

Replacing Judgment with Curiosity

Nancy Wood

OVERTURE: SOMETHING GREATER THAN ONESELF

What I love most in the world are God, my family, and musical theater. The longer I live, the more I enjoy the creativity of holding seemingly disparate ideas of the sacred and profane in tension. As a child, I saw firm delineations between the three loves of my life, and musicals were always on top. I felt more hopeful if *Camelot* was playing on the stereo. I found words for the paradoxical nature of our world by listening to “Tomorrow” from *Annie*. To riff on the opening line of the movie *Bull Durham*, I believed in the Church of Broadway.

I went weekly with my family to the Unitarian Universalist church, too, and was spiritually nurtured there. Later, I fell in love with Jesus at a performance of the musical *Godspell* and eventually made my way to the United Church of Christ. Throughout my life, my understanding of God and my passion for musical theater have informed one another. Each has offered me a complementary, expansive narrative through which I could make sense of myself and the world.

With the truths of my faith and the wisdom of musical theater as my inspirations, I weave my primary theories of Jean Baker Miller and relational-cultural theory, transformative learning as articulated by Elizabeth Lange, and my progressive Christian theology exemplified by Marcus Borg, along with critical purchase

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on these theories, into a tapestry of five universal human themes: transformation, paradox, authenticity, community, and play.

ACT I: TRANSFORMATION

As a child acting out musicals, I noticed that the second song on a Broadway cast album featured someone yearning for new life. Jack Viertel calls this the “I want song.” Certainly, some of these songs center only around the character’s individual desire to get ahead or gain greater power. But the songs that speak to me most deeply articulate the human longing for transformation through greater connection and relationship.

I use the language of transformation to encompass many essential theological concepts that inform my faith, offer me strength and hope, and serve as the foundation of my ministry. Here, I am indebted to the work of theologian Marcus Borg for his articulation of transformation as a core theological concept in Christian life.

Of all the powerful avenues of transformation made known to me in the Christian tradition, redemption and repentance speak most deeply to me. The Greek meaning of repentance offers a powerful definition for transformation: “to go beyond the mind we have.” With my particular cultural lens, it is easy for me to think of transformation in individualistic terms. But to truly go beyond the mind we have is to move toward greater connection with the people around us and the planet we share.

I bring in theologian M. Shawn Copeland as critical purchase for my theology because her work requires me to explicitly examine how culture, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, gender, class, and language impact my work. I have significant cultural power and privilege because of my social location, particularly my race, class, sexual orientation, and education. I am a straight white woman, the mother of two children, divorced and remarried. I was educated at elite Northeastern institutions. I have been ordained for twenty years in the United Church of Christ. These experiences have shaped me to have a particular understanding of the world, the mind I have. I intentionally engage students to consider how their culture and social location impact their ministry because, like Copeland, I believe that the fullness of God is made manifest through the embodied diversity of God’s people and that we understand all of our world, including the Holy, through the particularity of our bodies.

Relational-cultural theory (RCT), my primary personality theory, also takes seriously the impact of culture and social location on relationship. At the center of RCT is the conviction that growth-fostering relationships are essential in healthy human development. My students and I undergo our most profound change and experience deepest growth when we encounter difference in our relationships and work through conflict. Relational-cultural theory does more than embrace the joy and pleasure of being in relationship with others; it understands that connections and disconnections are natural aspects of every relationship. Rather than glossing over experiences of disconnection or discoveries of difference, true authenticity requires addressing them within relationship.

“To go beyond the mind we have” is at the core of my education theory, too. I use Elizabeth A. Lange, an environmental studies educator who builds upon Jack Mezirow’s foundational work in transformative learning, as my primary theorist. Transformative learning is “the process of changing our taken-for granted assumptions to make them more inclusive and truthful,” and Lange works with the concept of a “learning sanctuary” to create the fertile conditions in which transformation might flourish.

