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Creating Safe Nonviolent Space in the Classroom:
Contemporary Challenges and Responses

Abstract:
This paper will explore how we might create, as religious educators, safe space in our classrooms where creative and imaginative responses to our world might be generated. Students at every level need to experience nonviolence and safety in our classrooms, both in process and content, if they are to explore content that may nudge them out of their personal safety zones. How do we deal with the issues of difference and diversity in ways that all participants feel safe (but not necessarily always comfortable)? What additional challenges are presented by distance learning in creating safe space? Where is safe space found for the educator him/herself? Case study/narratives will be used to explore possibilities for action.

Every class I teach, at every level, begins with a simple exercise. Each member of the class is asked to make a circle with each hand, bring those circles up to their eyes, and look around the room through their glasses. We all look foolish for a few minutes, but it is a physical embodiment for where we will go next: the awareness that we all wear glasses. Our glasses are made up of every single thing that has happened to us in our life – where we were born, to whom we were born, where we grew up, who has loved us and hurt us, our class, race, gender, sexual orientation, educational status, religious affiliation or not, spiritual practices, everything. It's an introduction to hermeneutics, the lenses through which we interpret the sources we engage, or the sources that engage us; it allows for every course to be a hermeneutics course, wondering about both our sight and our blindness. The privileged place of religious education is to create the space where one's glasses can be identified ("I wear glasses"), corrected ("That particular lens blurs my vision and I should get it checked"), cleaned ("The dirt on my lens makes some parts of what I think I see impossible to see"), and affirmed ("I see more clearly"). Tom Groome reminds us that as educators we "must remember the interests, perspectives, and 'tinted lenses' we bring to the text of the Christian Story/Vision from our own social and cultural situation."[1] I am suggesting this is the work of every theology or religious studies classroom that is intentional about both information and formation, and that the lenses are much more complex than we might imagine.

The journey is catechetical and spiritual, intellectual and affective, developmental and imminent. Part of the complexity of the journey is that it must also be a communitarian journey, since there are corporate lenses (of churches, religions, nations) in our glasses, each one altering our vision, each one offering both insight and blindness or blocked vision. It is also a communal act to understand the many different sets of glasses within a group – in a family, in a class, in a church. Just as all the members of the same family do not recall a singular event in the same

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[1] Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 229.

manner, so too all the members of an ecclesial community or economic class or race or gender or sexual orientation don't wear identical glasses that allow one way to see the world, challenging the notion of one singular objective sight. The metaphor of the glasses invites conversion that is ongoing, and sets a path for a life-long attention to grow in age and wisdom and grace (Luke 2:52). It encourages one to "probe" their life, what Mary Elizabeth Moore describes as "a never-ending quest that encourages people to continue learning, wondering, and questioning."[2] The metaphor of the glasses also serves as a reminder that humans have always worn glasses; a deficit in vision or dirt on your lenses isn't a permanent status but one that can be corrected and made clearer. As Gabriel Moran rightly argues, "they ought to know that the quest for a unity beyond all divisions of nation, gender, and species is not a creation of the twentieth (or twenty-first) century,"[3] but rather part of the human story over time. Bernard Lonergan suggests "One has to keep developing one's knowledge of human reality and potentiality as they are in the existing situation. One has to keep scrutinizing one's intentional responses to values and their implicit scales of preference. One has to listen to criticism and to protest. One has to remain ready to learn from others."[4] We have to check our glasses.

This process of working with our glasses requires safe space within which to explore and wonder, both for teaching and learning. How might we create, as religious educators, safe space in our classrooms where creative and imaginative responses to our world might be generated, where our interpretive lenses are owned, challenged, critiqued, and affirmed? Students at every level need to experience nonviolence and safety in our classrooms, both in process and content, if they are to explore content that may nudge them out of their personal safety zones, if they are to probe. How do we deal with the issues of difference and diversity in ways that all participants feel safe (but not necessarily always comfortable)? What additional challenges are presented by distance learning in creating safe space? Where is safe space found for the educator himself/herself? I offer three case studies to explore the issues, each framing a contemporary challenge to creating safe space in the classroom: changes in boundaries, changes in diversity and technology, and changes in expectations for educators.

Case Study: Changes in Boundaries

In an attempt to help first year undergraduate students explore the concepts of religion, faith, spirituality, and to ground them in a methodology of practical theology, I invite students to reflect on their family in whatever configuration, using the framework of a genogram. The physical depiction of their family invites a reflection that is both deeply personal and communal. A series of questions about the religious practices of people in their families, good people without religious practices, and those with religious practices who aren't quite so "good" opens the reflection. It is a strategy that both offers a core understanding of some terms for the course (e.g., faith, religious practices, spirituality, morality) and allows for all the cultural and religious

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[2] Glennon, Fred, Douglas Jacobsen, Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, John J. Thatamanil, Amanda Porterfield, and Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Formation in the classroom", *Teaching Theology and Religion* 14, no.4:378. *Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (*accessed August 17, 2014).

