



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Goofing-Off (w/ Purpose)

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Blog Series: Stories from the Front

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It is a challenge to do what you teach. "If you know these things happy are ye if you do them." (John 13:17, King James Version - or the version of my childhood bible study) - my grandfather's favorite verse.

I know, in order to teach well in the fall, I must replenish myself during the summer. I know because I have heard myself give this sage advice to junior scholars. Giving advice is easy - acting upon my own advice - is quite another story.

Summer is my time to rekindle and nurture those interests which might enhance my teaching. I am convinced that refilling/replenishing/rejuvenating necessitates - at least a little bit - cultivating interests which are beyond, and even other than, whatever I teach. In other words, during the summer I try to do creative activities that I cannot find time or space to do during the semester. I think of it as a kind of cross-training to enhance my teaching by doing something other than teaching, writing, researching and committee work. It's a kind of goofing-off with a purpose.

My requirement for my summer cross-training activities is that the activity must have little to do with words. I love words. I work with words all the time. I have great proficiency with the many forms of words. I think of words as the primary medium of my art. So, to strengthen my facility with words, I choose an activity which is not dependent upon or centered on words. I take a breather from words.

cross training

Last summer my cross-training efforts involved photography. I took my camera and walked around my neighborhood trying to see what there was to see; trying to photograph what I thought was interesting or lovely or ironic. Picking up my camera put me in a new conversation with friends who are professional artists. It was very satisfying. I attended a photography class and met new people who were also trying the craft of amateur camera use. I hosted a party in my home inviting my photography teacher to come and take portraits of several friends. During the many portrait sittings, I assisted my teacher and received on-the-job-training. We ended the evening with a meal and wine and laughter. My first photography party was great fun.

In years past, I have made a study of my perennial garden (flowers are perhaps my second favorite medium) and basked in the glow of my neighbors' praises as they admired all the blossoms and well-designed spaces. One neighbor asked me why I was not vegetable gardening rather than flower gardening. He said if I was doing vegetables, then he could understand all my hard work and effort. I was glad I was spending my summer nurturing beauty simply for the sake of beauty.

Once I decided that my cross-training activity was going to be a course in water aerobics at the local YWCA. All summer, as I participated with the "senior swim" class, I felt like I was in a scene from the film "Cocoon." The sessions had a certain charm as I bobbed around the pool with all the 70 years plus crowd - many of who were stronger swimmers than I.

One summer I got a massage every week for 10 weeks. It was a marvelous summer!

Another summer I attended 15 live performances in 10 weeks - drama, comedy, music - everything from NYC Broadway to free picnic-on-the-lawn Shakespeare in my little suburban town. That too was a pretty cool adventure!

I actually don't know if this cross-training thing makes me a better teacher. I do know it gives me new experiences; causes me to think in new ways, to ask different kinds of questions, to participate with people beyond my routine circle of acquaintances and friends. Surely, that must be good for my teaching.

My cross-training activities usually involve my body in ways which I do not call upon my body during the school year. I like this aspect of the cross-training the most – calling upon myself to think about my body in new ways seems important, especially given the sedentary-ness of theological teaching.

My teaching assistant, Hyun Hui Kim, conveyed in a recent conversation that she is dismayed that her time for writing her dissertation prospectus was being spliced by her responsibilities for directing and teaching in her church's vacation bible school (VBS). I encouraged her that teaching VBS at this critical time of scholarly writing was, potentially, a productive opportunity if she thought about it as cross-training. I told her to allow the aesthetic of hip-hop youth, the spontaneity of children, the conversations with parents, and the warm summer atmosphere to influence her writing and thinking. She did not seem persuaded.

By now I usually have decided upon my cross-training activity for the summer. This year, I have not as yet decided. I have been distracted by family responsibilities and by work deadlines. I have a friend who has been encouraging me to take Kung Fu lessons with him.... Hmmm mmm.

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