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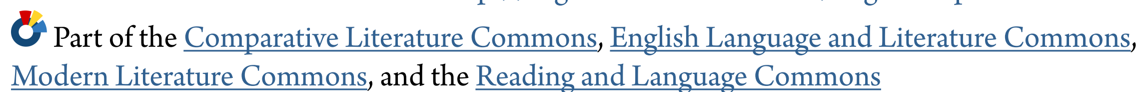

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Liberation Theology and Liberatory Pedagogies: Renewing the Dialogue

Shari J. Stenberg

In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* column, Stanley Fish describes a phone call he received after the death of Jacques Derrida from a reporter who was curious as to what would succeed high theory as the "center of energy in the academy."

"I answered like a shot," Fish writes, "religion" (1).

For many, Fish's prophecy might create a feeling of uneasiness; after all, in academic culture, religious ideologies are often considered hindrances to—not vehicles for—critical thought. This feeling may be especially true in regard to Christianity, which is often conflated with conservative politics and fundamentalism both in and outside of the academy. But those of us who espouse critical pedagogy and embrace Paulo Freire's visions of praxis and conscientization work out of a tradition, often unknowingly, with deep ties to religious faith.

While many are familiar with Freire's roots in Marxism, the fact that his vision relies as much upon Catholicism and liberation theology is often overlooked in critical pedagogy discourse (Daniell; Bizzell; Goodburn). Liberation theology calls Christians from all social classes to enact the vision of the gospels in order to end oppressive class structures (Perkins 590). While this goal is certainly not inconsistent with those of leftist academics, the source—the Christian gospels—may mark it as suspect. Consequently, Priscilla Perkins argues, many U.S. leftist academics see "Freire's own critical Catholicism [. . .] in vestigial terms, at best the political equivalent of tonsils, at worst a birthmark that disfigured and obscured his theories" (590).

But there are good reasons for remembering the tradition of liberation theology in Freire's work and for renewing the ties between liberation theology and

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liberatory pedagogies. For instance, those of us committed to critical education work to value students as complex subjects whose social locations are deserving of study and inquiry. For many of our students, spiritual identity is the most defining component of their social locations. As George Marsden contends, "[R]eligious beliefs [. . .] typically involve affirmations about reality and values that are more specific and far-ranging than beliefs inherent to gender, race, ethnicity, or class" (*Outrageous* 5). If we are to truly begin where students are, it makes sense to discover ways to value and build upon students' faith-based knowledge, rather than asking them to overcome these backgrounds.

Moreover, as Fish suggests, it is no longer possible—in a time when religion is a growing cultural force rousing social action—for academics "to regard [those with religions convictions] as quaintly pre-modern or as the needy recipients of our saving (an ironic word) wisdom" (1). We had better be ready, he warns, to deal with those who seek knowledge, guidance, and inspiration through religion.

Scholars in English studies such as Amy Goodburn, Lizabeth Rand, Beth Daniell, and Perkins have already begun the work of meshing the intellectual and spiritual, arguing that critical writing teachers might best serve their religious students by locating commonalities among religious and critical projects. Rand reminds us, for instance, that "[r]eligion, rightfully understood, is a subversive force" (361), while Goodburn emphasizes that the "language of social critique" (334) is a common thread between the discourses of both critical pedagogy and (even fundamentalist) religions. I further contend that our potential for achieving the goals of critical pedagogy would be enriched if we had a fuller understanding of the ties between critical pedagogy and Christian liberation theology, as well as the consequences of their segregation in both U.S. critical pedagogy discourse and in our own classrooms.

Liberation Theology and Christianity

Because Christianity is such a vexed term, it is important to unpack its use in the context of Freire's work: the prophetic tradition of liberation theology in the Latin American Christian Church. This tradition, exemplified in the Exodus event of the Old Testament, insists that God is on the side of the oppressed. While the emergence of liberation theology is typically traced to the 1960s, theologian Robert McAfee Brown locates its beginning as early as the sixteenth century, when priests such as Spaniard Bartolomé de Las Casas used the gospels to denounce colonization of the Amerindians by the Spanish in Latin America. This movement stood in contrast to the dominant position of the church, which placated the masses by promising the poor "an eternal reward in heaven if they made no trouble on earth" (4).

Even as overt colonization in Latin America ended in the nineteenth century, when the indigenous populations of Latin America revolted against European rule,

Europe maintained economic control over Latin America, resulting in dramatic distinctions between rich and poor (Brown). As life became increasingly intolerable for the poor, more priests began to alter their positions, concluding that the biblical message mandates work alongside the poor to end oppression. This change was amplified by the fact that the Bible became accessible to Latin American Catholics during the second half of the twentieth century, helping to shift the focus of Christian instruction from Mass and private devotion to collective study of the Bible (6). "[W]hen people began to study [the Bible] together," Brown writes, "surprise followed surprise." Through their collective readings, the message of acquiescence was rewritten as one of transformation. The church had "changed sides," from privileging the rich to preaching liberation for the oppressed (6–7).

