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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Who's the Adult Here? (Or, Reality Still Bites)

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It's a new year! Perhaps some of you, like me, have just spent a large chunk of time celebrating a holiday (or two) with your families of origin. And perhaps some of you, like me, have recently been pondering the distinct and all-encompassing weirdness that is being middle-aged in your parents' home.

I first left home for college in the late 80s, and except for a brief post-graduation stint as a



*"Three generations of cray-cray.
Analyze if you dare."*

Generation X stereotype, during which I moved back in with my parents and worked a retail job, I've technically been an adult for quite some time. Yet within moments of walking through

my parents' door I can feel myself turning back into a petulant teenager, ready to pounce on any perceived criticism or parental overreach. Add a sibling, my spouse, and a few more relatives to the mix and my inner transformation to Kardashian-style stupidity is complete. What is this strange power they have over me?

(I should mention that all of my family members are remarkably loving, generous, and jolly – “putting the fun in dysfunctional,” as they say. They are, in other words, un-interested in such power and entirely undeserving of this throw-back in my attitude.)

Never mind that there are children around, before whom I am expected to act like mother/aunt. It's possible that from their small perspective – given my power over them – I do indeed seem like an adult when I behave as I do. But I know in my heart of hearts that I am really only a wrinkled adolescent. All of life is basically glorified role-playing, and when I'm with my family the role I often play is one that was mapped out decades ago.

Now a new semester is upon me and I'm supposed to bounce back. Suddenly I am the adult in the room, the one with most of the power. I am the person who tells students what to read, how to write, and, let's be honest, what to think (*no, you are not allowed to say all Buddhists are spiritual or all Muslims are violent or Jesus was Christian*). It doesn't really matter how nice I try to be; in a system based on grades, students who enroll in my courses – technically adults themselves – have to do more or less what I tell them or face the consequences.

This makes me wonder: what role do I play in my students' imaginations? Do I remind them of their mom, their coach, their youth pastor? (I'm pretty sure it's not their youth pastor but you never know.) For that matter, what role do I play in my colleagues' imaginations? Am I their bossy big sister, their daughter, or perhaps a childhood friend? There's no way to know, of course, since most of us are unaware of the cast of characters who lie deep in our psyches.

The lesson I take from this is to tread lightly, to be gentle with the folks around me – both those who are subject to my power and those who are not. I'm never proud of myself when I revert to my childhood role, and yet I can't always help it. It seems likely that others, if they are the reflective sort, are just as confused about why they act the way they do.

What does it mean to you, as a teacher, to be the adult in the room?

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