

Reflective Teaching

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When A Student Dies

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Blog Series: Stories from the Front

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Tags: teaching for transformation | difficult conversations | vocation of teaching

I remember meeting Griffin Huber on the first day of the Fall 2012 semester in my undergraduate New Testament Intro class. Like many students, he took the class both because he was eager to study the Bible and because it fulfilled a general education requirement. He would successfully finish my course and go on to graduate from George Fox University in May 2014. Four months later, Griffin went on a run, suffered a heart attack and passed away.

He was 22 years old.

You may expect me to say that Griffin was an extraordinary student, and you are right! Consider this: he loved, studied, and made movies. When he was traveling in New Zealand on a study abroad trip, he managed to find his way onto the set of *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, where he met Peter Jackson, Philippa Boyens, Ian MacKellen and Richard Armitage. He even took a photo holding Eowyn's actual sword and Ms. Boyens' Oscar. Our Department of Cinema Media Communications should have graduated him as valedictorian on the spot!



Photo Credit: Flickr Auntie P

Sometime after he returned, I ran into him on campus and gently teased him about “hanging with Gandalf” over summer vacation. He sheepishly smiled as we passed by each other. That was our last interaction.

I found out about Griffin's passing through social media. Like many of my colleagues, I was in complete shock. After I emailed my two teaching assistants from that class to inform them, I instinctively scanned *The Oregonian*, George Fox's Facebook page and Twitter for any additional news. Although I am presently many miles away from my home institution, I felt a connection with my GFU community, as they shared their sadness through social media. I learned more about my student in the remembrances his friends shared on social media than I did during the 15 weeks of my class.

In the wake of Griffin's death, I re-read some of his papers from that semester and it helped me to process his passing. By definition, our job is to teach our students theology and religion. But these papers remind me that our call to teaching goes much deeper. There is something special about the critical teaching of religion. Perhaps by using actual sacred texts as textbooks, we foster a classroom experience that transcends cognition, but touches directly upon values that guide students' lives. These experiences can be enhanced by the openly confessional nature of many of our institutions that allows us to invest in our students in these special ways.

Regardless, we all know that the present climate for religious and theological education is harsh, to say the least. Financial viability of theological education is a formidable challenge. At some institutions, power struggles over religious ideologies can undermine academic freedom. For many adjuncts, teaching is essentially pro-bono work with low pay, lackluster support and no job security.



Photo Credit: Pete at Flickr

On top of all of this, we face constant deadlines, committee assignments, writing duties and endless grading.

I acknowledge all of these issues as real and pressing. We cannot discard them, but I am asking you to set them aside for just a brief epilogue on this tragedy at George Fox University. At Griffin's memorial service, his grieving parents chose to publically read some of his papers from his religious studies classes. Of all the aspects of his wonderfully rich life, it was decided that Griffin's thoughtful reflections on the divine could genuinely embody the spirit of this young man, that this would be the best way for his loved ones to remember him. Griffin's memorial celebration centered on his intellectual and formative growth, which was at least partially nurtured through his coursework in his religion classes.

My dear colleagues, remember that we have a wonderful vocational task to lead our students to critically explore religion with all its inspiration, meaning and controversies. It is a gift that we have been given. And it matters.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2014/10/when-a-student-dies/>