This movement was eventually supported by outside forces as well, as is evident in documents produced by the Second Vatican Council in 1962–65 and the Medellin Conference in 1968. Freire strongly influenced the Medellin education document, in which the church "chose to stand with the oppressed, attacked the political and economic structures of Latin America as purveyors of injustice, pointed out the unjust dependency of Latin America on outside powers, and called for radical change across the continent" (Brown 13; Lange; Paiva). From these efforts on behalf of social justice emerged a new viewpoint, which Gustavo Gutiérrez, who is often deemed the father of the movement, called "a theology of liberation" (Brown 13).

As theologian Peter Jarvis explains it, liberation theology is built upon the "strong theological conviction that the world had been deliberately created in an incomplete manner and that it was the destiny of humankind to join with the creator in completing the process and building a world that was both just and free" (31). In other words, rather than assume a predetermined history, liberation theologians believe that humans abide by free will and are responsible to work with God to create a just and equitable world. Consequently, liberation theology's interest in resurrection is not on the afterlife, but, as Dorothee Soelle describes so eloquently, on "life *before* death for all human beings" (qtd. in Welch 34; emphasis added).

At the core of liberation theology is the belief that the gospel grants epistemic privilege to the oppressed. Consequently, according to theologian Sharon Welch, liberation theologians interpret scriptural traditions from the perspective of those "who have not yet named the world—the marginal, the silenced, the defeated" (34). They also strive, as Gutiérrez points out, to cure "historical amnesia" by giving voice to the subversive "memory of the poor" (qtd. in Brown 31). In fact, Gutiérrez goes so far as to suggest that God is "revealed only in the concrete historical context of liberation of the poor and oppressed" (qtd. in Brown 67). That is to say, God is met in the midst of the poor.

Equally important, the liberation process is not a top-down enterprise, or one designed to free only the poor; liberation depends upon "communion" among hu-

man beings, who in coming together to understand and teach one another also liberate one another. As Freire argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the process of oppression involves an elite class subsisting on the "living death" of the oppressed class (113). His focus is thus not only on liberating the oppressed, but also on liberating the elite class from their oppressive stance, so that they might achieve "authenticity": "they must 'die,' in order to be reborn through and with the oppressed" (114).

Community and solidarity, then, are foundations of the prophetic tradition. For this reason, sin is "the denial of solidarity" and the hope of resurrection "is the hope for the power of solidarity to transform reality, a hope that human identity is found in relation to others, in participation in the formation of a community that transcends us now and after death" (Welch 45). The motivation for this solidarity is love. "Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself," Freire writes (70). But the prophetic notion of love is not the sentimental or romantic love that dominates U.S. popular culture; it is not the love that, according to Freire, has been distorted by the capitalist world (70). For Freire, love is an act of courage and a commitment to others. He writes, "[a]s an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext for manipulation. It must generate other acts of freedom; otherwise, it is not love" (70–71). As Elizabeth Lange explains it, "[b]oth Freire and the liberation theologians draw from [a] dialectical relationship between justice and love, where justice is the struggle to empower victims of injustice, the mutual struggle being a sign of love" (84).

As much as liberation theology relies upon communal work, such a process does require leadership, and within the prophetic tradition the prophet serves as a social guide to reconfigure and transform culture. According to Barry Kanpol, the teacher as prophet is at once "gut-wrenchingly critical of social surroundings" and one who "passes on a message of transformative hope" (112). Jesus of Nazareth is the primary model for this work, a political teacher who critiqued and overturned the dominant purity-based norms of the times, reached out to the oppressed and marginalized, and offered a vision of hope and redemption (Borg).

Freire also served as a prophetic teacher, promoting literacy by both facilitating awareness of oppressive social structures and providing tools to dismantle these forces. As Brown points out, Freire's name for this process—conscientization—"has become a symbol of the possibility of dignity and power among the poor, as they are 'conscientized' to their actual situation and opt to change it" (68). In fact, Gutiérrez relied on Freire's conscientization process as "a pedagogy to animate a new theology" (Lange 83).

For Freire's literacy pedagogy, as well as for liberation theology, conscientization requires praxis: action and reflection. That is, within liberation theology, there can be no distinction between theory and practice. Truth is something to be done (68).

Or, as Gutiérrez puts it, "[O]ur spirituality *is* our methodology" (qtd. in Brown 99). This means not only that liberation theology is absolutely dependent on practice, but also that within this discourse truth is not something found in sacred texts, but is something made, enacted. Spirituality as methodology does not exclude historical and social analysis, however. As Cornel West insists, work in the prophetic tradition must be fueled by a "sense of the larger context, the larger forces that shape and mold not only who we are but our projection of where we want to go" (227). Finally, unlike theologies or ideologies that are designed to provide final answers, the "truth" of liberation theology—the praxis—is never completed. Rather, it provides tools for ongoing work (Brown 68).

Even as the language may be different, it isn't difficult to find connections between Freire's prophetic tradition of liberation theology and critical pedagogy discourse, as articulated by scholars like Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Ira Shor. While the discourse of critical pedagogy should not be regarded as unitary—as Jennifer Gore has argued, the scholarship of Giroux and McLaren tends to focus on the social vision of critical education, whereas Shor and Freire place more emphasis on instruction—there are visions and values common to both threads. Each tradition is concerned with making visible and challenging those arenas in which human suffering is ignored as well as with fostering in individuals a sense of agency and commitment to change.

