



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Framing the Academic Year

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Blog Series: Stories from the Front

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Tags: philosophy of teaching | engaged teaching | course design | balancing teaching and research

Editor's note: Today's blog is Eric's final individual entry for this year of Stories from the Front (of the Classroom). Look for our final collaborative post on Tuesday May 19.

One of the things I love most about teaching is the rhythm of the academic year: the excitement of the fall, the relief of the spring after a long winter, the joy and pomp of commencement, the interlude of summer. There is something familiar, something energizing about these cycles of renewal and opportunity.

Beyond these regular rhythms, however, we sometimes encounter moments that disrupt or sharpen these chronological markers. These rhythms are sometimes memorably framed by events going on outside of the classroom.

I remember being a student during the tragic springs of 1995 (the OKC bombing) and 1999 (Columbine). In both cases, events that disrupted those closing days of the spring semesters were reminders of how violently, how senselessly tragedy can strike. In both cases, I was already contemplating a languid summer only to be made that much more aware of a wider world.

I began my seminary education in the fall of 2001. That is, I began studying for a life of service



Photo by Eric Barreto

to God and God's church in the shadow of the attacks of 9/11. The opening chapel service during our orientation week proved even more poignant than I could have imagined. We were already energized by this critical first step in fulfilling a call we felt into ministry. We were already anxious about the challenge of graduate theological education. We were already entering seminary with a mix of confidence and questioning, certainty and doubt. But we felt as if the world had shifted under our feet. All at once, our work seemed that much more vital in a world seemingly being torn apart at its seams.

So too, I will remember this academic year due to the opening frame of Ferguson and the closing frame of the unrest we have witnessed recently in Baltimore. Questions of race and justice have been particularly inescapable over the last year. The dark legacies of a history punctuated by the cruelty of slavery and the dehumanization of Jim Crow have repeatedly shaped my teaching in both visible and invisible ways, particularly this last year. These cases and protests have been ever present in my thinking, my teaching, my writing, and my service to my institution and the wider church.

And why? Because I teach, not just because I love a life of learning and not just because I love the spark of insight my students bring to our conversation, but because teaching matters deeply.

In the blog posts I've written over the last year, I've rediscovered that the scholarly life for me has at least two particularly bright spots. First, our teaching can play a small but profoundly important role in the work of justice in the world. When we discuss religion in all its various dimensions, we, the teachers of religion and theology, get to shape leaders and citizens who can bear their faith with conviction and grace, passion and generosity. Our students can live and/or observe lives of faith with hope and expectation and a critical eye. This is important work.



*"Commencement 2009" by The University of the South,
<https://flic.kr/p/6o7VwL>*

Second, the vocation of scholarship allows us to work with smart, interesting, thoughtful people. My students teach me again and again. My colleagues collaborate together in inspiring ways. And sometimes we meet and work with new colleagues and develop even more widespread networks of connection and belonging. Over the last year, my friends Kate Blanchard and Roger Nam have been editors of my writing. They have helped hone my arguments. But most of all they have been companions during a year both fruitful and frustrating.

And so this year is framed for me by Ferguson and Baltimore, events which compelled me to teach in such a way that will matter well after grades are submitted and diplomas are framed. This year was also framed for me by the power of collaboration with talented colleagues, by the transformative power of smart people who will sharpen your work and help give you the confidence to speak boldly about that which matters most. This is the essence of our vocation as teachers, and what a gift it is.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2015/05/framing-the-academic-year/>