious schools, one of whom had already received a Fulbright. I knew I wasn't as polished as they were. Did they think I even belonged in the program with them? Perhaps not.

After I graduated, I was not sure I wanted to go into academia, into a profession where I felt – where I was often made to feel – inferior. I had been working as a community organizer in public housing projects like the one I had grown up in. I felt at home there; I knew their struggles and they appreciated the work I was doing.

I taught part-time jobs in prisons and in the historically black colleges in the area. Most of my students came from similar backgrounds to me and I found joy in teaching them, which was the reason I pursued a PhD in the first place.

I ultimately decided to go on the academic job market and surprisingly landed a job as a "teacher-scholar" at a small, church-related college, much like the one I had attended. My department welcomed me, offered me help as I started my teaching career. This too felt like home, but I was still nervous. The research and publishing requirements were not overly burdensome, but research and writing were not my passion, at least not in a joyful sense; writing was torture save for those times when I could write on behalf of the poor, the unemployed, or about baseball.

I poured myself into teaching. I spent countless hours researching and conversing with colleagues at the college and the academy about pedagogy and the best ways to engage students who were in my classes because they were required. I experimented with and developed some competence in active learning and nontraditional adult learning theories and practices even though I knew it limited time for other research. My students appreciated my efforts, nominating me for a teaching award. Had I "made it"? Did I now belong to the academy?

My confidence was bolstered by invitations to write about my classroom experiences, to engage in what became the scholarship of teaching and learning. My peers welcomed my contributions at professional societies' presentations and eventually through the nascent peer-reviewed publications that were emerging in the field. I added a teaching professorate, staff positions on faculty development programs, and several other teaching awards to my resume, including an academy-wide excellence-in-teaching award.

The highest achievements in the profession, however, were still measured by and given to scholarship. I could work for my professional society but could never be nominated for its presidency. My contributions to my field of religious ethics have been much less successful. My rejections outnumber my acceptances three to one for both presentations and publications. Was I really a teacher “scholar”? I had earned a place at the teacher table. But I was still a stranger at the table of scholars who gathered at the board meeting. Would this ever change? Does it really matter?

After thirty years, definitive answers to these questions elude me. The imposter syndrome still feeds on my soul, periodically eating away my confidence when a student writes he didn’t learn a thing in my class (even though he was only one of thirty-five), or my proposal or paper is rejected. But its meals are less frequent now: in part because I am a tenured full professor; mostly because I have embraced the imposter within. I have learned to use the angst it generates to propel me forward, to become the best teacher-scholar I can be, however limited – just like so many of my imposter colleagues, who I have discovered make up much of the professorate.

I still feel uncomfortable at times sitting at the boardroom table, especially with the superstars of my field. But I am no longer quiet. My experiences, my insights into the world in which we work and the struggles most of us endure, are valuable, perhaps even the norm. Imposter or not, I would be irresponsible if I kept quiet. After all, most of the higher education world is filled with “townies” like me.

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