Lange begins with the core principles of transformative learning, most notably the importance of the disorienting dilemma as the catalyst for substantive adult learning. Mezirow, the founder of transformative learning, outlined the process through which students grapple with disorienting dilemmas and integrate new learning. Students have an experience that does not fit the way in which, heretofore, they have made sense of the world. This becomes the catalyst for change and growth. By its very nature, the disorienting dilemma invites, and at times compels, learners to examine their previously held assumptions. That is often painful. Learners have a choice when they experience the disorienting dilemma and can opt “to reject the unexpected” rather than move toward transformation. Students’ culture and their life experiences can impact whether and how they reject the unexpected.

Lange’s articulation of the concept of the learning sanctuary brings a more embodied, relational aspect to transformational learning, offering critical purchase to Mezirow’s more linear, less emotionally focused view of student learning. Lange describes the learning sanctuary as a container that can “enlarge the sense of self, from seeing oneself as separate and au-

tonomous to seeing one's embeddedness in a web of living relations." Lange outlines three essential elements.

First, the learning environment needs to provide students with relational experiences with nature. I love Lange's articulation of how connection with Creation can offer learners the space to notice and attend to their own bodies as sources of wisdom. In summer clinical pastoral education (CPE), when warm weather arrives, I plan a weekly outdoor walking meditation. Interns quickly adjust to the rhythm of intentional connection with the natural world. They come to savor this time to be on the wooded walking trails around the hospital and notice how the silent outdoor walk helps them integrate their clinical and classroom learning. I had thought these walks would simply offer the interns a relationship with nature, but I found the experience also fostered growth in their peer relationships, the second aspect of Lange's learning sanctuary.

Finally, the learning sanctuary is an educational environment that knowingly engages with the paradox. It is constituted through "a paradoxical relationship between a deliberative pedagogy while holding the space open for often unseen transformative processes to occur."¹ In Lange, transformation merges into the second theme of this paper, paradox.

ACT II: PARADOX

At the core of Christian theology is paradox, which in my tradition is referred to as the already/not yet. Christianity embraces the tension that God is both already incarnate in the world and the full expression of God in history is not yet fully realized.

I am challenged by the fact that the nature of God is to hold tension between two seemingly disparate truths. I don't find it easy to embrace the paradoxical nature of God and humans. I grew up in a Unitarian Universalist church that stressed the perfectibility of human nature. When, in my mid-twenties, I was discerning whether to be baptized a Christian, I wrestled with the theology of sin. After living in Nicaragua and witnessing suffering caused by the covert war my country had funded, I knew my faith had to account for evil. At the same time, I prefer to focus on the hopeful, positive side of life.

Yet I know pain, loss, anger, and fear are part of the human condition. Part of my work is exploring with students the darkness and disconnection within and between systems and people. If I can hold the tension of the paradoxical nature of

human beings, I make space for the possibility of new truths to be revealed and healing to take place.

My primary theologian, Marcus Borg, isn't of particular help to me in holding the paradoxical nature of our world and soul. Pastoral theologian Barbara Brown Taylor offers me critical purchase on my proclivity for binary thinking precisely because she requires I take seriously both the creative and destructive impulses present in human relationships.

Even as it challenges me, I love that RCT requires me to grapple with paradox, too. The theory works with three core paradoxes present in human relationship. The best known is the central relational paradox. It names that "[i]n the face of repeated disconnections, people yearn even more for relationship, but their fear of engaging with others leads to keeping aspects of their experience out of connection (these are protective strategies of disconnection, also known as *strategies of survival*). The individual alters herself or himself to fit in with the expectations and wishes of the other person, and in the process, the relationship itself loses authenticity and mutuality, becoming another source of disconnection."²

The second RCT paradox, known as the paradox of similarity and diversity, articulates the truth that in relationship we discover similarity in difference and difference in similarity. When we risk engaging with people who we see as different from us, we come to see that we have shared human experiences that transcend our differences. At the same time, we also discover that outward similarities can be deceiving and that significant differences live within them.

Finally, RCT lifts up the paradox of conflict in connection. Most of my students desperately want to avoid conflict with their peers and educator because they fear that any conflict will damage the relationships. While I empathize with their fear of conflict, RCT reminds me that it is often through conflict that connection is fostered.

The capacity to hold paradox is also needed for a true learning sanctuary. Like Lange, "I enter the learning space with my own commitments and some content and processes to engage learners; however, transformative learning is what happens underneath this."³ As an educator, I have to be willing to let go of what I planned would happen and be with what is happening in the moment. The following vignette offers an example of this paradox in the learning sanctuary and illustrates the power of the second two paradoxes in RCT.

