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Integrity and Passion in Teaching

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In September, 1976 I arrived at the Lutheran Theological Seminary (LTS) in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, as a young woman embarking on an experience of theological education. I had grown up in the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, active at both the congregational and district levels. Earlier, in confirmation, I had felt a desire for ordained ministry but was told that this was not possible because I was female. However, the church continued to be a place of support and encouragement for me. This resulted in my applying to LTS to further my education with hopes of working in the area of pastoral care.

My four years at LTS were very important formative years both in preparation for my future ministries but also in providing an environment where my faith could deepen and mature. The professors, staff and student community all contributed to my experience at LTS. However, Dr. Erwin Buck was particularly supportive, encouraging and welcoming of my dropping in to his office for conversation. This was a tumultuous time both in the broader church and the seminary. The decision to ordain women had been recently passed at national church conventions in the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCC). As one of the early women at seminary, I experienced a lot of turbulence as I was discerning God's call for my ministry. I remain grateful for Dr. Buck's openness and support for me personally but even more for his faithful witness to the Gospel and his love for God's church. To experience his passion and integrity in class, in his preaching and in his interactions with students and faculty, modeled for me what it means to answer God's call to be a person of faith in this world. His example has helped me over the years find the courage to live with integrity and passion. Hence, the title of this essay, *Integrity and Passion in Teaching*.

Most of us can identify a teacher in our lives who had a significant influence on us. It might have been a parent or grandparent, a Sunday School teacher, confirmation pastor, or a

university or seminary professor. These individuals have impacted us in ways that are far reaching, beyond the class(es) or experience(s) we may have had with them.

What makes a good teacher good? Parker Palmer observes that good teachers seem to share one trait: a strong sense of identity infuses their work. “‘Dr. A. is really there when she teaches’ or ‘Mr. B has such enthusiasm for the subject.’”¹ He notes that at times it is not easy to describe what makes a good teacher but it is easier to describe a bad teacher. Palmer notes one student’s description of such teachers as, “their words float somewhere in front of their faces, like balloon speech in cartoons.”² That image captures it. “Bad” teachers keep themselves separate from the subjects they are teaching and as a result separate themselves from their students. “Good” teachers are able to bring self, subject and student together and weave them “into the fabric of life.”³ When teachers become separate then, it is “as if” they are the teacher. Their words separated from themselves become a caricature of themselves.

“All real living is meeting,” said Martin Buber and teaching is endless meeting.⁴ To choose to stay open to all these meetings is a challenging task. One response to this challenge is to create an artificial separation between ourselves and the practice of teaching. This split that initially is made to protect ourselves from the inherent vulnerability of teaching is supported and encouraged by an academic culture that mistrusts “truth” that is personal. Palmer contends that though the academic world “claims to value multiple ways of knowing, it tends to honor one — an ‘objective way’ of knowing that takes us into the ‘real’ world by taking us out of ourselves.”⁵ When teachers distance themselves from students, subject and self in order to cope with their own vulnerability, they forget that in isolating themselves, life becomes more precarious. To not be present is a dangerous choice.

However, if teachers are able to remain aware of their own vulnerability and that of the student, then there are various possibilities for response. Van Manen describes these responses using the term “tact.” The tactful person meets another “with a touch, with a word, with a gesture, with an action, with the eyes, with silence.”⁶ Tact is derived etymologically from the Latin *tactus* which means touch or feeling. Later, tact began to also mean a sense of discernment or diplomacy. The word intact, which comes from the

same root word, indicates something that is untouched especially by anything that harms or diminishes.⁷ Tact implies more than a simple desire or ability to get along with others. Rather it implies interpersonal abilities that are especially important for the pedagogical relationship. Tact is not simply a feeling or a skill that can be learned. However, tact can be nurtured through the process of human growth, development, and education.

Tact is mediated through speech which either prevents or supports a sense of being connected with one another. The tactful voice makes contact through speech. However, silence is another powerful way in which tact is mediated. Silence can function in a variety of ways. Silence can communicate an experience of being together where words would disrupt. Silence can also create an open and expectant space for students to enter when ready. There is also the silence of the listening ear in which there is complete attentiveness to hear what the student feels is important to communicate.

Tact is also mediated through the eyes. Teacher and student both communicate with each other through their facial expressions and eyes. We experience the presence of an other through the eyes of the other.

Humans are also present to each other through their bodies. Van Manen notes that “word is gesture, and gesture is word.”⁸ Through gestural language a shared reality is shaped. Teachers create an atmosphere not only by what they say or do but also in the way in which they are physically present to their students.

While etymologically tact suggests physical touch, it also includes an ambiguous sense of an influence or effect that one person has on another that is not physical. Tact is not intrusive or aggressive and often involves a holding back.