But neither is it difficult to find points of departure between the prophetic and critical pedagogy traditions. Indeed, because of the deep chasm between intellectualism and spirituality, many of the values from which Freire wrote have been severed from critical pedagogy discourse in the United States—a split that I contend limits the potential effectiveness of critical pedagogy's work. Before examining how critical pedagogy could benefit from placing the goals of the prophetic tradition in dialogue with critical pedagogy, I offer a brief examination of why the distinction emerged—and endures—in the first place.

Faith in the Academy

While liberation theology depends on the overt linkage of faith and politics, critical pedagogy has largely separated these two realms, abiding by the modernity model that relegates matters of faith to the private sphere. This is the case even as critical pedagogy (as espoused by scholars such as Giroux and McLaren) has political roots in neo-Marxism and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Gore 34), and therefore challenges foundational knowledge and universal truths. As many feminist scholars have argued, however, within this discourse remain strong remnants of modernism (Luke; Gore; Lee; Brannon). Most notably, Gore demonstrates that critical

pedagogies are framed by the Enlightenment expectation of progress and improvement, which can be ignited by the radical individual—the critical teacher as transformative intellectual—and fostered through rational argument (121).

Critical pedagogy is not alone in making this distinction; it has simply followed the larger historical trend in U.S. university education. We can understand this separation historically by looking to the movement away from Christianity in higher education. This shift is carefully documented in George Marsden's *The Soul of the American University* and *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. As Marsden notes, most of today's "pace-setting American universities were virtually all constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by liberal Protestants." While the older establishments in higher education nearly always functioned out of a religious center, freedom occupied the core of the new universities. Freedom was here defined as liberation from appeals to supernatural authority, particularly those tied to Roman Catholicism (*Outrageous* 14). These universities were to be "havens for free scientific inquiry" (14), and an ultimate faith in scientific judgments ruled (18). This is not to say these universities were anti-Christian. Rather, they espoused a nonsectarian liberal Protestant view whose faith was built upon the Western cultural heritage, American democracy, and science. In many ways, nationalism constituted the university's new religion.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, philosophical and political idealism had reached a peak; these ideologies complemented scientific and technological values by providing transcendent moral ideas that could promote national civilization (Marsden, *Outrageous* 17). Increasingly, identification with any particular religious tradition in the university was deemed divisive, and ultimately harmful to democratic ideals. Further, as American culture came to emphasize acquisition of material wealth above salvation after death, the purposes of schooling became increasingly economic. More important than fostering a spiritual self was providing practical knowledge that would bear economic fruit (Nord 67). Consequently, religion in the university became an extracurricular activity, with various religious groups setting up ministries on the edges of campuses (Marsden, *Outrageous* 17; Nord 67).

Of course, the domination of Anglo-Protestantism and scientific objectivity never went entirely unchallenged. As the century unfolded, there were increasing efforts to invite a more diversified student population to the university, as well as to change the faces of university faculty and administration. But, as Marsden contends, even with these changes, "the essential structures and impulses shaping academia preserved continuity with the past" (*Outrageous* 18). As mass education and the government's role in it amplified during the 1960s, this became increasingly true.

While it would be easy to deny the rule of rationalism and scientific objectivity in the contemporary university, especially as critical theory has helped to promote tolerance for many ideological perspectives, overlooking the remnants of this system would be a mistake. Even during the 1980s, Marsden argues,

> the prejudices against traditional religious perspectives were stronger than ever. Old secular liberals and postmoderns, despite their differences, typically agreed that acceptable theories about humans or reality must begin with the premise that the universe is a self-contained entity. [. . .] [F]or many academics the idea of Christian perspectives seemed hopelessly old-fashioned or even bizarre. (*Outrageous* 18)

So even as critical thought is the reigning religion in our contemporary universities, an ethos that theoretically encompasses a respect for diverse ideologies, faith-based perspectives—particularly Christian—remain distinct from the privileged category of rationalism. As such, faith is often regarded as a false consciousness through which critical thought should cut, not something it should work alongside.

There is, however, a growing body of work by scholars who help to demonstrate how the critical tradition of the left could be enriched by rethinking the relationship between the spiritual and the intellectual, and more particularly by considering the offerings of the prophetic tradition. These scholars insist that the social crises named by the left are not only political or economic, but also "are at their heart moral and spiritual" (Kanpol and Yeo x). Scholars such as David Purpel and Svi Shapiro, Cornel West, and Kanpol contend that it is exactly this lack of focus on the ethical and moral that has prevented the left from actualizing its visions. As Kanpol and Yeo argue, "The educational mainstream and Right have forgotten that democracy is about change and the Left has failed to understand that it is also about hope, the moral and the spiritual—what some have termed as *prophetic education*" (x–xi). In what follows, I demonstrate how key tenets of the prophetic tradition of liberation theology could complement critical pedagogy, offering examples of what it might look like to place these traditions (back) in dialogue.

Valuing Faith as Knowledge

While we have evidence that the academy is beginning to rethink the relationship between "personal faith and intellectual life" (Buley-Meissner, Thompson, and Tan 4), we still have a way to go if we are to value faith as knowledge, as the prophetic tradition advocates. Perkins contends that the first step toward encountering "each other's privileged textualities in a spirit of greater openness and respect" is for teachers to examine their own "intellectual distrust" of particular viewpoints and knowledges (586). Often, she argues, conservative Christian students are targets of this distrust, making them "one of the only cultural groups openly and comfortably disparaged by many otherwise sensitive writing teachers in the country" (586). While she points out that this response is certainly not irrational, given the conflicts between their own and their students' literacies, it is neither "just nor pedagogically effective" (586).