In an "end-of-life ministry" didactic, I shared with my students that patients, families, and staff may engage in gallows humor. Most of the group joined me in the assumption that gallows humor was a harmless way that some people deal with anxiety about death. "Carlina" did not. As the mother of a chronically ill

child, she viewed gallows humor as disrespectful. She was hurt that her peers and educator would see this so differently. After several minutes of conflicted communication, I sought to get us back on the outline I had planned. This only served to increase the conflict present in the group.

I set aside my plans to be with the learning in the moment. Carlina shared how deeply her family had been wounded by insensitive comments by medical professionals. The rest of the group, all training for ministry after careers in other healthcare disciplines, spoke of the defenses they used to keep the patient losses from overwhelming them. By acknowledging that they each dealt with the toll of seriously ill in different ways, the interns grappled with and learned from two RCT paradoxes—similarity and diversity, and conflict in connection. And they did so far more effectively than I could ever have planned.

Not only did I turn to my personality and education theories in that moment, I also drew from my own spirituality in order to supervise in the midst of the unplanned holding of paradox. In my anxiety, I leaned into my belief in the incarnation, trusting that God was present in the group within us and between us. I let go of my desire for control and tried to be curious in that moment. Moreover, through this unexpected “detour” in the didactic, God offered me another opportunity for redemption. I had thought that I knew how everyone would experience a few words written on an outline. But even when I have the best of intentions, I bring my unexamined assumptions into my teaching. Rather than staying with what was known to me, my trust in God’s commitment to relationship allowed me to let go of the mind I had and learn from and with my students.

Later, I learned that this experience had been powerful for Carlina, too. As an African American living in rural New England, as in our CPE unit she was often the only person of color in the room. While I missed the mark at first, trying to assert power over the group by insisting we stay with my plan, she saw me adjust toward greater power with the group, honoring the group’s need to examine the dynamics of connection and disconnection. In the mid-unit evaluation Carlina wrote that she appreciated that “you were wrong and you self-corrected.” My willingness to acknowledge my cultural assumptions and amend my educational plan helped Carlina grow in her trust of me.

As in the above example, Lange helps me to engage paradox when it arises organically. I bring in Parker Palmer as my critical purchase of Lange and transformative learning because he offers specific, time-tested ideas to focus on both soul and role. His teaching context and focus are explicitly about deep spiritual values in professional work and education. Like so

many of the theorists I seek to learn from, Palmer welcomes authenticity, vulnerability, and empathy.

ACT III: AUTHENTICITY, VULNERABILITY, EMPATHY

Broadway director Michael Blakemore famously said, “When the curtain goes up, the audience is in trouble.” The theater-goers have been thrust into a new story involving characters they’ve never met. How much are they going to be able to handle, and how quickly?

Like the audience in the first moments of a musical, members of a new CPE group feel anxiety at the start of a unit. Whether this is their first unit or they have prior experiences in CPE, they’ve never been members of this particular CPE group before. While my job isn’t to fix the “trouble” the group feels, I want to lower the group’s anxiety enough so that we can all begin to form meaningful relationships and learn together. I do this with the RCT values of supported vulnerability, authenticity, and mutual empathy.

I love the RCT emphasis on the appropriate use of self by the educator as an asset to the student’s learning and growth. “Authenticity means that the [educator] tries to be with the thoughts and feelings occurring in the relationship. It also means that the [educator] tries to be with the movement towards connection, the fear of that movement, and the strategies of disconnection.”⁴ When I risk bringing my vulnerability into the learning relationship, this paradoxically fosters strength and courage within both my student and me. In modeling vulnerability and authenticity with my students, I create the conditions for students to bring those values into relationship with me. This was the case with “Athena.”

Athena was a first-unit intern with significant gifts for ministry. In the second half of the unit, she visited a patient even after a licensed nurse’s aid (LNA) had discouraged her from doing so. Consequently, the LNA felt disrespected. Athena knew she should have listened to the LNA, but she also didn’t like to be “managed by gatekeepers.”