Tact includes a complex collection of qualitative, abilities, and competencies. Van Manen notes a number of qualities of the tactful person:

First a tactful person has the sensitive ability to interpret inner thoughts, understandings, feelings, and desires from indirect clues such as gestures, demeanour, expression and body language Secondly, tact consists in the ability to interpret the psychological and social significance of the features of this inner life Third, a person with tact appears to have a fine sense of standards, limits,

and balance that makes it possible to know almost automatically how far to enter into a situation and what distance to keep in individual circumstances. Finally, tact seems characterized by moral intuitiveness. A person with tact is able to sense the right thing to do.⁹

Tact is “the expression of thoughtfulness.”¹⁰ The whole being of the individual is involved as it requires an active sensitivity toward the lived experience of the other and recognition of what is unique for this person. Van Manen concludes:

To exercise tact means to *see* a situation calling for sensitivity, to *understand* the meaning of what is seen, to *sense* the *significance* of this situation, to *know how and what to do*, and to actually *do* something right. To act tactfully may imply all these and yet tactful action is instantaneous.¹¹

This is the art of teaching.

The Teachable Moment

It is not possible to plan a tactful action or response. However, it can be realized in unexpected or unpredictable situations. While it is not possible to plan for such situations, it is possible to prepare for them. This is a reminder of the musical practice of improvisation. When musicians improvise together they respond not only to each other but also to whatever calls them in that experience. All of the previous hours of practice and playing are brought into the experience of improvisation in ways that could never be fully understood or anticipated. Since there are never two moments in time that are exactly alike, there can never be an exact repetition. So it is in the pedagogical relationship. It is the unstable, variable moments that particularly require a tactful response in teaching. These are not accidents but rather an essential and integral part of teaching. While we may not be able to plan a specific response to these, all of the teacher’s education, life experience and disciplined sensitivities are resources for responding in a tactful manner.

Pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact are the skills that enable a teacher to respond in an improvisational manner in educational situations that are continually changing. These situations are constantly changing because the students are never the same; the teacher is never the same; and the context is never the same. The teacher is continually challenged to recognize the pedagogical

possibilities as they are presented in ordinary events and to utilize these for significant learning instances. This is what tact can offer teaching.

As was noted earlier, it is not possible to predict when learning will occur. Traditionally, knowledge has tended to be seen as if it were an object. As an object then, it was believed that knowledge could be manipulated, stored, and grasped. However, Davis and Sumara suggest that instead of viewing knowledge as an object, knowledge should be understood as action or “better yet knowledge-as- (inter)action.”¹² Following Gadamer’s understanding that a conversation cannot be predetermined but rather emerges in the process of the conversation, Davis and Sumara argue that understanding emerges in a similar fashion.¹³ In the unpredictable process of a conversation each participant is affected in ways that were not foreseen at the beginning. Consequently, our understandings of the world and our self-identity are recast.

These ideas are not new and have been influenced by ecological theorists who have studied the relationships of organisms to one another. The important implication for education is recognizing that our tendency to see the learner as situated within a particular context is limiting. However, if we can recognize the learner as part of the context then the learner learns as the context changes and the reverse is true; as the context changes so does the identity of the learner. From this viewpoint, then, everything in the teaching/learning environment is intricately, ecologically, and complexly related.

Davis and Samara consider that “learning then, is ‘occasioned’ rather than ‘caused’ that is, we regard student learning as dependent on, but not determined by, the teaching.”¹⁴ Since understandings are “situated in” and “co-emerge” in complex webs of experience, it is not possible to identify the causes of any particular action. This does not mean that deliberate efforts to teach are not of use but rather that the teacher’s activity matters to the extent that it occasions action. The teacher participates in but does not determine the student’s learning.

Ted Aoki describes the pedagogical relationship as a “living in tensionality.” This tensionality emerges from “in-dwelling” in a space between two curricula worlds: “the worlds of curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived.”¹⁵ As a developing teacher I was aware of the structure of a class and various ways of presenting the material

and inviting discussion. Initially, I responded to the teaching-learning situation in an instrumental manner, focussed on “doing.” I was ignoring the most important resource I could offer: that of my self and my ability to offer students a place where they could recognize and access the many resources that were available for their learning. As I was able to hold open this space, then both the student and I began to have a different experience than what I have previously known. Aoki reminds us “that there is a forgetfulness that teaching is fundamentally a mode of being.”¹⁶

The Pedagogical Relationship

As a student, it was important for me to have a mentor, to observe and experience someone who was passionate about what he taught and also strove to live it with integrity. I learned by example what it meant to teach and preach the faith in an embodied way. This hearkens back to Palmer’s emphasis on the integrity of the teacher. It is not only what we teach but who we are that is significant in the student’s learning process. Buber states it this way,

Only in his [*sic*] whole being, in all his spontaneity can the educator truly affect the whole being of his pupil. For educating characters you do not need moral genius, but you do need a man who is wholly alive and able to communicate himself directly to his fellow beings. His aliveness streams out to them and affects them most strongly and purely when he has not thought of affecting them.¹⁷

When he [she] has not thought of affecting them. What an interesting statement! Often teaching is thought of as purposefully trying to influence or affect the student in a particular way. Isn’t it the teacher’s job to get the student to learn a particular concept or conform to a certain way of being in the world? Yet, if we reflect on those teachers who were influential in our lives, they seem to have been more focused on the experience of learning and less on the outcome. How does the pedagogical relationship support this kind of learning?

