



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Most Wonderful Time of Year?

Eric D. Barreto, *Princeton Theological Seminary (formerly at Luther Seminary)*

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

December 30, 2014

Tags: vocation of teaching | faculty well-being

I love the holiday season, but I think I loved it more as a student than as a teacher.

The Christmas season was usually a clear barrier, a distinct break. Finals were done. There was no more work to do. The weeks of Christmas and New Year's were a time to rest and remember what life outside of the classroom was like.

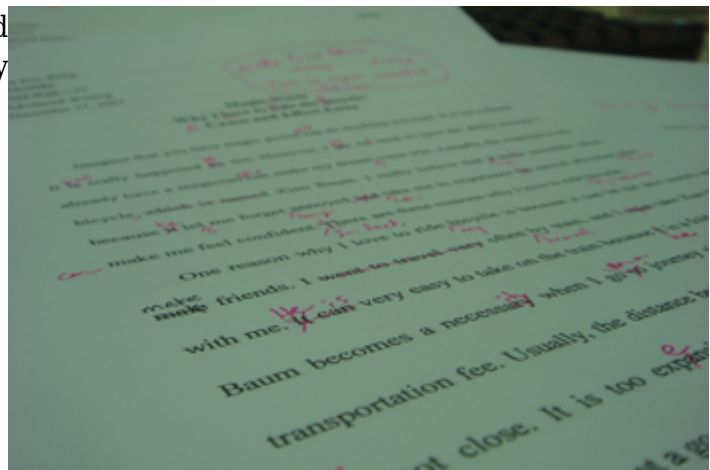
Remember what life outside of the classroom was like?



"Christmas Vacation" by 11Jewels
<https://flic.kr/p/qrjJcH>

The Christmas season is still a break of sorts, at least from the front of the classroom. My Facebook feed lights up with laments about plagiarism and students who appear not to have listened to a word we spoke or even bothered to read the syllabus. It then lights up again with shouts of acclamation, both when students do well and learn something along the way but also when the grades are finally in and the fall semester has drawn to a close. During these times of grading and lament, the Twitter handle @BibleStdntsSay (<https://twitter.com/biblestdntssay>) helps provide some levity and reminds me that I'm not alone.

When at my best, I get my grades done by the time I'm wrapping presents or at least when Santa shows up at my house. But this year—ahem, not for the first time—I wasn't quite done with my grading. The fall semester seems to extend inexorably beyond some indistinct horizon. If I'm not done by the time Christmas hits, the end just seems to extend beyond my imagination.



"Grading Essays" by lawrance & amanda wu
<https://flic.kr/p/4i7BSu>

Add to my holiday to-do list the copy edits of a volume I edited, some other short pieces I committed to write, and the big projects that are always looming over me, (in addition to this particular piece which I'm writing on a plane Christmas Day as we head to a family

celebration!), Christmas does not feel like much of a break quite yet.

The rhythms of the academic year are as freeing as they are constricting. As we gain freedom and flexibility, we pay for it in the fervor and rush of deadlines that always seems to crop up. In the midst of all this, balance is fleeting. Balance between family and vocation, teaching and scholarship, work and rest can seem like a dream.

So, the most wonderful time of the year? Yes and no. The labor of grading is burdensome, certainly, but also provides the evidence of a semester's work well done. The pressure of deadlines emerge again even as we gain a bit of time and space to pay attention to long-neglected projects. And yes, after a long semester, we can finally catch up on sleep or TV or perhaps both.

I do wonder how we can better accommodate our habits and practices to the rhythm of the semester. Are there ways that breaks can actually be breaks and not just interludes for catching up? Can we strike *a balance of some kind* between the hubbub of the semester and the lulls of summer and winter breaks? Can the teaching life consist of consistent flows of work and study and rest instead of radical peaks and valleys? Or is this the life we have chosen?

What do you think? How does the rhythm of semester work and not work for you?

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2014/12/the-most-wonderful-time-of-year/>