Athena brought the experience to supervision and, at first, was very hard on herself. Because negative relational images can undermine learning, I invited Athena to treat the experience as an opportunity for reflection rather than an irreparable mistake. I authentically shared times when I’ve moved at a fast pace to feel important. When I offered examples of my own vulnerability in spiritual caregiving, I noticed Athena physically relax. Taking her more open body posture as a sign of her willingness to explore in a spirit of curiosity rather than self-judgment, I suggested we role-play different ways she might have interacted with

the LNA. Athena excitedly discovered a way to bring both her authenticity and empathy into the relationship.

True authenticity requires that I name the ways in which I benefit from the multiple axes of my privilege. I brought Athena's and my shared class privilege into our work together, inviting her to consider how class may have played a role in the interaction with the LNA.

My faith as a progressive Christian teaches me that it is God who first and best models *power with* relationships. In the life of Jesus, I believe God chose to fully embody the values of authenticity, vulnerability, and empathy. By demonstrating the power of vulnerability in the person of Jesus, particularly through the circumstances of his birth into a poor, religiously and culturally marginalized family living under occupation, God defies expectations and collapses traditional power structures of *power over*. It is this kind of mutuality that Jesus embodied in his ministry that I seek to bring into my work as a certified educator candidate.

Lange's theory of education shares a deep congruence with both RCT's valuing of growth-fostering relationships and Jesus' incarnational ministry. Lange believes that when we bring our authentic selves into teaching, we create an environment where students "overcome alienating social relations in which they are embedded . . . [and] experience a change in their being in the world including in their forms of relatedness."⁵ Through this relatedness with their educator, their peers, the natural world, and the discipline they are learning, the learners may experience transformation.

Of course, there is significant risk in embodying the values of authenticity, vulnerability, and empathy. Most students have been socialized to keep their vulnerability hidden to protect themselves from potential harm. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus' life of radical authenticity, vulnerability, and empathy serves as a powerful reminder not only of how transformative such a choice can be but also of the stakes involved.

As I grow as an educator, I want to increase my capacity to examine with students issues of power when they are present in our supervisory relationship. Doing so will assist my students and me to become more aware of how our cultural assumptions shape our individual ministries and help us to create and foster more authentic and just communities.

ACT IV: COMMUNITY

The best musicals have “their own unique beating hearts” and yet follow the same general structure. I believe the same is true for the formation of community. Each group of people is a particular beloved community of “unique beating hearts” in which the Holy is at work. And shaping the evolution of each CPE peer group, sometimes more clearly and sometimes less, is a similar pattern.

For this reason, I use Bruce Tuckman’s theory of groups to have an overarching sense of the trajectory we are on as we form community. Within that structure, I use my primary personality theory of RCT, emphasizing the cycle of connection, disconnection, and reconnection that is present in all relationships and, particularly, all groups. I bring to this Parker Palmer’s articulation of the spiritual resource of what lies within us and between us. And, because I have to account for the destructive elements possible in group life, I use systems-centered theory (SCT) as my critical purchase on my positive-focused, very relational primary personality theory. Systems-centered theory pays close attention to such things as competition, anxiety, anger, and hostility in groups and has a structure and framework that allows group members to more safely engage with these human elements.

In his seminal work on groups, Tuckman described five stages of group development. While not all groups go through all stages or do them in this order, and some groups cycle back through various stages, Tuckman’s framework helps interns and me have a guideline for what may happen.

In the first stage, knowing as *forming*, group members get to know one another and try to figure out what this experience will be. Clinical pastoral education group members are usually quite polite, affirming, and careful, engaging in “indirect attempts to discover the nature and boundaries” of the group. When I see that students are focusing on “peripheral problems” or topics, I may gently steer them back to the here-and-now by asking them about how the topic may be connected to what is happening in the moment.

Typically, the group then begins to bump up against difference and moves into the *storming* stage, which is characterized by “disruption and fragmentation.” The storming can be in response to significant conflict, smaller irritations, or something in between. The group members experience disconnection and must work through it.