[3] Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, *Reshaping Religious Education: Conversations on Contemporary Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 108.

[4] From *Method in Theology* as quoted in Raymond Moloney, "Conversion and Spirituality: Bernard Lonergan 1904-1984", *The Way* 4 3/4:129, October 2004. http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/434Moloney.pdf (accessed September 1, 2014).

diversity of our student community. The strategy always works; the academic distinctions between the words comes alive within each student's own context, and they are able to imagine new ways of talking about faith and religion. But I have encountered a new dynamic in the past three or four years. Their use of social media and engagement in popular culture has given them very few filters about what is to be shared publicly, as well as where they are safe and where they are not yet safe. Last semester, a young woman tells the class about her grandmother who does all kinds of "religious" things, but who hurts people in her family, hurts her father, and makes fun of other religions. The class grows quiet, uncomfortable with her disclosure about her grandmother, and looks to me to "fix" it.

Surely this can be viewed as a pedagogical and classroom management issue. However, the rise of intimate sharing of one's life through social media outlets appears to be blurring and blending boundaries in the classroom, with little sense of appropriate or inappropriate self-disclosure, ultimately changing the nature of what is safe space for all in the classroom. After more than twenty years of teaching/learning experience, I have learned that even the most careful attention to the dynamics in the classroom is challenged by this "blurting" behavior. How is a nonviolent safe space created in light of these changes in boundaries?

Case Study: Changes in Diversity and Technology

In a graduate class last fall, at the majority-minority university where I am on the faculty, students self–identified as male Hispanic Roman Catholic, white female Catholic, African-American Southern Pentecostal womanist, gay white married Anglican Catholic priest, Liberian ordained Methodist male, white male Catholic, Nigerian Catholic priest, and two Ghanaian Catholic priests who participated in real time through Google hangout. Acquiring a diverse learning environment is not our challenge, but creating a safe space for the exploration of ideas and identities in diversity is. One of the experiences in this class was the night the Pentecostal student told the class about her experience growing up in the South, her seminary experience, and her growing realization and identity as a woman of color. Her identity as a woman AND African-American AND Southern AND Pentecostal was a new understanding for her, fraught with all the angst and uncertainty of new awakenings, especially as it now impacted finding her theological voice. Likewise, when the Anglican priest married his partner, his conversation about his husband and journey deeply challenged many in the entire class - about marriage, sexuality, language, religion, God, and grace. The learning and probing of the entire class across wide differences in perspectives came as a result of the risks each took in sharing their stories and struggles.

In addition, the challenges of a classroom with tremendous diversity are increased by educational technologies that allow for participation in a course from a distance, without the benefit of a shared physical space. How do we create space that is safe for the critical exploration required in the classroom with students learning at a distance? Even with a modified residency requirement, the trust that takes time and encounters to build is limited. In addition, it seems to be even more of a struggle at the graduate level, where there can be so much at stake if the trust is not upheld, when ordination, review boards, CPE and job recommendations, and advancement in rank can be at stake over positions held and statements made. Cellphone technology alone changes the level of trust in a classroom, when conversations can be transcribed, recorded, preserved, and shared without permission, no matter what policies are put in place. The

combination of diversity on every level and the increased use of technology makes creation of safe space within which to teach and learn a tremendous challenge.

Case Study: Changes in Expectations for Teachers

Faculty in a theological classroom are not free from the concerns for personal safe space either. Sometimes what I have created in the classroom is politically correct space, but not safe space. As a feminist educator, I am deeply aware of the issues of inclusion and exclusion in theology, and work diligently to create space where everyone's voices are heard. What often has happened, however, is that voices are spoken but not heard, or not heard as they were spoken, often resulting in exactly the kind of oppression I was aiming to address. Reflection on long held stereotypes and beliefs about the other is more challenging when diversity is layered upon diversity, and when there is some presumption that we have "been there, done that." A graduate student who has read Ivone Gebara, Kwok Pui Lan, Elizabeth Johnson, and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza may believe they "get" feminist theology, but one can master the information (a requirement) and not understand the material (a requirement as well). My default image is that of the old hard copy encyclopedias, where a frog is shown with its skeletal structure, and then each cellophane page is layered on top of it, to show an ever more complex creature, with muscles and organs and veins and skin. We are not only skin, but intricate layers of identity that do not exist in isolation but are alive only in relationship to each other. Safe space in the theological classroom will attempt to honor those layers, even as they are coming into realization, each with a certain integrity of its own.