We see this dynamic in Chris Anderson's oft-cited article "The Description of an Embarrassment: When Students Write about Religion." Here Anderson tells the

story of a TA's discomfort over a student's narrative that describes her conversion to Christianity. Anderson admits that he shares the TA's "disdain, her uneasiness, her embarrassment" in response to the piece (12). He's bothered by the student's "assumption of authority, however mild, even sweet, which is what I think bothers all of us" as well as by her "foolishness that is unaware of itself, superficiality that is either/or, dogmatic, unexamined" (12). At the same time, Anderson challenges the TA's own unexamined position, contending that she must not naturalize her faith in social-epistemic rhetoric. He insists that a truly social-epistemic stance would be more open and more complicated, and would make room for the possibility of religious discourse (13). What the TA needs to help the student see, Anderson reasons, is not that she has used inappropriate language, but that she has applied this language to the *wrong situation*.

Anderson's insistence that we must be reflective about our own faith in particular ideologies—and our desire to convert students to them—is astute; however, his own belief in what does or does not belong within academic discourse remains unexamined. As social-epistemic pedagogues remind us, academic discourse (like all discourse) is a social language that is changed by its users; it can never be homogeneous or static. Even so, Patricia Bizzell argues, "at any given time its most standard or widely accepted features reflect the cultural preferences of the most powerful people in the community" (1). To overlook the cultural dynamics that shape academic discourse is to naturalize it and those knowledges (and users) it excludes.

We see a similar example in Joe L. Kincheloe's *Toward a Critical Politics of Teacher Thinking*, where he argues that education theorists too often overlook the ways students' religious backgrounds influence their engagement in schooling. It is "[o]nly through an understanding of the sociopolitical context on which students' lives take shape," he writes, that we can "understand the often unseen ways lived sociopolitical reality shapes cognitive ability" (51). While he is interested in raising increased sensitivity to the backgrounds of fundamentalist students, he goes on to complain of the difficulty he experiences teaching those same students, whose backgrounds "spill over" into the "cognitive sphere" (51). He explains that many of these students are unable to reconcile their religious and "cognitive" worlds, a condition that is worsened by the fact that many of these students come from "poor homes with parents who possess minimal formal education" (51).

In light of his earlier statement about understanding the contexts that help to shape students' identities, I find his diagnosis of these students rather ironic, considering that a true understanding of students' backgrounds would not allow him to so easily categorize students' lives into dualistic boxes, to assume that fundamentalism is divorced from the cognitive realm. The certainty of his categorization verges on the same kind of certainty he wants to challenge in his fundamentalist students, and certainty often gets in the way of learning.

While both Anderson and Kincheloe offer useful ideals for greater self-reflection and understanding of our students, these examples demonstrate that when it comes to engaging students who are deeply invested in their faith it is easy to naturalize, rather than critically examine, one's "intellectual distrust" of that discourse. Consequently, an opportunity is lost to form solidarity with the student, or, in the language of critical pedagogy, to reach the student where he or she is. Even worse, the student whose faith-based knowledge is critiqued or dismissed may experience this as a personal affront—or, as Stephen Barrett puts it, as a "trauma."

Narrating his story as a "faith-centered" student, and offering experiences of those he's interviewed, Barrett explains that when entering the academy, "many [religiously conservative] students experience a degree of trauma not required of those of their peers whose primary discourse communities—home, neighborhood, possibly religious institutions—are more consistent with those of secondary discourses, like those of the academy" (47). He describes, for instance, his own pain when grappling with postmodern notions of the self:

> Stripped of belief. Stripped of community. I don't even have Christ to alleviate my aloneness. Persuaded that what I've experienced all my life as my self is only a closet filled with the costumes I'm asked to don to play the roles I'm asked to engage in. Persuaded that the discourses I participate in all preexist me, will all outlive me, and will all be ultimately little affected by me. Persuaded that my family historically and presently are irrelevant, irritant, at best, a curiosity, a study—twenty-first-century "Fundamentalists." (37)

Because of this potential threat to their identities, students whose values and knowledge are dismissed by critical approaches may do one of two things: reject them entirely and resist the pedagogy or, if they want to be accepted within a new discourse community, keep that identity closeted. Both Barrett and English graduate student Whitney Douglas write eloquently of this "cloaking" process. Douglas, for instance, describes a time when a colleague in her MA program interviewed her for a piece on how religiously identified composition scholars negotiated their faith and composition theory. "As we spoke," she writes, "I looked over my shoulder frequently, for fear someone was listening in on our conversation and would discover my faith and reconstruct me as a less learned scholar or as a threat to the academic community" (4).

