



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Wielding the Power of Silence

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Michael Callahan, brilliant Drew Theological School student, said in his response to a previous blog post, "Silence grants its own power to the one who wields it." I love this idea! We are crisply aware of the power of word(s), of the power of discussion, of the power of shouting, of voice, and of well-crafted articulation. We ponder the story of Genesis which depicts the marvelous power displayed by God when our world was spoken into being. We applaud the first words of a child. We look to the eloquence of preachers to beckon the opening of heaven's doors. In the midst of talk, words and eloquence, we must, as we teach, become as aware of the power of silence. Silence requires its own kind of mastery.

When I consider the wielding of the power of silence, one name comes to mind - Dr. Vincent Harding. Dr. Vincent Harding was a Historian who specialized in American religion and



Dr. Vincent Harding

society.

Along with his beloved wife, Rose Marie, he was equally an activist. From my experience of him – he was a master teacher. I came to appreciate Dr. Harding as a master teacher wielding the power of silence while he was teaching courses at Drew University Theological School on two separate occasions. Time does not permit me to give a full and proper description of Dr. Harding's ways and practices in the classroom which supported his silence approach, but in a nut-shell, here is my description.

Dr. Harding would ask the class if there were any questions about the readings. Routinely, several hands would fly up. Dr. Harding would point to a student. The student would ask his/her question. Dr. Harding would then with his eyes open, sit thinking in silence. A few seconds would go by. Then, at some point, Dr. Harding would close his eyes – continuing in silence ... for one minute, two minutes, sometimes five or ten minutes. The first time I witnessed this – I thought he had fallen asleep (my bad!). In time, Dr. Harding would emerge out of the silence, and then would respond to the student's question taking twenty, thirty, or forty minutes of uninterrupted, thoughtful consideration before answering. By mid-semester, he was answering about two questions per class session. By the end of the semester, he would ponder a question for thirty or forty minutes before responding.

During the first session of the class, students would be restless while Dr. Harding was in silence. After three or four sessions there was a shift. During the time of silence, students would still themselves; the feeling of fidgety-ness was replaced with an air of expectation and wonder. The empty silence was replaced with a full silence. When the silence was broken by Dr. Harding's words, students were focused and attentive – waiting for the engagement.

The silences of Dr. Harding, as you can imagine, drastically changed the tempo of the interactions in the classroom. A typical class discussion is "rapid fire" like tempos described musically as Prestissimo or Moderato, with only fleeting moments of pause and silence. In a usual classroom there is discomfort with silence so students and teachers work to fill every moment with some kind of noise – productive or benign. The long, long silences in Dr. Harding's class created a tempo better described as Grave or Slow, Largo or Lento. The silences, creating a new tempo, added a dimension to the session which was a kind of a spiritual intangible. Students would feel good about posing a question which evoked such consideration and thoughtfulness. Students also felt the sting, if after having posed a question, Dr. Harding answered swiftly or ignored it.

It seems to me that the power wielded by the silence in Dr. Harding's classes is a tapping into

meditative, spiritual power inextricably linked to intellectual know-how. This approach disrupts the stale caricatures of “teacher as expert” or “the sage of the stage” for a more authentic experience of wisdom and compassion. When we free ourselves from the illusion of being the “fount of information” who has to rush to answer each question upon demand, and instead use our power to deeply consider the better/best questions of our students – the ecology of the classroom shifts from a sterile place to a place of warmth and liberation.

What would it mean to give ourselves permission to contemplate and ponder while teaching? What kinds of spiritual disciplines might we incorporate into our lives which would allow for more silence in our classrooms? How might we signal to our students the importance of their questions by the thoughtfulness of our responses?

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