Fear and Faith: educating for transformation when fear overshadows critical thinking.

Fear plays a powerful role in decision making, overshadowing critically considered aspects of charity when the “other” is encountered under stress. Religious education tends to focus on teaching the rational aspects of faith and avoiding these emotional/moral aspects. Research shows that emotion, physicality and reasoning are tightly interconnected in the human. We need to pay more attention to this intersection of thinking and feeling as we educate for transformation.

On its own the shared sacred scripture of Christianity and Judaism promotes ethical encounter; care for the widow, orphan and alien and justice for all of earth. But scripture is always interpreted by real, complex, people who are constructing meaning within complex realities. Current world events have powerfully demonstrated once again, that even the most devout and committed persons are prone to make decisions that would be considered unethical in their own faith tradition when pushed by fear; fear of “other”, fear of a shortage of resources, fear of loss of control, fear of shame. I suspect this is transferable to Islam as well.

Methodology

As part of research leading to a PhD dissertation, up to 20 older adults from the Christian tradition will participate in a modified faith development interview to investigate the formation of their faith, specifically as it correlates to their engagement with Christian scriptures. Among other items they will be asked to reflect on times they have made decisions, using the question, “Tell me about a time you had to make an important decision” and “How did you go about making that decision?” They will also be shown a picture of Jesus and his disciples in a storm at sea and asked to reflect on this story. Both these items will be evaluated for evidence of emotional input to a thinking process.

Sources

Olfelt, Christine M. Qualitative research in process