Over the years I have thought about the pedagogical relationship using the image of a railroad bridge. I am referring to the type of bridge that spans a gorge and is supported by many cross trestles. As a class begins, the student and teacher are on opposite sides of the gorge. On the first day of class, only the student’s registration in the course and the teacher’s commitment to teach connects the two. If the

teacher has a reputation of being a good teacher, this may also contribute to the initial willingness of the student to enter the relationship with the teacher. However, as the initial and subsequent classes progress there is the potential for putting more trestles into place.

The trestles represent a number of dynamic factors within the pedagogical relationship and are constructed by teacher, student and classroom peers. In the beginning, the teacher sets the structure of the class, provides input, invites and responds to questions, facilitates discussion, etc. While these classroom activities proceed there is the possibility of further trestles being placed under the pedagogical relationship. This occurs when students feel respected and understood and the classroom environment is increasingly a “safe” place to ask and explore questions and ideas. As the class proceeds, students experience the pedagogical relationship as one that is able to “hold” their questions and concerns. As noted earlier, this is based on a number of things: words both spoken and unspoken, the body, tone of voice, eye contact, the internal physical and emotional response of the teacher, the teacher’s hunches etc.

Of course, each student and, for that matter, each class, will construct these trestles differently. Attending to the various factors that individual students and classes bring will facilitate the building of a pedagogical bridge that will be able to hold the learning that needs to happen for an individual student. These trestles are constructed by “present” reflection on what is occurring within the pedagogical relationship at any given moment. The reflection is facilitated by attending to the current lived experience of the individual, the class and the pedagogical relationship. Certainly, there are many distractions that can draw attention away from this kind of attending: distractions with self, distractions outside the pedagogical relationship, or distractions in the environment. The teacher’s own physical and emotional self-awareness can be a resource in recognizing such distractions and finding tactful ways to respond.

In the context of theological education we often speak of the process of learning involving a sense of *dislocation*. This is the inherent vulnerability that is a part of learning. As the student engages new ideas, inevitably some of the previously held beliefs will be challenged. Sometimes these challenges are welcomed as the student is excited about the new possibilities being presented. However, other

times students resist and resent such challenges and respond defensively, even angrily, to this experience of dislocation. This experience of dislocation can feel like swinging out on one rope, needing to let go to catch another one and feeling the brief but terrifying gap in between. The strength of the pedagogical relationship (how many trestles have been placed under the pedagogical bridge) will play an important role in the student's ability to live the experience of dislocation. Again, if we recognize that the student is the determiner of what is learned then the experience of dislocation is not about prescribing the outcome but enabling them to encounter new ideas and learn what is important for them at this given moment.

The classroom experience with Dr. Erwin Buck was crucial in helping me learn in the midst of my sense of dislocation at seminary. I came to seminary with a fairly conservative understanding of Scripture and Lutheranism. Initially, I felt much challenged by what I was learning. There were many questions and heated discussions in class but I observed Buck engaging the conversation in a manner that recognized how important these were to each of us. Through these discussions, the "bridge" was strengthened for me. This allowed me to be open to the learning process, trusting that it was safe and even exciting to learn in this way.

This excitement and openness to learn has stayed with me. As a parish pastor, pastoral counsellor, and seminary professor I continue to be curious about and fascinated by the possibilities for learning that my students offer. There is still vulnerability in learning for both me and the students, sometimes greater, other times less. What I learned as a result of Buck's passion and integrity is that the inherent vulnerability in learning does not need to be feared and is, in fact, the "teachable/learnable moment."

Thank you Erwin, for you have taught with integrity and passion. I thank God for you and for your many contributions to the life of God's church.

Notes

- ¹ Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), p. 10.
- ² Ibid.

- 3 Ibid., p. 11.
- 4 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), p. xiv.
- 5 Palmer, p. 18.
- 6 M. Van Manen, *The Tact of Teaching: The Meaning of Pedagogical Thoughtfulness* (London: Althouse Press, 1991), p. 143.
- 7 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>> (accessed 1 September 2008).
- 8 Van Manen, p. 182.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 125-26.
- 10 Ibid., p. 146.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 B. Davis and D. Sumara, "Cognition, Complexity and Teacher Education," *Harvard Educational Review* 67(1) (1997): 105-125.
- 13 Ibid. Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. & ed. David E. Linge (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).
- 14 Davis and Sumara: 6.
- 15 T. Aoki, "Spinning Inspired Images in the Midst of Planned and Live(d) Curricula," *FINE: Journal of the Fine Arts Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association* (Fall, 1996): 7-14.
- 16 Ibid.: 7.
- 17 Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1947), p. 124.