While encountering new knowledge will necessarily result in some discomfort, the prophetic tradition would have us pay greater attention to the effects of our pedagogies on students. As bell hooks points out, we must be careful about presenting students with ideas that can result in a feeling of humiliation, and "[strip] them of their sense of value" (65). Perkins, for instance, suggests that rather than focusing energy on critique of our students' valued faith discourses, we become more familiar with them. Many of us do this already in other areas, paying attention to the popular

culture literacies—music, media, technologies—that shape our students' lives; Perkins would have us extend this to faith discourses. In working with fundamentalist students, she recommends drawing from the "framework of conservative Christian philosophy" so as to aim for an "academic/religious lingua franca that we can use when we are on contested territory" (596). In doing so herself, she draws from conservative theologian Lesslie Newbigin's rendering of metanoia as "a radical conversion of the mind" (597), a concept that helps her bridge the gap between her students' knowledge and her pedagogical goals (597).

We might also consider how religion can and does function as cultural criticism, and in this way shares another commonality with critical academic approaches. As Robert J. Ackermann points out, "[r]eligions have arisen as legitimate protests against societies and ways of life, providing in the process the overpowering foundations for laying down one's life to improve the lot of humanity" (qtd. in Purpel 79). This is not to say, of course, that religion *necessarily* serves this purpose. Like any ideology, it can serve as dogma, particularly if it loses a critical perspective on itself—and we have far too many examples of this loss.

Even so, if we want students to reflect critically on their lives and their knowledge, then we might benefit from acknowledging shared ground between our pedagogical goals and their spiritual convictions. As Rand argues, "[I]f writing instructors want to motivate evangelical students to reflect upon faith-centered identity, perhaps we should start from the premise that religious convictions (even those within conservative forms of Christianity) are considered by many to be 'radical'" (361). Indeed, this ethos of sharing in knowledge making (rather than denying the validity of one another's knowledge) is at the heart of Freire's notion of praxis. Praxis requires that the teacher trusts in the student's ability to reason. He warns, "Whoever lacks this trust will fail to initiate (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection, and communication" (48).

While I have typically been somewhat wary of inviting students to reflect on their faith backgrounds, for fear it would move them too far away from "reasoning," I decided in a senior-level literacy course that many students could not compose their literacy histories without considering the influence of faith. So, I listed religion or faith as one potential literacy from which students might draw as they considered the following questions: What does my literacy teach me about the social groups to which I belong, as well as those of people around me? How was my coming to literacy informed by the social groups I belong to, or by the social groups of those around me? Has my literacy taken different forms in different contexts? How have I used literacy, and how have others used my literacy, in socially conditioned ways?

In reading the responses, I was not surprised at how often faith was mentioned by my students as a central "primary discourse" that shaped their literacy practice. What surprised me was how it was discussed—not as a truth from which the student

would not stray, but rather, as in the story of Molly's that follows, as a source for critical reflection on the students' lives and culture.

Molly began her narrative with an interesting discussion of her parents' deep commitment to their daughter's education, which stemmed largely from their own insecurities and regrets over not having completed college. As they emphasized academic literacy in their daughter's life, however, they did not stress the literacy that was primary in their homes: Roman Catholicism. Raised in strict Catholic homes, Molly's parents felt "their education provided them with no options in deciding what was right and wrong. [Eventually] they felt more restricted than they were educated by the church." Consequently, they decided that they would force neither religious education nor involvement in the church on their children.

Molly went on to describe her own educational background, during which she fulfilled her parents' greatest hopes for her. She worked hard, graduated at the top of her class, and chose to pursue "the most prestigious and academically challenging career path" for herself: medicine. But her secular education was, in fact, much like her parents' religious education. She felt it gave her little room to think reflectively or critically; she learned largely by rote memorization and never felt inspired by true intellectual inquiry.

It was in her first year theology course at our Jesuit institution, however, that Molly acquired a secondary literacy that allowed her to reflect critically on her education and upbringing. As she puts it, "[F]or the first time in all my years of formal education, I was challenged to think beyond what was written in the text. I was not being asked to memorize material, nor was I being asked to repeat what I had read. Rather, I was being asked to think critically about the material by reflection on the meaning behind the content of various religious texts."

I was here struck that it was her religious education—not just this theology course, but her subsequent involvement in the Jesuit ministry on our campus—that allowed Molly the critical education she craved. Even more, though, the class allowed her to consider "new ideas and opportunities in both my educational and my dormant faith life." As the semester progressed, she writes, she began to relate the classroom material to her newly burgeoning faith, and to "become more curious about the ways I could live this faith out." In other words, the class reached her at once on an intellectual and a personal level, refusing to separate intellectual issues of religion from personal belief. This is a characteristic valued in liberation theology discourse, in which a "sense of the possible" is defined not only by political transformation but also by spiritual restoration (Kanpol 107). A pedagogy built from these ideas, then, does not only facilitate the student's ability to strive toward social justice, but also enhances his or her personal faith.

While it is all too easy to categorize religious discourse as "inappropriate" in the academic classroom, for Molly it was a classroom that linked intellectualism and

faith that allowed her to discover how she could develop and mesh her intellectual and spiritual lifework. Her faith life is not about blind acceptance, but about an ongoing process of participating in a faith-based community, asking questions, and reflecting on her life and culture.

Indeed, Molly's story may be packaged in language that we find more palatable than that of the student's in Anderson's story. But it should be recognized that both are about religious conversion, both are about a commitment to sponsor others' religious literacies via a commitment to Jesus Christ, and both demonstrate the primacy of religion in these students' lives. Rather than dismissing religious inquiry or even testimony as inappropriate for intellectual work, we might consider what possibilities are opened by beginning with students' religious literacies, by assuming that they are not only deserving of study and reflection, but may in fact also serve as a resource for critical projects.

