



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## **Pedagogies of Fear How should we think about the shooting of Prof. William Klug?**

Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Union Theological Seminary, NY*

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

June 14, 2016

Tags: philosophy of teaching | classroom power and privilege | liberative pedagogy | critically reflective teaching

*In memory of William Klug and Ioan Petru Culianu*

Pedagogies are concerned with the study and practice of teaching and learning. Pedagogies are ways of organizing society as it has to do with ways of thinking and valuing life, shaping emotions, defining sense, choosing abilities, establishing relations and so on. We all know that pedagogies do not belong to classrooms only, and it is not only used or studied by teachers. Pedagogies are about life!

Paulo Freire's has taught us about "critical pedagogy" which carries an expansive sense of pedagogy that has to do with the power of knowledge and the knowledge of power. To teach is not only about teaching to read and to write but also how to read and how to write. To teach is about helping each other to find consciousness about our own freedom and the ways in which we can be controlled. To teach is about finding thinking/practical ways to tap into one's own sense of power and autonomy and possible correlations. Teaching then means that a good education is not the one that prepares somebody for an office but rather, one that prepares us all to read the world in all its power dynamics and the ways in which these powers organize, allow and/or obligate us to think, act and feel. In a nutshell, teaching should teach and learn how to live.

All of this is but a preface for us to ask: how shall we think about the shooting of Prof. William

Klug, associate professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering at University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). How are we to understand this tragic event? As a way of looking at it more closely, I want to point out how his unfortunate death can tell us some things about pedagogies of fear that are so alive today. Underneath Prof. Klug's death, we can see at least a couple of things that were not present in the reporting of the news for obvious reasons: gun control and mental health issues.

Gun control in this country is framed in ways that makes it impossible for any discussion. It doesn't matter the tragic numbers, the results of rippled violence across the country, the ongoing shootings everywhere and so on. All that is said is that if we put any form of restriction to gun control we are infringing on the Second Amendment. The need for no gun control feeds on several issues that spans from the huge economic corporate aspect of it to the individual sense of power and supposedly freedom one can have by holding a gun. From any point we take, there is one central feeling surrounding guns: fear. Fears that produce fear and respond with fear. The one who holds a gun is fearful of something, real or imaginary, and the one in front of a gun is fearful of something too. Fear has plasticity and through cases of gun violence all around, from the death of Prof. Klug to the shooting of someone at a traffic light we are all scared of what is around us. Interesting enough, while the middle class and upper class do not fear the rampant numbers of shooting and killing in poor neighborhoods all across this country because they are not affected by it, middle class fears encourage and enable this arms race.

But not only that. We just witnessed another mass murder at the Pulse nightclub in Florida with 50 people dead and 53 injured. It is one of the worst in U.S. history. This event is a result of a powerful combusive coalition of several forms, we could say pedagogies, of fear: homophobia and misogyny, domestic abuse, political propaganda, racial and gender hatred, possibly religious influences and easy gun access. The news covering of the event will surely place the cause of it on ISIS or conflating it with Islam so they can avoid naming what really makes it all possible. Again, Islamophobia will be the social fear to be felt.

Fears breed fears and fear becomes one of the major organizing emotion of our political life. Since guns are everywhere, anywhere in this country can become a deadly place, including the school. The classroom, the teacher's study, the cafeteria, or any other place inside of the school can be a deadly place. Prof Klug's study was just one of these places and he is a victim not only of his killer (who also killed himself) but a victim of a larger political atmosphere of fear. The result of this widespread violence makes us cringe and fear about our own lives all the time. Institutional fears are also everywhere breathing fearful relations anywhere we go. In Christian historical churches the fear is present. In schools fear is everywhere so schools are

becoming gated communities as well. Even to go to a chapel service in several seminaries now one needs to ask permission. And we are getting used to it: the middle-upper class modern life nowadays is about going from one gated community to another. But there is no safe place for anyone. Our open society is being closed, one gun at a time.

But this violence is not only about guns. Governments are sources of violence as well and they know how to keep social conditions underfunded, creating weary circumstances for people to live. By spreading uncertainties and abandonment hidden by a rhetoric of care, widespread budget cutting in states and cities, always for the sake of “austerity,” which is a political way to shift money to the rich, restricting life from many people in order to warrant the enjoyment of life for very few. This “there is no other way” measures depletes mostly impoverished communities from basic need social services. Help with housing, electric bills, food, and health for the poor are more and more what they don’t have.

Our modern life is often maddening and to survive nowadays is not easy, especially when we don’t have structures to help us cope with hard situations. No wonder depression is one of the plagues of our time. Fear is to be found everywhere, from national or international news to personal relationships, from losing the power of income to rampant social inequality. The combination of societal high demands of success and material possession, with lack of sources and opportunities, and immense lack of social resources, creates a combustive fuel that can create very dangerous consequences.

We have only one refuge: to fail and fail miserably with all the *blame* to be placed exclusively on the individual and not on the government and its violence against its own people. Schools are part of this scheme of things as well. Instead of an education that works to level the inequality of our students and communities, we have given ourselves to the educational regime of meritocracy where we look only at the arrival line and not to the conditions of the possibilities that made the outcomes predictable. Also, the loss of our ability to think, to desire and to basically react, takes away from us a critical mind that can name the long history of racism, takes away the strength to fight against it all. Thus, the lack of support of mental health associated with lack of pedagogies of freedom, social conditions of dignity and so on, only serves to drop us at the side of the road, where we have to deal with the idiosyncrasies of our own lives. In that place, our reaction to the killer of Prof. Klug will be: “I didn’t see anything wrong coming from him.”