I am very aware of anxiety in this phase, my students’ and my own. Theologically, I remember my feelings as I go through Holy Week each year and live into the story of Jesus’ betrayal and crucifixion. A part of me is always afraid that this

time Easter won't come and I will always be in the storm of fear, betrayal, and loss. When I bring my theological imagination to this storming stage, I can more readily engage my playful side and signal to the interns that this is a safe environment in which to explore.

If groups are able to successfully move through the storming stage, they likely move to the third stage, known as *norming*. Group members share greater intimacy and cooperation, experimenting with connection and disconnection and learning to embrace the paradoxes of similarity and diversity and connection in conflict. As interns create explicit group norms, I find that they often will speak in broad, general, often absolute terms. I invite them to speak with specificity and consider how their cultural backgrounds may influence their understanding of such norms.

From norming, the group typically is ready to move to the *working* stage. As the name suggests, members are able to readily use the group as a resource for their learning. Learners are often able to share about their cultural context and how it impacts their relationships in the group. Their statements move from absolutes to a more nuanced understanding of how culture shapes us.

At this stage, I remind the learners of the finite nature of the group to aid them in moving to the fifth stage. I like the language of *mourning* for this group stage as it has a direct correlation to the experiences of loss most patients and families are experiencing at our medical center. When CPE students can examine their own experiences of loss as the CPE unit is ending, they may better understand and minister to people grieving their own losses.

While I place a strong value on the power of groups to provide support, I've come to see that groups have the capacity to engage in harm and neglect as well. In my supervisory practice, I seek to account for the shadow side of humanity present in groups. I find Yvonne Agazarian's SCT, to be particularly helpful in addressing "the darker disruptive side of human behavior." Systems-centered therapy, originally designed to work with persons with serious mental illness, slows down the processing of conflict and connection through its highly structured approach to relational exploration. This makes such work emotionally safer than when group members are free to express feedback that may be "too much" for a peer or the group. Systems-centered therapy's careful provisions for how to facilitate a group add, for me, helpful supervisory tools, especially when a group is caught in negative patterns, such as when the group is stuck, participants' defenses are blocking the development of a true learning sanctuary, or the specter of scapegoating is looming.

Slowing down the group process is particularly important given my cultural background. In my family of origin, quick-wittedness and the ability to engage in

dinner-table debates gained me approval from my father. I know I can move quickly in the way I engage with people. At best, others experience me as engaged and motivated. At worst, I can leave people behind or make them feel overwhelmed. Systems-centered therapy elements provide me the opportunity to check in with my body and lead not just with my head but with my whole self.

In my CPE education I have found SCT to be experientially productive. Although I do not operate out of a thorough-going SCT framework, I employ elements that I have found useful in group exploration and learning. The first of these elements is functional subgrouping. When I sense that a member of the group may be feeling alone or isolated, I rely on SCT's core methodology of functional subgrouping, asking if there are others who can join the group member in his feeling. This intervention reduces the possibility that a group member will be scapegoated or become the identified patient as no one is left holding one feeling by himself.

I connect both theologically and developmentally with the use of what I see as the use of spiritual practices and ritual in SCT. Agazarian suggests that groups have a review period to end a group session so that participants might "join in and contribute information" about the powerful emotions they experienced in the group. I use a variation of this process. At the beginning of each interpersonal relations seminar (IPR), I have interns give a short check-in without cross-talk and ask them to indicate whether they have a particular topic or issue they wish to explore. Then, before the close of group, the interns engage in a closing practice in which they share a learning, appreciation, disappointment, or surprise, again without cross-talk. These consistent, simple practices help create a container for IPR. I find it particularly helpful to students when the group is in the storming stage because they find safety in having a closing practice through which they can set down the seminar group work and transition into other parts of their work with their peers.

I use SCT's concept of "member role" in my group work as well. I find it helpful for interns to think about their "personal resources that are relevant for membership"⁶ and ask them to purposefully bring them into the group work. This emphasis helps learners become alert to the energy, information, and presence they have. They may then practice bringing their energy and engagement into relationship in the group for use by the group.