The Prophetic Teacher and the Transformative Intellectual

Valuing students' religious knowledge also requires us to reconsider the relationship between critical teacher and (acritical) student. As many feminist teacher-scholars have documented, critical pedagogy discourse tends to abide by a modernist notion of the individual teacher, whereby the teacher holds power to liberate students from domination, to direct students and teachers to make the "correct" choices, and to provide a model to which the students aspire (Gore; Luke; Lee; Brannon). The assumption here is that the critical pedagogue is not complicit in the power structures he or she seeks to challenge; he or she is thought to have the agency both to move outside of these dynamics to offer critique and to liberate students from them. Even more, the teacher is thought to possess critical knowledge which students need, but to which they do not currently have access. As Ira Shor puts it, "the dialogical teacher is more intellectually developed, more practiced in critical scrutiny, and more committed to a political dream of social change, than are the students" (qtd. in Gore 95).

It is not surprising, then, that classroom depictions of critical pedagogy tend to position the teacher as a hero who is more concerned with passing along "critical knowledge" *to* students than creating critical knowledge *with* students, valuing and drawing from the knowledge that students already possess. One such example in composition is found in David Bartholomae's oft-cited exchange with Peter Elbow. Bartholomae argues that as teachers, we must be more than managers of the cultural substations that are our classrooms. Instead, we need to make writers "aware of the forces at play in the production of knowledge," to help them understand how culture has written them (483). He goes on to offer an example of a student in his writing class who composed a piece about her parents' divorce. "We've all read this

essay," he writes. "We've read it because the student cannot invent a way of talking about family, sex roles, separation" (484). Instead of allowing her to "reproduce" this narrative, he asks her to "read her paper as a text already written by the culture" (502). His strategy, in his words, is to be "dismissive" (502).

Many of us can likely relate to this response to the kind of paper we feel is too familiar. At the same time, there are also pieces at which our critical dispositions bristle because they do not abide by the analytical plotline we expect or demand. When Mary, a student in my service-learning literacy course, turned in a piece that described her Catholic literacy, I had this same response. Mary's piece described the ways her Catholic literacy was shaped by her home, parochial school, and church life, and the subsequent ways in which this literacy was challenged at our Jesuit institution by the secondary discourses of her theology professors and her Catholic and non-Catholic peers. The point at which this piece became unfamiliar to me was when it turned from what I thought would be an "enlightenment" story—her academic professors opened her up to more complex, critical thought—to one of returning more deeply to her Catholic roots. In other words, when it became what I didn't expect, or what I didn't want it to be, I found myself wanting to dismiss this conclusion as too easy or simple. I wanted Mary to see that she must have changed her ideas in some way, that surely those challenges made her more critical or skeptical of her initial beliefs. But then I began to wonder whether I was simply imposing a reading that would make her piece more familiar, comfortable, to my own critical sensibilities. What was I losing by pushing her in this particular direction: my direction?

While I agree with Bartholomae that ideally we help students see beyond the normative roles culture has prescribed, I wonder about the consequences of valuing a critical position over the writer herself. What is the cost of a pedagogy that is built on dismissal? If the role of the critical teacher must be to give his or her students a different way to read their papers, their lives, then he or she presumably has access to a way of reading that is not already "written by culture"—that will somehow liberate students from the throes of family, sex roles, separation. But, I wonder, in what way might that way of reading be experienced as antiliberatory?

The topic of Bartholomae's student's paper is her parents' divorce, most likely an experience that incited complex emotions. Likewise, Mary's paper focused on faith, an identity she deems central and primary in her life. How we can we engage in these subjects with students without dismissing the knowledge, experience, and emotions that are entwined within them?

The prophetic tradition offers some possibilities. While the transformative intellectual abides by a tradition based upon criticism as a vehicle for social transformation, the prophetic teacher begins from a place of compassion and solidarity with students and at the same time engages in ongoing self-reflection about those aspects

of oneself and one's pedagogy that hinder liberatory goals. As Kanpol,drawing from Purpel, puts it, this critical teacher "adds compassion as a personal emotional reaction to oppressive structures, as well as concern about the numbness of the present social context" (112). His or her ultimate goal is to "teach about what it is to be human in a dehumanizing culture" (112). The aim, then, is not to dismiss, but instead to remember that students speak, act, and think out of positions in which they are deeply invested. Remembering critical pedagogy's roots in the prophetic tradition, then, reminds us not to use teacher authority to overcome student knowledge, but to think with our students, to listen closely, and to strive toward mutual learning.

While the critical teacher is positioned as the agent of critical pedagogy, the bearer of critical knowledge who enlightens students to this way of thinking, Freire's prophetic vision offers us a more reciprocal and reflective model for the relationship between critical teacher and student. "The revolutionary's role is to liberate and be liberated, with the people—not to win them over," he writes. "One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people" (76).