This means, in practice, that when the young white man in his 20s says, after seeing a film in class (*Remember the Titans,* 2000), that he's sincerely glad we don't have any of those problems with race anymore, I need to create a way for the class to respond that is both critical and life-giving. His response set off a tremendous response in class. How do I create a space where he can feel safe enough to explore and still be challenged? The risk of attempting safe nonviolent space in the classroom is that there is are expectations that learners will be able to explore layers they may not have explored before, even in ways that may disturb others, and that the teacher will honor the diversity in the room, holding the tension and ambiguity, walking as carefully with the man who believes he already completely understands the "plight of women" as the woman who believes the Christian church cannot be redeemed from patriarchy. These expectations are hard to name and assess in course level learning outcomes, and require skills that are most often not taught in doctoral programs in theology or ministry. The expectations have changed.

What does safe nonviolent space look like that would hold this tension as sacred? Reflection on these case studies in light of the work of Parker Palmer, particularly in his work <u>A Hidden Wholeness</u>, provides two possible creative responses. One is his concept of circles of trust, and the other is the need to "stand in the tragic gap."[5]

Circles of Trust and Standing in the Tragic Gap

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[5] Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 174.

Parker Palmer, in <u>A Hidden Wholeness</u>, describes circles of trust as singular in their intent: "to make it safe for the soul to show up and offer us its guidance."[6] These are not support groups or therapeutic groups but a movement towards sacred space. Parker suggests that creating "circles of trust" is a way of creating community and generating positive, life-giving alternatives to violence. They are intentional communities that operate with clear guidelines ("touchstones")[7], skilled leadership, open invitation without manipulation, common ground for exploration of the inner life, and graceful space within which to meet.[8] A limitation of the application of the circles of trust to the classroom is the necessarily voluntary nature of those who join the circles, a condition which cannot be replicated in most classroom settings. Nonetheless, the schema of the circles of trust - the intentionality of guidelines, skilled leadership, an invitation to participate without manipulation, common ground, and space that is conducive to learning – is a format that addresses many issues raised in this paper. The touchstones themselves are similar to other ground rules for intercultural or interreligious dialogue.[9] These ground rules assume voluntary participation, but all provide a base from which to encounter the other in life-giving mutuality. As educators, we will need to model safe space in how we respond with and to students and our colleagues. How will a student learn to "speak your truth in ways that respect other's truth"[10] if they have never seen it? How will a student imagine "when the going gets rough, turn to wonder" if they have not heard, "I wonder, what might have brought that person (you) to this belief"?[11]

Palmer's insight from his work with the circles of trust lead him to suggest that where we most often need to stand, in light of differences and limitations of every kind, is in what he calls "the tragic gap." Addressing the question of nonviolence, Palmer writes:

> ….We must learn to hold the tension between the reality of the moment and the possibility that something better might emerge….The insight at the heart of nonviolence is that we live in a tragic gap – a gap between the way things are and the way we know they might be. It is a gap that has never been and never will be closed. If we want to live nonviolent lives, we must learn to stand in the tragic gap, faith fully holding the tension between reality and possibility of being opened to a third way.[12]

I suggest that one way to create a nonviolent classroom in order that people might explore, learn, and grow is to stand in the tragic gap as educators, and to help our students to stand there as well. I cannot give them a perfectly safe world, nor is it my intent to leave them in despair. In a Google dominated world, where every question has an answer a few clicks away, and media pundits on the left and right have the solutions for everything, we need to learn to stand in the already but not yet space between what is and what could be. In Ferguson, with ISIL, in the church, in the academy, in our personal and in our professional lives, it is all we can do and it is

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[6] Ibid., 22.
[7] Ibid., 217-218.
[8] Ibid., 73-85.
[9] See for example, Leonard Swidler, "The dialogue decalogue: ground rules for interreligious dialogue", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20, no. 1 (December 1, 1983): 1-4.
[10] Ibid., 218.
[11] Ibid., 218.
[12] Ibid., 174-175.

the most we can do. When I stand in the tragic gap, and help my students to stand there, possibilities are generated that liberate those who are oppressed, that offer the healing power of God to lenses damaged and worn. It is the space where nonviolence is born. Walter Kasper frames it this way:

> In light of injustice, which can never be completely abolished, and in light of mercy and love in this world, which can never be completely fulfilled, all that remains in the end, in many cases, is only an appeal to God's mercy.[13]

Standing in the tragic gap is standing in the space of mercy. The work of religious education has never been more important, and the responsibility and privilege of creating space where students can encounter both their sight and blindness cannot be delegated or relinquished to other disciplines. Living in the already but not yet of the present moment, witnessing that it is possible to stand in the tragic gap with hope is our business and our call.

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[13] Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*. (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 205.

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