As someone who has witnessed and been in many entrenched relationships, I also rely on the SCT concept of role locks in my work with groups. Agazarian observes that "group members helplessly, unwittingly,

and persistently repeat major role behaviors they learned in childhood . . . [by] subliminally cue[ing] each other to treat them in ways that repeat . . . old familiar role relationships.”⁷ In a role lock, two learners lose their creativity and get stuck in their ways of relating. But it isn’t the dyad’s work alone. The role lock between two people aids the whole group in some way, binding energy up between the dyad in order that others feel less anxious. The following vignette illustrates my use of the concepts of role lock and functional subgrouping.

Athena and Charles were in a significant one-up, one-down role lock, respectively. In one IPR, Charles and Athena locked into a discussion about friendship. Charles wanted his peers to affirm that “we are all friends.” Athena reacted strongly, stating that they weren’t friends but peers. They went back and forth, with Athena becoming more indignant and Charles appearing increasingly needy and hurt.

I identified too much with Athena’s self-righteousness to respond as quickly and creatively as I wish I could have. With the theme of consultation from a mentor, I was able to invite the whole group to take up their member roles and work on the themes of connection, disconnection, power, and resentment that I believed were beneath the friend conversation. “Esther” and “Abe” joined Charles in a subgroup around the desire for connection. “Edward” joined Athena in a subgroup that felt resentful. Because their peers joined them in their feelings, Charles and Athena found a little more space in their role lock.

Finally, from SCT, I invite all of us to avoid taking things “just personally.” While the interns may have strong feelings about their group interactions and be tempted to notice only the immediate feelings within them, IPR offers emerging spiritual caregivers the opportunity to practice thinking critically about the larger dynamics happening within the group, the factors that lead to growth-fostering relationships and those that create division and anxiety.

I think of my work in IPR as privileged play. I use the language of play in community intentionally as I see it as “work-that-is-play.” In IPR, I offer learners “marked-off space” which they may use “for the purpose of experimentation and reality testing and then put aside—much like a painting is enjoyed or a book read or a piece of music performed.”⁸ This brings me to the final theme of the paper, play.

ACT V: PLAY

The personality theorist Donald Winnicott believed that play is an essential building block for learning and growth. He wrote that “[i]t is in playing and only in playing that the child or adult is able to be creative . . . and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.”⁹ Play opens up a space of trust and relaxation in which our need to protect ourselves diminishes. We are then able to engage in “a creative reaching out” through which we may search for a deeper understanding of ourselves.

I love play, both the specific kind with a stage and actors and the more general process of exploring the world through curiosity, experimentation, and a light touch. And I need it. For this reason, I bring Winnicott in as critical purchase on my personality theory because I know that when I am confronted with a new experience in which I fear judgment, I tend to become very serious, offering little warmth or humor to those around me. This is antithetical to learning, growth, and connection with the Holy. While RCT certainly makes space for play, particularly through its emphasis on authenticity, vulnerability, and empathy, I know that I need to explicitly bring play into my work precisely because of my proclivity to become aloof and inscrutable when I feel anxious or fearful.

Play is a core component of my progressive Christian faith. I understand much of God’s salvific story as originating from God’s desire to be connected to us and play with us. The life and ministry of Jesus is God’s ultimate creative reaching out, demonstrating that God will stop at nothing in order to bring us into creative self-discovery about who we are and who God has created us to be.

Through his teaching in parables, Jesus gives me the clearest example of what play can look like in transformational education. Jesus sought to engage his listeners with narrative, humor, and experiences that directly connected to their lives, and then he invited them to see the world in a new way. Jesus was interested less in reporting facts and more in creating the opportunity for his students to make deeper transformational meaning in their lives and the lives of those around them. Jesus’ parables are “meaning-filled stories, and in that sense they are truth-filled and truthful.” Their meaning and truth aren’t dependent upon the stories having actually happened. This frees me up to move beyond whether the story is fact or not and let my spiritual imagination run free to consider what transformation the story may invite to my life. Marcus Borg invites me to see all of the Bible through this

creative play Jesus offers in the parables, to engage in what he calls “parabolic meaning.” I, in turn, bring the spirit of parabolic meaning into my work with students, inviting them to see their encounters with patients as more than just literal.