A dynamic that promotes winning students over to critical thought risks not only reproducing the very "banking" dynamic the critical pedagogue works to challenge, but also positing critical knowledge as a regime of truth, a form of fundamentalism. As a result, the students lose the genuine opportunity to explore their own values—an exploration that could end as easily in their strengthening as in their revision. According to Kanpol, the critical educator should "try to create a pedagogy of dissent from certain dominant values without essentializing alternative values that can also act as a form of domination" (111). After all, as Perkins points out, critical pedagogies can themselves function as a "colonialist imposition" that steers us away from mutual inquiry and development. The goal, then, is not to overcome or dismiss students' knowledge, but to value that knowledge as a resource in the process of *collaborative* knowledge making.

Consequently, then, we might better reach students—and our own pedagogical goals—not by asking (or requiring) students to *replace* their knowledge with our own, but by helping students consider more ways of examining their culture and lives as we consider more ways of examining our own (Perkins 607). As scholars in the prophetic tradition remind us, a pedagogy can be both "spiritually restorative [and] politically transformative" (Kanpol 107).

By making the pedagogical goal not a predetermined "critical" end, which may alienate students who deem this perspective hostile to their social locations, but a *process* of critical inquiry, we may gain an opportunity to work in solidarity with students. Having realized that dismissing Mary's conclusion would be to steer her paper in the direction of my values, not hers, and would thus preclude a true investigation of her own experience, I invited her to delve deeper in her articulation of

how her Catholic literacy was deepened in these challenging encounters—to show what elements of the tradition she questioned and why, how she felt as she wondered about issues she'd long taken for granted, and how she came back around to make an informed choice about her beliefs. In her revision, she began to flesh out her confusion in having her beliefs questioned by Jesuit priests and classmates; most concerning to her was her inability to articulate a rationale for her beliefs. She writes, "It was very scary to me because people would ask me questions that I could not answer, like why confession was necessary." Consequently, she writes, "I became open to others' opinions and more curious to finding answers regarding all my personal questions about my faith."

While in the end her beliefs and values were affirmed, not changed, her piece reminded me that the process of inquiry is as important as the outcome. It also taught me that we might focus less on the need for students to reach a particular conclusion, and more, as Perkins puts it, on "our collective responsibility to listen to each other [. . .] and to ask questions [. . .] not so much to challenge but to amplify thought" (605).

Imagination and Transformation, Compassion and Action

As I have argued throughout this essay, the academy is not without its own notion of the sacred; the university's strongest deity is critical thinking (Purpel). The liberation theology tradition, of course, is built upon cultural criticism, but, importantly, it refuses to distinguish spirituality from social analysis and critique. As a result, the prophetic tradition refuses critique as an end in itself—a tendency that is far too common in critical pedagogy discourse. As Purpel, who has written extensively on the possibilities of linking the critical pedagogy tradition with the prophetic, puts it, the prophetic voice is one that speaks "not only to criticism; it is also a voice of transformation" (81).

When I was a graduate student, one of my professors insisted that we not simply "tear down" an idea without rebuilding or offering something to replace that which we critiqued. We quickly realized that we had learned well the practice of critique, but we were lacking when it came to imagining new possibilities for change. This professor recognized, as does Kanpol, that "the educational Left has often fallen prey to a form of nihilism. Critique for the sake of critique and deconstruction all too often dominate critical discourses in education" (111).

A likely consequence of this mode of critique is paralysis. Students may be left wondering "What now?" when the infatuation with critique wears off. What comes after deconstruction? And critical pedagogy scholars, who argue fiercely for educational and cultural change, often leave teachers without answers to the question of "how." As Kanpol and Yeo argue, "Mired in the postmodern quandary, [critical theo-

rists] do not want to be labeled as *technocratic strategists*, *essentialists*, or *pragmatic*, so they offer no clear plan or normative framework to guide the changes they advocate. In many senses, despite the validity of their critique, critical theorists have become stymied by an intolerance of praxis" (x).

The prophetic model of critical education offers a useful supplement to critique: imagination and transformation; compassion and action. As Purpel sees it, "our work as educators can be significantly enriched by the prophetic voice that speaks not only critically but compassionately" and that combines "sharp criticism, dazzling imagination, a sacred perspective, commitment to justice and compassion, hope, energy, and involvement" (82, 85). Purpel cites Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., as examples of teachers who worked in the prophetic tradition, who not only critiqued social structures but who also insisted that moral and spiritual concerns not be relegated to private contexts (83). Perhaps most important, their work was built on the practice—not merely the espousal—of their ideals.

While critical pedagogy gives lip service to producing critical citizens who work toward social transformation (Gore 111), the discourse itself focuses little on what this practice looks like. Most of the energy in this discourse is spent on critique. Or, as Purpel puts it, "The academic community has done far better with its oppositional critical capacities than with its creative responsibilities" (69). This doesn't mean that we need ease our efforts to be critical, Purpel contends. Instead, it requires us to "complement these skills with the creative and imaginative arts that can provide use with richer, truer, more satisfying schema, models, visions and paradigms" (69).