Our modern state society has learned very well the tactics of pedagogies of fear. The deadly association of the elite classes ruling the political arena can only produce a state where everybody must fear. Their ideology is basic and powerful: the elites control the media and the

corridors of the Congress, which allows them to manipulate the law and the money. Moreover, with the media controlled, information is manipulated, truth hidden, and forms of meanings created as to protect the powers and embellish them with an appearance of real concern for people. Our modern state controls not only our taxes but also, how we see, perceive and engage the world. Not only *how* but also *what* and for *how long*. With this combination of power apparatus, they control the means of production and with the money of the people they empower themselves, save bankers, support wars and control the world while they control the very possibilities of what life is all about. As Pierre Clastres says, the state serves to maintain class differences.

Moreover, the pedagogies of fear are expansive and malleable. Using the law to rule for themselves and the police to protect them against the people, the *soft* scenery of George Orwell's 1984 grows all around us with the major feeling of our modern life: **fear**. The feeling of fear can save us or it can be deadly as well. When deadly, fear is the awareness of the possible destitution of ourselves in some way or entirely. So we can become paralyzed and don't fight for our rights! When the 2008 economic crises happens, no CEO or banker leading those financial institutions was put in prison (instead they received financial bonuses) while hundreds of protesters were thrown in jail. Criminalizing social organizations of protest spreads fear of fighting for what is just and right. With our economic and workers rights being slowly and surely taken away from all of us, with the consequent denial of our full dignity as human beings, we also suffer intertwined forms of symbolic and real punishment if we protest about injustices.

But those who control the pedagogies of fear know that the best way to reinforce fear is when someone who fears responds with another form of fear. When we are fearful we instinctively search for places to hide and people to protect us. It is when the government becomes our refugee that the state has the chance to show us why we need the state and the police. Flooding the UCLA building with hundreds of police officers after the death of Prof. Klug, the state gives us the sense that they are there to protect us, which serves to confirm that the increased budget on police and militarism is indeed very necessary, even if at the expense of education, health or other social care demand. However, the state is really more interested in policing us than protecting us, otherwise social policies of care, protection and support for people would be fostered and not cut. Pedagogies of freedom can counter pedagogies of fear.

The death of that precious teacher cannot be redeemed. But perhaps it can help us, teachers, to see our larger world under ideological domination. Perhaps it can help us see how this death shows the ways in which we are all caught up in pedagogical systems of fear that perpetuates

insecurity. In this atmosphere of fear, we are not clearly told but are softly encouraged to *learn* and *relearn* to fear without knowing that it is fear. We are supposed to *think* in terms that are insular to our own fields in order to protect ourselves. We are supposed to *reflect* only upon what is given to us and by people who think like us. And we are also expected to *evaluate* violence as isolated cases often disassociated from the massive strategy of pedagogies of fear. These pedagogies are used to slowly make us think that these kinds of violence are unfortunately normalized forms of attack that we need to respond locally, without ever properly responding to it socially, hoping it will never happen to us.

Fear has many tricky names and social processes. We fear that an “outside attack” can come inside of the school. But we fear the inside of institutions and what it can do to us as well. We are taught to fear relations with students, faculty, board, deans and so on. The board, also fearful, tries to navigate the market, and whispers that uncertainties are everywhere. We fear speaking up! We fear saying what we believe. We fear doing something that is a little off the norm. We fear writing some things. We fear retaliation. We fear the disenfranchising of our programs of ideas. We fear losing our jobs. We fear not keeping our dean or president happy. We fear saying something wrong. We fear standing with the wrong group. We fear not to have a proper scholarship. We fear and in our fears we silence ourselves and others.

It is also often true that our students fear us, fear the courses, fear the readings, fear the assignments, fear not being able to do it, fear it is beyond their capacities, fear being flunked, fear not having enough time to read while they cope with a thousand other things. Fear failing, not only themselves, but their families and religious or other communities. Fear of not finding jobs after school and not being able to pay their debts. They fear too!

As we all know, pedagogies of fear are also about colonizing minds and spirits, bodies and body politics! Pedagogies of fear are forms of colonization that continue to challenge us, ways to dismantle our forms of psychological and bodily resistance in order to maintain the structure, power and meaning of the master’s house. Four hundred years of elite white domination continues to this day. They taught us to fear then, they continue to teach us to fear now. Some tactics and strategies have changed, some are still the same, but all have become way more complex.

Our task as teachers is to be aware of these pedagogies of fear and not to lose our ability to see these ideologies in place. Instead of pedagogies of fear, our task is to use pedagogies of liberation that can help our students to feel something else rather than fear. Pedagogies of liberation can create conditions for our students to continue to live, survive and create something new; pedagogies of liberation also for the schools to work from places of strength

and mission that are not tied to commodity and profit, so that these institutions can become places that breed new forms of life and freedom; pedagogies of liberation can work from positive potencies, affecting the world so we can all experience other and new forms of life.

In this way, our critical pedagogies must venture into that which is not here yet, into that which we do not know yet. In this process we can create conditions of the possibilities for new forms of life to arrive and be experienced. Our challenge is to teach in the midst of many fears and beyond these fears that keeps crippling our feelings, our trust, our self-esteem, our ability to see, to relate, to perceive and to feel differently. We must teach about feelings that can help us live and practice other forms of life. Against colonizing pedagogies of fear, we must go on shifting forms of seeing, perceiving, receiving, and sensing the world around us.

As a Christian, this sacred text always challenges me: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that...”

... we can create a just world! So that we can become free! So that we shall not fear anymore!

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2016/06/pedagogies-of-fear-how-should-we-think-about-the-shooting-of-prof-william-klug-6/>