Borg’s articulation of parabolic meaning dovetails nicely with RCT’s understanding of relational images, the inner pictures we carry within us about why our relationships are the way they are. Often without our knowing, we live out of these relational images, expecting our current and future relationships to be as they have been in the past. Not unlike discovering truth in a sacred text, I invite interns to find parabolic meaning in their relational images rather than seeing them as factual. If interns can engage in play with the relational images that no longer serve them, then, perhaps, they can begin to form new images that are more life-giving and contain more possibility. This was the case in the following vignette with Charles.

After he had experienced a shared reflective visit with a staff chaplain, Charles was somewhat shaken. Charles saw the staff chaplain join deeply with the patient’s full expression of her emotions. This frightened him because he tried to contain emotion in his patient visits. Mindful of the RCT’s work with relational images, I invited Charles to share his spiritual care image.

Charles first shared the image of the chaplain as snake charmer. We noticed together how dangerous spiritual care was in that image. Charles continued to play with the image by saying that, while the staff chaplain was virtuosic with her snake-charming flute, he (Charles) didn’t know how to play that instrument at all. Through this use of play, I understood better than I ever had the anxiety that Charles was carrying with him. I then asked Charles if there might be another metaphor for spiritual care that wasn’t so dangerous and didn’t require him to be charming. He readily offered up the image of a group of geese flying far overhead. He wanted to take turns both leading in his ministry and being part of a flock.

Play isn’t always joyful. It may also give expression to the darker experiences of our humanity. Both the snake in the basket and the birds in flight are part of our human makeup and may show up in our play. Winnicott was suspicious of sentimentality, and attributed its appeal to a “denial of personal awfulness.” “The truly responsible people of the world,” Winnicott wrote, are “those who accept the fact of their own hate, nastiness, cruelty, things which co-exist with their capacity to love and to construct.”¹⁰

Some students may have more societal and cultural freedom to play in an educational setting than others. An intern from a working-class background may view play in education as frivolous. A female student who has

had to fight for standing in the workplace may view the concept of play in CPE as antithetical to her continual challenge to be taken seriously. Even the language of play—which may evoke in one student the opportunity to learn without judgment—may call to mind in another the violence done to women, girls, and boys who have been treated as “playthings” by those with more power.

I cannot always predict which of my theories will connect (or disconnect) with a learner. I try to bring curiosity here, too.

ACT VI: TRANSFORMATION (REPRISE)

Often at the end of a Broadway musical, the audience will be treated to a reprise. The actor sings a big number again with a slight change in lyric or tempo. This subtle shift illuminates a new facet of the show’s theme and brings wholeness to the entire enterprise. When this happens, I sit riveted, seeing an old truth in a new way.

Time and again, I experience reprise moments in CPE. I think I know the full definitions of transformation, paradox, authenticity, community, and play. Then God combines these elements in a new way and, again, I move beyond the mind I’ve had. This was so in this last vignette.

Carlina had always seen her role in ministry as focusing on the positive. When members of the group shared their experiences of suffering, Carlina was uncertain how to respond. She noticed her impulse to fix their pain by emphasizing hope. Yet Carlina allowed for the sadness being expressed and even took the risk of sharing her own experience of suffering. In so doing, she realized how connected and alive she felt. She had thought talking about suffering would sink her, but, paradoxically, she was “buoyed up.” She realized that her work in chaplaincy was “not to try to make someone feel better” but to “join them in their suffering so that they are not alone, trusting they’ll experience that buoyancy, too.”

I used to think I had to figure out every aspect of CPE in order to offer my students the kind of transformative learning I’d experienced. Like Carlina, I thought all the responsibility to bring positive change into being was mine. Now, I know I can’t make transformation happen. When I trust what is within us and between us, I move from judgment about how I think things should be to curiosity about how things are. This creates room for the mysterious work of transformation.

At the same time, as Joni told me, *"It doesn't happen because of me but it doesn't happen without me."* When I can embrace that paradox, when I can foster authenticity, vulnerability, empathy, and play in the context of community, transformation is more likely to happen.

Call it what you will—buoyancy and transformation are both good words for it—when I witness this in my students I am the first one on my feet, clapping with all my might, calling out for an encore.

NOTES

- 1 Elizabeth A. Lange, "Fostering a Learning Sanctuary for Transformation in Sustainability Education," in *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*, ed. Jack Mezirow and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 194.
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