One way the prophetic tradition helps us to enrich the practice of critique is by acknowledging the emotive responses that often accompany critical investigation of one's life and culture, and by insisting that compassion and love are essential ingredients for critical work. In "Counterpublics in Public Housing: Reframing the Politics of Service-Learning," David Coogan highlights the role of love within the African American prophetic tradition:

> [L]ove helps a person learn to think rationally within a group as a problem solver. What's emphasized in this definition of rationality, however, are not the traditional habits of critical thinking or best practices of rhetorical deliberation, but the moral capacity that enables a person to stand above or apart from everyday experiences and "[p]ersist in loving people." (469)

In my literacy service-learning course, I often invited students to reflect on the intersections of our course reading and site work. Near the end of the semester, Keisha described the relationship she had formed with a literacy student, Andy. "He's just so cool," she said, sharing some instances of their developing friendship. But she quickly interrupted herself, "I'll stop now. I'll stop now. This isn't relevant." Anyone

reading Keisha's body language—fingers flying and foot tapping—as she discussed Andy, could tell that such feeling was relevant to her work at the literacy center. But somehow she had learned in the course that the emotive belonged outside the intellectual.

Coogan challenges the established critique in service-learning discourse that personal growth has been privileged at the cost of social change, arguing that emotive reactions to service-learning are not only inevitable, but also worthy of reflection. He and his students cannot, as he puts it, "*not* react to it" (477). And he insists that the African American leaders they worked with would not want his student to "bypass her emotional response or privately held opinions. They would want her to confront them head-on" (477).

This contention is shared, too, by the prophetic tradition. We see this in West's notion of "combative spirituality," which "sustains persons in their humanity but also transcends solely the political. It embraces a political struggle, but it also deals with issues of death or dread, of despair or disappointment" (109). These emotions and responses are worthy of study and reflection, West notes, because they are the "ultimate facts of existence and they're filtered through our social and political existence" (108).

Those of us in English studies interested in liberatory education might look to our colleagues in other disciplines who also ascribe to critical teaching to see how this element of the prophetic tradition is enacted. During the semester I taught the literacy course, our college sponsored a panel on the benefits of service-learning. Several of my students, who were also simultaneously enrolled in a service-learning peace and justice course on the life and work of Jesus, served as presenters. As one student described the two courses, she named mine as "highly academic." We read theories of literacy and social injustices in class, and they saw how these dynamics played out as they worked at the community literacy center. She described her other class as more "personal." There the class studied the life of Christ, and, while working in a range of nonprofit organizations, were asked to focus through regular journal writing on what they found particularly *nourishing or life-giving* in the community service that week; and, on the other hand, what they found *disturbing or confusing.* What was it that especially touched their hearts? Finally, they were to describe *why they were so affected.*

To be honest, I immediately felt a sense of relief that my course had been described as "academic" in front of our administration; this, after all, is the valued model. But then I began to think about what might be missing from my teaching as a result. There is certainly safety in distanced critique. But by overlooking the students' responses to their work, we lose the chance for them to examine those affective responses to their encounters, to consider the very elements that often facilitate compassion, investment, and community and that shape our values.

In a discussion of his pedagogical approach with instructor Roger Bergman, Roger explained to me that his aim was to help students consider what Ignatius of Loyola calls "consolation" and "desolation," in a manner that would not be alienating to non-Christian students. According to Elder Mullan, SJ, spiritual consolation involves some "interior movement in the soul." Consolation is "every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy" which offers peace (Mullan). While terms like "hope," "joy," "nourishing," or "life-giving" are often excluded from academic vocabularies, these experiences drive powerful work, work in which students (and teachers) feel invested. It seems worthwhile not only to acknowledge this dynamic, but also to reflect upon it.

Desolation, those moments Roger describes as "disturbing" or "confusing," involve experiences of feeling "lazy, tepid, sad, as if separated from [one's] Creator" (Mullan). Roger describes these moments of having one's "heart broken"; they often involve coming into contact with those our culture has marginalized or forgotten.

The prophetic tradition certainly does not facilitate a risk-free pedagogy; it involves not only an experience of that which may feel painful (and exhilarating), but also the recognition of and reflection on one's feelings as he or she encounters these moments. But I would contend that even as it carefully remains at the level of the cerebral, critical pedagogy is no less risky. In fact, it may involve more of a risk because it does not typically allow students room to articulate the feelings of "trauma" that might accompany their encounter with new ideas.

For the students of the prophetic tradition, then, the goal is to leave the classroom not only able to critique social structures, but also to act in ways that alter them, or that facilitate others' abilities to work within and against them. For the teachers of the prophetic tradition, the goal is to remember that this process will likely not occur on a purely intellectual level; students need an opportunity to reflect on that which is both nourishing and painful.

While opening our classrooms to ideas such as love, compassion, and faith is likely to feel risky or messy, so, too, is the task of working with students. As James Moffett reminds us, "I know, the university feels it shouldn't play doctor or priest, dirty its hands with therapy and its mind with religion. But if it has real live students on its hands, its hands are already dirty" (261). Too often, missing in the discourse of critical pedagogy is reflection on the effects of our hands. How do we use them not only to challenge, but also to support? Not only to critique, but also to validate? Not only to deconstruct, but also to reconstruct?

The prophetic tradition of liberation theology offers us visions that may not only enrich our understanding of critical pedagogy, but may also help us enact it more fully. To place these traditions back in dialogue is not to espouse theology in the critical classroom, it is to return to roots that might better allow us to realize the goals of liberatory education: valuing student knowledge, enacting a reciprocal

teacher-student relationship, enriching critique with both compassion and action, and participating in ongoing reflection and revision.

And these goals, to my mind, represent a pedagogy that is truly critical.[1]

Note

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