



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



A Strategy to Re-Humanize

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

February 16, 2016

Tags: racism | anti-racism | embodied teaching

The intent of racism is to dehumanize. Consequently, a prevalent strategy of racism is to convince caring people that non-white people are lacking - lacking in values, lacking in character, lacking in abilities, lacking in that which makes for good community, good neighbors, good teachers. Racism teaches that non-white people should be objects of suspicion and guile. What does it mean to be a Black woman professor when the uncontested lenses of racism are the basis of students' knowing about Black women? What does it mean to use theological school classrooms to re-humanize the de-humanized? While in the grips of dehumanization, what strategies might a Black professor use to re-humanize herself so that her teaching might be effective? How does one gain trust when one is summarily deemed untrustworthy?

".... like going to rat city in cheese pants!" This little known, but clever, adage describes some of my feelings about teaching as a Black woman. I, like most Black women professors, have spent significant time developing coping strategies against the racism and sexism in my own classrooms. Racism works to truncate the imagination of the racist person. It thwarts the human spirit's yearning to know and develop meaningful relationships with persons who would

be strangers. As such, it is common that stereotypes of Black women permeate the thoughts and behaviors of my students when they first meet me. As a Black woman, I can be labeled and summed-up through only a few, well accepted categories: whore, shortie, mammie, superwoman, maid, Oprah, bitch, or welfare queen. The tricky-ness of stereotypes is that they possess a modicum of truth; on any given day I am one or two of these personas, and every day I am more, much more, than all of these personas. Being a Black woman in my own classroom has meant a constant project of helping my students to see past their initial presumptions of me and risk moving into genuine relationship.

I have learned that if I am not successful in humanizing myself in the eyes of my students then my classroom becomes a battlefield where they think they are in charge of me, and where I disagree.

I have come to understand that an effective teaching strategy when the racism and sexism is thick is to find ways to expand the narrative about Black women in the knowing of my students.

My task is to add to, or create anew, narratives of Black women which re-inscribe our



Nancy Bullock Westfield

generative roles in society. I have learned that telling stories of my mother - Nancy Bullock Westfield - is a tool of my survival. It seems that narratives about family and family life are persuasive in expanding the racist/sexist imagination. Somehow, when I portray myself as someone's daughter, my students see this as an invitation into a more authentic relationship in the classroom. Sharing stories of my mother is an invitation to my students into a recognizable sacred space.

When I tell stories of my mother in my classroom I can feel my tone of voice warm, I can feel the confidence she prayed into me rekindle. When I tell stories of my mother I relax and my energy grounds. While telling a story about her, I remember her love for me, and my body eases, my facial expressions soften. I rest deeper into my own body feeling more present and summoning authenticity. The telling of these stories make me feel less alone and less vulnerable because I remember my highest values of kinship and community.



Dr. Westfield
with her mother

Of course, I do not tell stories that are sentimental, maudlin or nostalgic. The narratives I infuse are of the ways mother was a warrior, artist, activist, seer, healer, prophet, teacher, mystic, prayer warrior and political strategist.

I understand that my storytelling is an invocation of Nancy's spirit summoning her values and protection into my classroom. I understand that my mother connects me to her mother, and her mother, and her mother, and her mother, so my generational responsibility is present in my classroom - working on behalf of all of us. I suppose it is easier to trust someone who honors mother.

And so, I continue to reflect:

As engaged teachers, what is at risk by sharing personal stories in the classroom? What is the measure of this kind of pedagogical intimacy?

What would it mean if administrators recognized the divisiveness of race politics in classrooms and assisted in creating an ecology whose hallmarks are equality, reconciliation, and reparation?

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2016/02/a-strategy-to-re-humanize/>